

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS LICKONA

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This Book Review section is devoted to an interview with the scholar whom educators most identify with moral growth and development, character education, and intervention strategies. Tom Lickona has spent the last 25 years articulating his views in books such as *Raising Good Children* (1983) and *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (1991) and in articles like "A More Complex Analysis Is Needed" (*Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1998) and "Religion and Character Education" (*Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1999). His professional career has been at the service of his consuming interest in helping teachers do a more effective job in shaping character and facilitating the moral maturity of their students.

Dr. Thomas Lickona is a developmental psychologist and professor of education at the State University of New York at Cortland, where he has done award-winning work in teacher education. He currently directs the Center for the Fourth and Fifth Rs (Respect and Responsibility) at that institution. He also has been a visiting professor at Boston and Harvard universities.

His highly acclaimed expertise and engaging manner of presentation are reasons for his being a frequent consultant and a sought-after speaker at conferences for teachers, parents, religious educators, and other groups concerned about the moral development of young people. He has lectured across the United States, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, Ireland, and Latin America on the subject of teaching moral values in the school and in the home.

*Educating for Character* has been described as a definitive work in the field and received a 1992 Christopher Award for affirming the highest values of the human spirit. His work has been featured in the *New York Times*; he has been a guest on radio and TV talk shows including the *Larry King Live Radio Show*; *Good Morning, America*; and *Focus on the Family*.

Tom and his wife, Judy, have two sons, Matt and Mark, and five grandchildren. They live in Cortland and recently collaborated on a book for young people with William Boudreau, *Sex, Love and You*.

***Tom, it is clear in conversation with you that you project a passion about the topic of ethical behavior. Where did you acquire your sense of morality and the urgency of teaching of morality in the schools?***

I grew up in a strong Catholic family. Morality was part of how you lived the faith. My mother was a convert with the fervor for the faith that converts often have. She had a devotion to the Sacred Heart, and conceived me after making a novena to the Sacred Heart following a number of miscarriages. My grandmother, who lived with us, walked to Mass every day rain or shine. My father and mother both believed in the old saying "The family that prays together stays together," and we prayed a family Rosary most nights.

I faithfully memorized my *Baltimore Catechism*, which certainly isn't all that's needed in religious education but which still impresses me for getting across an amazing amount of theological and moral content with extraordinary clarity and economy of language. As was true for most of my generation, my religious training instilled a healthy sense of sin. I tried to be a good kid because I loved my parents and wanted to please them and because I believed that sin had consequences, now and in the hereafter. In our home there was also open communication, including the freedom to debate a rule or decision; I could go back and forth with my parents about something I disagreed with as long as I did it respectfully. I grew up with a strong sense of fairness and my right to speak my mind. This was the context in which my conscience was formed, and I feel sure it was the primary influence in shaping my lifelong interest in moral development and moral education.

***In your writings and lectures, you share the importance of facilitating the moral reasoning of today's youths. What is your current view of the legacy of Lawrence Kohlberg's ideas regarding moral development and their application within the just community school setting?***

Philosophically, Kohlberg's theory of moral development was the first real challenge to the moral and cultural relativism that had dominated the social sciences. It held up justice, defined as respect for persons, as an objective and universal moral standard. Psychologically, his research revealed the child as a moral thinker, someone whose moral reasoning was developing and whose development we could stimulate by providing perspective-taking opportunities. Like Piaget, Kohlberg inspired us to listen to kids with new interest and respect. Good moral reasoning, of course, doesn't ensure good moral behavior. That realization led Kohlberg to conduct his just community projects,

aimed at changing moral behavior by giving participants a larger voice in their lives and by developing group norms of fairness, trust, and accountability.

The just community schools were a serious attempt to give students and staff a direct experience of justice and democracy. This model certainly influences my own work in character education, but unfortunately most schools still fail to capitalize on participatory student government as a character development strategy.

***In what ways has your thinking on character education/moral development/ethical training evolved during your career?***

Up until *Raising Good Children* (1983), my work with teachers and parents focused on fostering development through the moral stages. In the mid-1980s, I had the privilege of working with Father George McClean of Catholic University on a project that brought together a group of scholars, mostly Catholic, to try to articulate an integrated vision of the human person and an integrated theory of moral education. It was through that project that I began using the language of character and to define character as knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good. Character in this full sense became, for me, the goal of moral education. Defining “the good” led to a focus on virtue as the content of character.

***Could you give an example of the kind of character education that develops character in this full sense?***

In his article, “The Healing Power of Altruism” in the November 1993 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Richard Curwin tells the story of Billy, a fourth-grader in a rural school. Billy was surly with his teacher, fought every day on the schoolyard, and did little schoolwork. His father was in jail, his mother was alcoholic, and Billy himself was beginning to use alcohol in times of stress. How do you develop the character of a kid like Billy when you’re probably not going to be able to change the character of the world he comes from?

Billy’s fourth-grade teacher, his principal, and the school counselor assigned him the task of helping a wheelchair-bound first-grade boy on and off the bus every day and being his special protector. There was one condition; if he got into a fight, he couldn’t help the first-grader for the rest of the day. The two children quickly became friends. One day, when Billy’s teacher informed him that his little friend was out sick, she saw a tear in his eye. Billy’s fighting declined significantly, and he developed a more positive attitude toward himself and school. Somebody was counting on him; he felt needed and important. Billy grew in responsibility because he had responsi-

bility, a new social role that engaged all three parts of his character: head, heart, and hand.

***What is your vision for the future of character education in schools in the United States? For the family? What is most needed?***

There needs to be K-12 district-wide commitment to character education. Character education is growing rapidly at the elementary level, less so at the middle school level, and least of all at the high school level, where it's desperately needed. At that age, kids are facing pressures to get into all kinds of self-destructive activities. Fortunately, they are still forming their ideas of what life is all about and are open to positive influence from adults if we talk to them in an honest and caring way. But not enough high school teachers do that, and high schools as institutions are often too big, too fragmented, too impersonal, full of hostile student cliques, and bereft of any kind of unifying vision and real moral leadership. Paul Hill's 1990 Rand Corporation study, *High Schools of Character*, found that urban Catholic high schools, compared to their public school counterparts, were more successful in creating a cohesive moral and academic community, so it is possible. Scale, leadership, and shared values are all key.

A real danger for the character education movement, as for all educational reform movements, is that it will be trivialized—reduced to trappings rather than transformative change. To do character education well is to transform the school culture.

As for the family, schools need to do much more to help parents carry out their role as a child's primary moral educator. Right now, nobody teaches parents how to be parents. The school is the only social institution positioned to help parents. If the school doesn't do it, kids will suffer and the school's job in character education and academic instruction will be much harder. Helping and supporting parents should be the first priority of every school that's serious about character development. There are lots of imaginative ways to do this, such as forming small parent support groups that meet monthly in someone's home.

***Forces outside the school and home put stress on young lives. In today's popular or commercial culture, what forces do you see as most toxic in raising and teaching moral children?***

Kids today are growing up in a garbage culture. One survey found the average American teenager consumes 60 hours a week of electronic media. Most of that is promoting values contrary to human dignity and moral health. There are at least three things schools can do to stem the negative influence of the media. One is to reach out to parents. An elementary school principal, for

example, sent a letter home to parents saying, “We find that children get along better at school and concentrate better when they watch less TV. We recommend the following guidelines: If your child is second-grade or younger, a maximum of a half-hour of TV a day. If your child is third-grade or older, a maximum of an hour a day. In all cases, please monitor what programs your children watch. Thank you very much for your help in this matter.” Many parents said they were grateful for the principal’s letter; it gave them leverage in controlling television.

A second thing schools can do is to teach media literacy—critical thinking about the content of television, movies, music, advertising, the Internet, etc. A fifth-grade Canadian teacher developed a curriculum called “Watching Wisely.” She gave her students homework assignments such as watching a sit-com and recording the number of put-downs vs. compliments. The next day in class they discussed, “Is this real life? What would happen in real life if people insulted each other with this frequency—how would it affect feelings and relationships?” Studies show that when kids view media through this kind of critical filter, they are less likely to copy the bad examples they see.

Finally, given the low level of popular culture, exposure to high culture should be an important part of schooling. Music appreciation, including classical music, should be mandatory. Such experiences elevate and ennoble children’s spirits.

***Which two or three teaching strategies would you recommend for the beginning teacher who is interested in focusing on the character development of his or her students?***

First, try to establish a personal relationship with every student, especially those in trouble. There is no greater motivation for students than thinking that at least one adult at the school knows them well and cares about what happens to them.

Second, create a caring community in the classroom through daily community-building activities and well-structured cooperative learning, beginning with simple paired tasks. Kids need caring relationships with adults, but they also need caring relationships with each other.

Third, in establishing discipline—every new teacher’s number one anxiety—use rule-setting and rule-enforcement as opportunities to help students understand the reason for the rules and to take ownership of them.

***While many schools and teachers throughout the nation have taken active measures to promote the moral education of children (as evidenced by your book, *Educating for Character*), many university teacher education programs have not explicitly or consistently prepared teachers to be facilitators***

***of student moral development. Hence new teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the challenge and the obligations of being moral educators. What suggestions do you have regarding this problem?***

Two groups—the Character Education Partnership and the Association of Teacher Educators—have each recently completed useful reports on the challenge of preparing teachers who have the vision and skills to be effective character educators.

At SUNY Cortland, we have a Center for the fourth and fifth Rs (Respect and Responsibility) which offers an annual Summer Institute in Character Education for teachers and school administrators in the field. Each semester, I also teach a graduate course in character education. At the undergraduate level, our elementary education major includes a required course titled Classroom Discipline which examines character education as an important approach to preventing and dealing with discipline problems.

But much more is needed. Deans can provide leadership to make educating for character a higher program priority. We ought to ask applicants to our teacher education programs to supply character references and to sign a pledge, something like an honor code, to model and uphold high ideals of character. And we need to identify the good things already being done in schools of education and disseminate them widely in a small book of promising practices.

***Maya Angelou once said that cynicism in children is deadly to their souls because children go from knowing nothing to believing nothing. Do you agree with Ms. Angelou? Do you see our culture fostering cynicism in children?***

Cynicism is definitely poisonous for the soul, and our culture is certainly fostering it. Kids become cynical when adults don't practice what they preach. What is the impact when the President sponsors a White House Conference on Character, endorses abstinence for teens, and then takes up with an intern? When a prominent mayor and Senate candidate campaigns on family values and the Ten Commandments while having an extramarital affair? When society professes concern for "the children" but leaves millions of them without health care and permits the killing of 4,000 a day in the womb?

If we honestly ask where the deepest cynicism comes from, we'd have to look at our closest relationships: family. The people we love the most have the power to hurt us the most. For poignant examples of this, read the excellent little book *Endangered: Your Child in a Hostile World* (Plough Publishing, 2000), by Johann Christoph Arnold. Many young adults, he says, view their elders as frauds. He quotes a young woman at Texas A&M who was asked to comment on the Columbine massacre. She said: "People may

label us 'Generation X,' but we are more appropriately called 'Generation Why.' Why did most of you lie when you made the vow of death do us part? Why do you fool yourself into believing that divorce is really better for the kids in the long run? Why do so many of you divorced parents spend more time with your new boyfriend or girlfriend than with your own children?"

We may feel that young people are being harsh or unfair in harboring such sentiments. But what is a child to think when parents, who brought the child into the world, essentially break their contract with their child to provide a stable, secure, and loving home? Or when one of the parents walks out of the child's life? What meaning does commitment have to a child after that?

*As much as we work and pray for our children, as well as ourselves, to be moral people, we know that weakness is part of our nature. Since forgiveness is a core virtue in Christianity, how do you suggest teachers model and teach this virtue to their students? How does a school foster a culture of forgiveness?*

Humility helps us forgive: "There but for the grace of God go I." I'd also have students reflect on the words Jesus taught us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What does that mean? That God will forgive us in exactly the measure that we forgive others.

How can we make God's forgiveness real to kids? They need to experience it in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That won't happen, of course, unless someone helps them to experience Jesus as real and present in their lives and helps them be drawn to his healing mercy. To feel a need for his mercy, kids need help in learning to examine their conscience and recognize all the ways, big and small, that we sin by commission and omission. And, of course, as adults we have to set an example by valuing and frequenting Confession ourselves.

In public school, too, especially in our culture of violence, forgiveness is an important virtue to teach. Teachers can model forgiveness by making it clear that they have no continuing anger at a student over an incident of misbehavior, even while they hold the student accountable for his actions and require restitution or some other just consequence. Teachers can teach children a language of forgiveness for reconciling with their peers: "Will you please forgive me? . . . Yes, I do forgive you." Schools can foster a culture of forgiveness through peer mediation and other conflict resolution programs, which have sharply reduced fighting and suspensions in many places.

*Both of your books, Raising Good Children and Educating for Character, have met the deep needs, personal and professional, of teachers in both public and Catholic schools across the country. Do you notice a difference in the two groups of teachers?*

Good teachers everywhere model and teach good character. They went into teaching because they wanted to make a difference in the kind of human being a child becomes. Teachers in Catholic schools, however, have the opportunity to be explicit about the ultimate reason for leading a moral life: God expects it. We are made in his image. As Mother Teresa said, “We are created to love and be loved.”

An unfortunate difference between Catholic and public school teachers is that Catholic teachers are badly underpaid. We have a serious problem in the Church when we promote the ideal of a living wage as a matter of social justice but don't practice that in our Catholic schools. In order for Catholic schools to have the resources to pay a just wage to their teachers, we'd need to challenge more Catholics to come closer to tithing than is now the case.

*If you were a bishop of a diocese and had the opportunity to instruct the superintendent to initiate changes, what would be one or two changes you would make in the elementary schools in the diocese in order to facilitate the character development of the students in the schools? Would the changes in your secondary schools be along the same lines?*

I'd want to be sure there was an annual retreat for staff at all levels to reflect on Catholic schools' reason for being. The deepest purpose of Catholic schools, like the ultimate purpose of the Church, is to make us into other Christs. To do that, a Catholic school must first of all be a living incarnation of Christ's love, a community that affirms and integrates all of its members.

I recently spoke with a father who took his daughter out of a public high school because of its sex education program and its elitist indifference toward lower-track students. But in her first year as a sophomore in her new Catholic high school, she spent the year walking the hallways at lunch, alone and often crying, because the girls at the school froze her out. The next year, she returned to the public school. If there aren't positive school norms, traditions, and structures in place—such as older students mentoring younger ones or assigning every new arrival a buddy who helps the new student feel welcomed, make friends, check out the extracurricular activities, learn the ropes—the sinful side of human nature often takes over. Are we making it a priority in Catholic schools to help every student feel respected, valued, and loved? If not, that's a scandal.

*Besides fostering a strong sense of community in Catholic schools, what else would you do?*

I'd want all school staff to continually ask, “What are we doing to develop the character of Christ in ourselves and in our students?” That should be the defining goal of Catholic character education. This would include a school-



wide effort to develop the virtues of Jesus as presented in the Gospels. First among these is a radical obedience to God's will, one that understands that we find our true freedom in obedience to God and one that would lead us to die for our faith if necessary.

Our students should reflect on the fact that Jesus spoke constantly about doing his Father's will, not his own. He was obedient unto death on the cross; he gave his life for us. If God doesn't call us to a physical martyrdom, he will surely, in some way, call each of us to be spiritual martyrs, to be persecuted for following him faithfully. For example, if you stand up for life in a culture of death, as Catholics young and old should be challenged to do, you will almost certainly experience a measure of the persecution that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels.

Many teenagers have been inspired by the example of Cassie Bernall. When Eric Harris walked into the Columbine High School library a little over a year ago, he put a gun to her head and said, "Do you believe in God?" She said yes, and he shot and killed her. Her mother, Misty Bernall, has told her daughter's story in a book called *She Said Yes* that has already sold a half million copies. I recently learned of an eighth-grade girl in an inner-city school whose life has been turned around by this little book.

***Are there resources on Catholic character education that you would specifically recommend?***

For an instructive account of an award-winning K-8 Catholic character education program, I'd recommend Sister Mary Carol Gentile's article in the 1999 NCEA book, *Character Development in the Catholic School*. She is the principal of Providence's St. Rocco School, which centers its character efforts on "growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ." Sister Kate Arseneau at Catholic Central High in Troy, New York, has an excellent secondary-level program with peace as its organizing theme ([www.cchstroy.org](http://www.cchstroy.org)).

***Helping our youth become transformed in Christ is clearly our highest goal, but many Catholic schools and even faithful families struggle just to get Catholic teenagers to attend Mass. What would you say to them?***

I've had Catholic parents come up to me after talks and say things like, "I have 10 grown children, and not one of them goes to Mass." Our children need to know, first of all, that in the Third Commandment, God commands us to "keep holy the Sabbath day." At the Last Supper, the first Mass, Jesus showed us how to do that and commanded us, "Do this in memory of me."

Finally, our children need to know that if they are obedient to Jesus and his Church, attend Mass faithfully, and receive our Lord regularly in his Body and Blood in the Sacrament of Eucharist, they will grow closer to God and

gain the inner peace and strength to face life's toughest challenges. But if we turn our back on this great gift from God, we hurt ourselves and offend him deeply. God won't force himself upon us. We can choose his friendship or reject it, in both this life and the next. It's our call.

To make all of this take, especially with teens, is not easy, but I've seen it happen—at Youth 2000 Weekends, for example. I think a spiritual retreat of this sort—combining solid teaching about the faith, experience of the Sacraments including Reconciliation, prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, and authentic testimonies about the power of a personal relationship with Jesus is crucial in the character and faith formation of teenagers.

At Youth 2000 Weekends, there is also an effort to draw young people into a personal relationship with Mary as mother of the Lord, their heavenly Mother, and someone who will always lead them to her Son. I recently read a reflection on the Blessed Mother by Saint Elizabeth Seton, who writes of how our prayer is purified when it passes through the heart of Mary and how pleased Jesus is when we love and honor his Mother in this way. We cheat our children if we don't teach them to go to Mary as an integral part of their faith.

***What can we do to help Catholic school faculty be prepared to carry out their formidable task as moral and spiritual educators?***

First, be very clear that our primary responsibility as Catholic educators is the care of souls. To fulfill that responsibility, we need to tend to our own souls. As you have pointed out in your writing, the laypersons teaching Catholic schools today need ongoing spiritual formation. They need help in understanding and coming to love the Church and her teachings—from her teaching on the sanctity of life to her great documents on the poor and social justice to her beautiful teachings on married sexuality and why natural family planning honors the unitive and procreative purposes of sex and contraception does not.

***You are a college professor and interact with undergraduates and graduates daily. Do you have any suggestions to those who make up the faculties of Catholic colleges and universities that could further the moral growth of their students?***

Help students develop a vision of the purpose of their lives. From a Catholic perspective, the purpose of our life is to give glory to God. We do that by saving our souls and helping others to heaven, by developing the character of Christ, and by building God's kingdom.

***How does one develop the moral values that would create an intrinsic motivation to lead a chaste life?***

I recently learned of a program for freshmen called “48 Hours” that Boston College began in the mid-90s. Father Tony Pella, the college chaplain, described it to me as a weekend away from campus designed to help students make a good transition from home to college culture and to avoid slipping into destructive patterns such as alcohol abuse and sexual activity.

The weekend includes a “vision talk” about the Ignatian Catholic heritage—what makes Boston College different from Brown?—but the program’s emphasis is not explicitly religious. Later, Father Pella said, there will be opportunities for retreats where the focus is on prayer, worship, and deepening one’s walk with God. “48 Hours” is aimed at helping students initiate friendships with student leaders, professional mentors, and other classmates that will be a support system through their college years. The focus is on leading a constructive and balanced life.

During the weekend, each student is asked to examine his or her own life, set a personal goal related to an important life issue, and plan three action steps for achieving it. This is called a “covenant with oneself.” Later in the freshman year, there will be reunions and other events to help students follow through on their goals. Since the program began, the number of participating freshmen has grown to nearly half the freshman class.

***As we look at the violence in schools and among youth today, something seems terribly wrong. What is wrong? Is it at home? At school?***

If you look at the kids who shot up their schools in the past two years you’ll find many differences but one common characteristic: They did not feel a sense of belonging in their school. In some cases, there was deep alienation and anger. The 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health interviewed more than 12,000 7th- to 12th-graders and found that two factors were protective against students becoming involved in destructive behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity. The first factor was family connectedness, a feeling of closeness to parents. The second factor was school connectedness, a feeling of closeness to people at school. Once again, we see why creating a caring school community must be at the heart of any character education program.

***You once wrote that being smart and being moral are not the same. What is the ingredient that is missing when intelligent people are immoral?***

Love.

***The changing conditions of American society have compelled teachers and schools to take a greater role in the moral formation of children, a duty which is rightfully theirs as educators. However, parents will always remain the primary educators of the young, and they need to be reminded of this responsibility and given insights as to how to fulfill it. Do you do any work with parents? (Your book, Raising Good Children, is a wonderful resource for parents.)***

We encourage school teams that come to our Summer Institute to include a parent leader. Our Institute presents nine ways to partner with parents in character education. When I do an inservice workshop for a school, I always try to talk to parents in the evening about what they can do in the home to try to raise children of character. Basically, parenting for character comes down to love, good example, clear moral teaching, reasoned discipline and supervision, opportunities for taking on responsibility in family life, and providing a spiritual vision of life.

The essence of love in any relationship is the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of another. For parents, it's usually a sacrifice to say no to a child because of the hassle that's involved. It's often a sacrifice to give kids the time they need. And it can be a real sacrifice to hold a family together for the sake of our children.

Families need our help—from churches, communities, and the whole culture—in remaining families. It's still not easy to talk about divorce in our society because so many people have experienced it. But the hard truth is that so many problems can be traced to broken families. A mother said to me recently, "The most important thing parents can do for their children is to love each other and stay together." That may not be possible in some cases—when there's violence, for example—but both secular and religiously based marriage counselors are now urging married couples having problems to do everything possible to work out their difficulties and try to save the marriage. That advice is based on the experience of many couples who vastly underestimated the pain of divorce for both adults and children.

***How do you respond to those (e.g., Alan Singer, but others, too) who accuse you of defining moral character according to your personal religious prescriptions and of using character education to promote Roman Catholic religious beliefs?***

I point out that in my writing about public school character education, I've defined moral character as consisting of virtues that people of all faiths, and people of no faith, can embrace as being the basis of strong personal character and a just, democratic society. Virtues such as those named by the ancient Greeks—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—are objectively good

human qualities, grounded in reason and experience. They transcend time and culture.

There are other virtues such as prayer, love of God and all God's children including our enemies, obedience to God's authority, gratitude for our blessings, humility before our Creator, sorrow for our sins, and suffering for the sake of our sanctification and the salvation of souls. These virtues are grounded in religious faith and can be taught only in a religious context.

What about a virtue such as chastity, reserving sexual intimacy for the marriage commitment? Can you make the case that this is a secular virtue as well as a religious one? I think so. What happens when a society loses chastity? It begins to destroy itself. In the wake of the sexual revolution, we've had a plague of problems stemming from the breakdown of sexual morality: promiscuity, sexual addictions, rape and other forms of sexual exploitation, teen pregnancy, unwed births, abortions, an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases, sexual harassment, the sexual abuse of children, increasing infidelity, a huge pornography industry, and the damage done to families by many of these problems.

Our culture is beginning to recover ancient wisdom: Sex needs boundaries. From the federal government to the grassroots level, there is growing support for character-based sex education. This approach guides students to the conviction that abstinence is the only medically safe, emotionally healthy, and morally responsible choice for unmarried teens, and that condoms don't make sex physically safe, emotionally safe, or ethically loving.

I spend a lot of time talking to teens about sex and why it makes sense to save the ultimate intimacy for the ultimate commitment. Happily, there's increasing receptivity to this message. Attitudes and values in this area, as in all areas of character, are open to influence. And with God's grace, we're making progress.

To suggest other author interviews or request reviews of specific books, please contact:

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