



Barbara Jacobson

Chief Administrator

Biographies, Moral Imagination and the Leadership Character Model

About 20 years ago, my husband wrote a paper entitled “Biography and the Moral Imagination”. He wanted to explain to our then teenagers why he loved biographies so much and was frequently reading one aloud to our family. In the preface to his article he wrote “Richard Brookhiser says in his biography of George Washington, 'Moral biography has two purposes: to explain its subject, and to shape the minds and hearts of those who read it, by showing how a great man navigated life. In other words, the highest uses of biography are sound instruction and sober inspiration, things hard enough to come by in everyday experience. For any of us, though, biography offers plenty of both, if we know where to look, and how to read.'”

In the article, my husband also refers to Samuel Johnson, Edmund Burke, and Plutarch and their contributions. Plutarch stated that he first started writing his “Lives” as a project for others, but found himself completing it for himself.

Our family just finished a biography of Petrarch, believed to be the inspiration of the Renaissance with his library of classical works which he found, translated, and commented on for the first time. His work resulted in increased interest in the Greek and Roman authors – and the rest is history! Petrarch’s father had a book by Cicero, which he treasured - and as a result his son sought out manuscripts, had them copied (by hand at that time), and saved them from oblivion.

When I came to work at Turknett Leadership Group, I had no idea how much the philosophy of the Turknett’s and the ideas in their book would dovetail with the culture we have wanted to encourage in our family. It has been a pleasure to meet and interact with our staff and amazing clients every day. The Leadership Character Model is an inspiration as well, reminding me that keeping Respect and Responsibility in balance are the foundation of developing and maintaining Integrity.

At the end of my husband’s article, he included a poem by Henry W. Longfellow, which we all memorized. Longfellow saw that it is those who have travelled before us who can give us the greatest hope and inspiration. I have copied it here below.

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Psalm of Life by Henry W. Longfellow

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.