

QUALITIES OF CHARACTER

**A Catalog Of
Character Trait
Stories, Examples,
and Anecdotes**

By Harold Rust

PREFACE

The author has collected stories on character qualities throughout his life. This book represents a culmination of the first long phase of that effort by categorizing the stories in a format which is user-friendly in finding a story that fits the subject of a talk or lesson being planned. Three factors make this book unique in its application of stories that describe character: First, it includes more stories in one location (book or CD or computer file) than currently exists; Second, it indexes those stories with links and story titles that make it extremely easy and efficient to locate one or more stories appropriate to the subject at hand, and Third, the stories are all written with a background description followed by the story itself of a length appropriate for most talks or lessons.

The author welcomes feedback on all aspects of this book and is particularly open toward having readers submit their own proposed stories to be included in a next edition of this compilation. It is the long-term desire of the author that this resource can reside on line as a first-choice location to be used by a speaker/teacher, leader, or parent when preparing a presentation in which vivid examples of real-life experiences exemplifying a particular character trait are needed.

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**hlrust@comcast.net
503-888-6736**

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OVERVIEW

This is a collection of stories, each of which highlights one or more specific character traits. Most of them are positive, but some reflect the negative of the trait rather than the quality implied by the name. The character traits selected are an arbitrary list, but I do explain later in this introduction more about that. I include an introduction accompanied by a CD or on-line reference because that should prove to be what I hope is a very efficient way to quickly locate a story that works for your particular situation and need.

My introduction is rather lengthy, but it is intended to provide a setting in which the whole concept of character and ‘who we are’ is addressed first. The subject itself has become much more fascinating to me as I have collected these stories and then reflected on the relationship between a story and the insight it can provide into the meaning of character. I do hope it does the same for you.

The qualities are grouped under three main headings: Directed Inward, Toward Others, and Toward God. This collective split could be readily debated, but I do believe it offers one way to recognize that some traits are reflected more within a person while others are more noticeable by others or affect others more clearly. The last category was simply my way of grouping those traits which are more of a spiritual nature by themselves—even though they could be considered by many as being Directed Inward as well.

INTRODUCTION

A story is told about a scorpion who wanted to cross a creek and saw a turtle nearby. He called out to the turtle and asked for a ride on his back. The turtle responded “I couldn’t let you ride on my back because you could easily sting my neck and kill me while I’m transporting you across.” The scorpion replied, “I certainly wouldn’t sting you because if I did we both would drown. It is only logical that I would have every reason *not* to sting you while you are carrying me where I need to go.” With that logic calming his fears, the turtle paddled over and let the scorpion onto its back. As they headed across the creek, the scorpion began edging toward the turtle’s neck. The turtle paddled harder, but kept reminding himself that surely the scorpion wouldn’t try biting him because it would be a quick death and they’d both drown. However, the scorpion continued sliding toward the neck as though he were being drawn by a magnet. Finally, when his tail was next to the turtle’s neck, the scorpion gave a fatal strike with his stinger. The turtle instantly knew it would be his death. In agony, he cried out to the scorpion, “Why did you sting me? Now I will die and you will drown in the creek. You said you wouldn’t do it because it just wasn’t logical if you did.” The scorpion sadly answered, “It isn’t really about logic; it’s just my character”.

Yes, our essential character runs deep and ultimately determines our actions. Although most of us like to think we could change those character traits which don’t work well for us while holding solidly onto traits which are recognized as positive and a valued aspect of who we are, we still often do something “illogical” just because of who we are. In the process of learning about character, I have found it to be a multi-dimensional panorama of thoughts, actions, and reactions that becomes more complex the more we study it. That is why my plan for this book is to provide some preliminary discussion of the meaning of character and then use the accompanying CD to illustrate various traits through stories that involve real people acting in ways that give insight into a recognizable pattern. The background information that follows

can help in appreciating the value of those stories and provide some semblance of order to this random subject.

We Identify With Good Character Qualities in Others

We mortals thrill when we see or read about heroic actions of others. Whether it is James Stewart in a movie portraying a Senator who stands up for right or reading about Pat Tyndall who gives up his football career with the Arizona Cardinals to go protect his country, we admire, respect, and inwardly desire to follow these “heroes”. The more noble and elevated the hero becomes, the more likely we are to question whether we, in fact, could carry out their selfless and committed actions; however, the closer we can personally identify with them and understand their own weaknesses and challenges the better we can contemplate that same action. The value of a good story comes with insight into enough background of the situation that we are positioned to picture the possibility of emulating that outstanding character quality. When we read about a “local” Eric Smith surviving a float plane crash but then giving his life in crawling toward the rear of the burning plane in an attempt to save his wife, Christine, and baby son, we easily recognize the heroism involved while silently hoping we would have the strength of character to have done the same. It helps us to believe this was just an “ordinary” person—like we are—who became a hero when called upon to do so.

It is this recognition of character in others that leads us to recognize heroes and to flock to movies or plays or to read about these inspiring actions. Although many writers and producers have at times cleverly displayed inappropriate actions as something to root for—such as siding with a Mafia head in striking back at opposing gang leaders—most of us still give our allegiance to those who act with righteous intent.

One of the purposes of retelling an example or an incident is to highlight the details sufficiently to allow us a reflection of ourselves in that situation. As we submerge ourselves in following what led someone else to do good and act courageously, we expand our own reserves for acting appropriately as we encounter

similar situations. Seeing not only the action but also the internal character leading to that action provides us a greater basis for developing our inner strengths and character. For this reason, I have applied the story-telling technique to explore the impact of character and its consequences.

The Story-telling Technique

We all know a good story when we hear one, but it isn't always easy to duplicate that when we try telling it to someone else. There are some important elements that go in to making a story compelling for the listener, and I like to categorize these elements as Action, Brilliance, Consequences, Detail. *Action*: The story must be more than describing characteristics of a person; it should include those individuals actually doing something very specific. *Brilliance*: The more vivid the imagery detailed in the story, the more readily the listener (or reader) is to become emotionally connected and able to relate to the subjects of the story. *Consequences*: When there is an action there needs to be an identifiable effect of that action—either on the person of interest or on those with whom that person is associated. A story not only needs a beginning; it also needs an end. *Detail*: One of the most common flaws I see in stories is that they don't contain enough detail for the listener to fit themselves inside the actors of the story and live the part themselves. Garrison Keillor has become famous through his “Prairie Home Companion” series of radio shows by including lots of detail and creating a hilarious story out of what otherwise might just be a simple event involving someone in your home town losing a shoe or leaving for a vacation in Florida.

Developing Character our Primary Purpose

One of the few common threads of life is the fundamental purpose for living, for being on this planet and experiencing life itself. I believe there is that one aspect which is the same basic element for each and every human who has ever lived. Despite almost complete unique birth environment, social setting, DNA, and

opportunities for each of us, our potential for achieving any level of character development is unlimited and ultimately equal. This statement implies that each of us can become as honest, as courageous, as charitable...and so forth...as any other person who has ever lived. That is a very bold statement because it would offer the possibility for us to eventually progress to a state of complete perfection—given that we can continue pursuing it after this life and given that we do have the will to keep working at it for a very long time. When one views our life's experiences in that light, then our real focus should be on the state of our character traits rather than the state of our accomplishments and achievements.

It also helps when we put into perspective the fact our environment is simply a medium that hosts us as we develop those essential traits of humanity, those elements of our character which have deep-seated longevity. In that sense, we all have truly equal opportunities here on earth even though our situations of existence are so diverse. Ultimately we will recognize that we all are equally endowed by our creator despite the vast differences we each face in physical, mental, social and even spiritual environments.

An example I will use is that of an individual carrying a pack on their back. Observers can see how well that person can walk, run, and move around; however, an observer doesn't know what strengths are being built into the person and what their capability will be when the pack is removed. One person may have 100 pounds of rock on their back and thereby struggle to climb even a gentle hill while another may have helium balloons that can allow them rapid ascent of difficult terrain. When the packs are removed, however, the first may have developed muscular strength that now enables a very fast race to the finish while the second may have been willing to be carried along with the pack so that without it there is little strength left after a short walk. So it is with the various "packs" we each carry in this life. The promise to all, though, is that despite what is in the pack, we can develop our muscles so that when the pack is removed we can demonstrate our strength.

A powerful description of this role of character in our purpose of life was given by Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a general conference address in October 2000. After referencing several scriptures regarding the Final Judgment, he then states, “From such teachings we conclude that the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have *done*. It is an acknowledgment of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have *become*. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.”

Defining our Goal in Personal Development

I do not propose to define a clear set of characteristics for which one can directly measure one's progress toward ultimate perfection. In fact, it is my belief that while here on earth we will never circumscribe a defining description of those human attributes which constitute God's perspective of perfection. The recognition of that uncertainty should not diminish our desire to continually strive to identify those characteristics we wish to achieve. We are endowed with sufficient insight to recognize whether a particular trait appears to be leading that person to improve the lives of others and is thereby a worthwhile quality.

Although we are generally endowed with that ability to know right from wrong—or better from worse--, we can't always readily translate that into a specific quality of character we should develop. We have been taught that Christ lived a perfect life and, thereby, had perfect qualities of human character; however, it is difficult to describe or envision in earthly terms exactly what those qualities are because Christ's actions were described by mortals who witnessed--albeit they were spiritually inspired--His demonstrations of character qualities in mortal settings.

One example of this is the description of Christ casting out the money changers in the temple. As we read the story in Matthew and in John we can sense the broader elements of respect for His Father's House and His desire to impress others of that need for respect--but we may struggle somewhat in determining the underlying core principles that would present a definitive prescription for the exact character traits we can emulate. Does the value lie in loyalty?, in stubbornness?, in fearlessness?, in perseverance?, in decisiveness? Likewise, does this mean we should act in similar fashion to cast out others we see defiling God in some way? Should we always demonstrate loyalty in such a pronounced way? In following our own perception on Christ's actions, it is almost certain we will not completely duplicate the character qualities he asserted at that time.

Such imprecise application should not obscure the value in attempting to replicate Christ's style and fundamental qualities of character. It simply means we must be aware of the frailty of mortal interpretations of eternal elements and of the need to keep searching for, honing, and refining those aspects of our own character which can lead to eternal perfection. I am convinced that to the extent we pursue this goal, we will be guided in determining what is best. I may think humor to be a valuable characteristic, but if my humor leads others to be uncomfortable or less unified or disloyal, I will have cues to guide me toward revising what I should incorporate in that aspect of my character.

Defining character in abstract terms is, in my opinion, of very limited value. However, a good description of actions and responses when humans pursue resolving a situation within themselves, interact with others, or communicate with God can provide an arena for at least visualizing key aspects of specific traits of character. For that reason, I have become more and more convinced of the benefit in learning how others responded in a particular situation. Not only can a story be much more lasting in one's memory, but a story can also better establish a working definition of both positive and negative elements of human character. Properly applied, a story from someone else's experiences can be as valuable to us in developing good character

as a good--or bad--experience in our own life. Given the value of character qualities in achieving our purpose of life and our long term pursuit of perfection, the benefit of effective stories about character traits should be recognized.

Beginning the Process of Defining Character Traits

The character traits I have selected are certainly not a perfectly balanced set of descriptors. There are many other terms which could have been used and other groupings that may be more appropriate than the ones I have chosen. However, these were selected after many reviews of character trait listings used by other authors and editors. With volumes of synonyms available for each of these traits, the list could easily be much longer. However, my goal was to have an index which allowed for the breadth and variety of traits that can be exhibited while keeping the total number of categories as small as possible. This index has also been refined several times as I began documenting stories and observed which traits seemed to be both descriptive and also inclusive: that is, those descriptions which appeared reasonably understandable to the reader and also which included enough breadth that several types of actions and settings could be found that illustrated the particular trait selected.

Establishing a description of traits is not done in a vacuum and without some link to observable action. After all, we tend to classify someone as having a particular character trait only after that trait is demonstrated several times and appears to be a consistent behavior for them. And yet, the intensity of the moment also provides an important element into our perception of character. For example, a person can be kind to friends and neighbors around them for years, but one act of unkindness toward someone in a truly unfortunate and disadvantaged position can reflect a basic character flaw of unkindness. Our character is generally a reflection of how we have consistently behaved or acted, and yet our "true" character can be a reflection of a change--either positive or negative--we have made to a situation requiring us to reach out and beyond our normal response pattern. This is one theme expressed by many writers of those exposed to extreme

conditions such as the concentration camps or POW environment: some become the best they have ever been and some drop to lower levels than ever before exhibited.

The Constancy of Character

Can we ever say that the character of an individual is set? No, we well recognize there is always the possibility of change. And yet, change generally occurs only with specific effort and generally only slowly at that. It can appear to change rapidly in some specific situations, but again it generally is that fast only when powerful forces are at work. The character of an individual is not set at birth and yet even in the early years many of the basic forms of ones character begin to show recognizable form. If our character is formed as a result of our mortal experiences, if it reflects that accumulation of who we are and what we are and how we act, and if it is what we carry with us to the next world, then perhaps one way of representing our character is that of being a mortal expression of our spirit. I personally believe that our character is the essence of who we are and that essence is what we carry throughout the eternities. If so, it behooves us to understand character and use any mortal method we can to improve that quality of character in every way we can while we have a body and mind to do so.

Watching even very young children can quickly highlight differences in basic character qualities between individuals. Although many of these qualities show up in physical reactions only during those early years (cries easily, goes to sleep when sung to, loves to hug, takes toys from other kids,...etc), there are some inclinations or unique responses that seem to be prevalent from one's early childhood through the later adult years. The expression "Type A" or "Type B" is just one label that seems to be a long-term trait—whether actual or just perpetuated in later years based on an initial inclination toward that trait—implicitly accepted by many of us as factual. Just ask yourself whether someone in your family early identified as a "Type A" has been relegated to a "Type B" in adult life—or vice versa!

An example of the apparent durability of a basic character trait is that of Kermit Roosevelt, son of President “Teddy” Roosevelt. A graphic portrayal of some key events in his life described in *The River of Doubt* by Candice Millard offers a vivid review of the durability of character traits. Kermit, Roosevelt’s second oldest son, was working as a young engineer in Brazil when his father decided to take an adventurous tour in South America. As plans evolved into the trip including exploration of an unmapped tributary of the rain forest Amazon region, Kermit was the logical pick by both Pres Roosevelt and his wife (Kermit’s mother) to accompany the President and “look after your father”. Kermit had exhibited a somewhat brooding and “black heart” disposition as a youth, but his time spent on an African safari with the president had demonstrated his courage and resourcefulness in the wilds. Although he had just received a letter by his sweetheart, Belle, accepting his proposal of marriage, Kermit agreed to delay his reunion with her until after the river trip.

The riding of the rapids down this sometimes treacherous river in the middle of the Amazon was a challenge that Kermit met in full stride. He was resourceful, diligent, and focused as the group encountered the difficulties of portage with the heavy dugouts time and again around waterfalls. A month into this strenuous undertaking, President Roosevelt badly scraped a leg and the resulting infection forced him to stay off his feet and be treated constantly for high fever and a severely weakened body. After several more days of difficult travel along the river, the group was faced with a series of falls ahead that not only required removing all passengers and supplies from the wood dugouts, but also offered no good adjoining areas for portage as they had done in the past. The expedition commander, Col Cañdido Rondon , felt he had no choice but to abandon the six dugout canoes and declare that from here on out the group of men would all have to hike out on foot. The news meant that Roosevelt would have be left; the consequences were such that Roosevelt prepared now to take his life by swallowing some poison he had brought along just in case he had to face becoming an unbearable burden to the others. Kermit hovered over his father and insisted he could never go on

without his father. That single-minded determination from his son to bring him home despite the odds kept Roosevelt alive. With almost super-human effort, Kermit showed to the others how they could maneuver the canoes over the falls and drag the scanty remains of their luggage as well. Several weeks later and in near-starvation condition the canoes came upon a rubber tree worker who kept them alive until they could reach “civilization”.

The above exciting experience would appear to demonstrate complete focus, determination, discipline, and unselfishness as fundamental character traits possessed by Kermit. However, just a few years after his marriage to Belle he was back in Brazil and having a difficult time remaining focused. He was openly unfaithful to Belle and exhibited no discipline in his near-addiction to alcohol. Belle used her influence with her cousin, FDR (Pres Roosevelt), to obtain a commission in the Army for Kermit during World War II. However, by then his lack of focus, lack of determination, lack of discipline and his self pity eventually led to his taking his own life while on assignment in Alaska. This latter set of qualities seemed to mirror his behavior as a youth.

Thus we see that even with the months of resolute display of solid and remarkable character qualities, Kermit could still fail the test of holding onto those qualities in his later life. One might ask the question of just who Kermit would be had he died after rescuing his father. He certainly would have died as a hero and been remembered by the living as one who had the highest of values bedded within his soul. Did life do him a disservice by granting him time to achieve his ardent desire to marry Belle and return to his beloved Brazil? Would he have retained a spirit far more noble by dying earlier than appeared to be his case by living a relatively worthless 25 more years? I certainly don't propose to know the answer.

A contrasting example can be illustrated in the life of Michael Moore. As a manager of the Log Haven Restaurant in 1982, Michael was embezzling funds that he then used to provide additional money to several underpaid employees—including himself. When alerted that the company accountant would be

meeting with him and was likely to uncover his financial dealings, Michael met the accountant at the Restaurant early in the morning before anyone else would arrive. He shot him in cold blood and then had to kill the laundry truck driver who stumbled on the scene just moments later. His efforts to hide the murder failed and he was convicted to life imprisonment. One could list several key character traits that clearly pointed his path as being headed straight to Hell. And yet, over the next 15 years he changed. He accepted full responsibility for what he had done, he actively sought out ways to improve the life of others, he developed skills and volunteered for additional responsibilities in the prison that eventually resulted in an updated computer system which saved the prison thousands of dollars. He humbled himself in attending Church services, reading the scriptures every available minute he had, and eventually demonstrated to the families of his victims that he was indeed sincere in his repentance. He was denied parole he had hoped would be granted so that he could prove beyond doubt his commitment to change. He died in prison but did so with everything he had done indicating he had a broken heart and contrite spirit.

Despite all this good he did while in prison, we mortal individuals can not judge whether he has eliminated his negative character traits that led him to be a murderer. We can be inspired by what he did, but we cannot know for sure of his underlying character. Likewise, we can't really judge the fundamental character traits that defined Kermit Roosevelt in his dying days.

In an article by David Brooks of the New York Times printed on May 13, 2008, the results of the Grant study tracking 268 promising young men just entering Harvard College are explored to reflect on this matter of character constancy. He references a forthcoming issue in The Atlantic magazine by Joshua Wolf Shenk titled "What Makes Us Happy?" and notes the wide divergence of character displayed as the years went on for this group of men. Although all were smart, privileged, and ambitious, a third would suffer at least one bout of mental illness and alcoholism was rampant among the group. He then concludes: "It's the baffling variety of their lives that strikes one the most. It is as if we all

contain a multitude of characters and patterns of behavior, and these characters and patterns are bidden by cues we don't even hear. The man who is careful and meticulous in one stage of life is unrecognizable in another context."

Despite these examples of character qualities that seem hidden for years and then mystically arise to overpower the individual's prior behavior, I believe we can find within the experiences of others sufficient resources to alert ourselves to several fundamentals:

- a. Character strengths can be acquired but can also be lost
- b. Our past works alone do not insure who we become if we allow ourselves to discard or distort those very qualities that led us previously to act wisely and well.
- c. We cannot judge others solely by what we observe in their actions. Character is much deeper than the tangible response one displays in a specific situation. That is true for both apparently bad deeds as well as noble accomplishments.
- d. Our character does not change easily nor quickly, but it can be improved—or degraded--depending upon our willingness to change.
- e. The most important element determining our character may very well be how strongly we want to have specific character qualities. And if we don't work at those specific traits, then we allow whatever is deep inside to simply "bubble up to the top" and decide for us.

Can we Change? Do We Change?

Two examples, both with a different message, were included in *the Oregonian* newspaper on the same day, May 27, 2007.

The first was an article by Anne Saker of *the Oregonian* about

Norm Frink who gathered media attention during the conspiracy case of figure skater Tonya Harding and the assault on Nancy Kerrigan. As recently as a year ago, Portland lawyer Ronald Atwood watched Frink disrupt an author's reading of his book in a community church to denounce the book and yell out that "The distortions you are peddling are not true!" Atwood was so taken back at Frink's actions that he wrote to the District Attorney "Mr Frink was embarrassing, rude, and acted as a bully".

The reporter goes on to write that "Those words and many others like them have been applied for decades to Norman William Frink Jr., a relentless, aggressive, throw-away-the-key career prosecutor who tells people exactly what he thinks—usually in excruciating detail—and who plays not just to win but to force opponents to admit defeat.

A friend from his early school years, Todd Follett, described Frink by saying "You pretty much know what you've got when you see him. It's... what he's been since he was 13. Some people have massive changes in their personality. He really hasn't."

The second article was a commentary by Steve Duin about Beth McCormick who is graduating from Marshall High School with a 4.0 GPA. It might not be so unusual except for the fact that just three years ago her Kelso, Washington house was stormed by police who arrested her parents in a major marijuana bust. Her father is still in prison; her mother died two years ago of a methadone overdose; her grandparents, who took over care of her, both died a year ago; and her only other close relative, a brother, recently tried to commit suicide. During her high school years she has been living on food stamps and for the last year has had only her brother to help care for her. But her resilience, her generosity, her resolve in what one teacher calls the 'Pursuit of happiness' resonate at the Renaissance Arts Academy where she has finished her studies through Marshall High.

Asked what accounts for her emotional maturity, teacher Adam Smith responded "Who knows? Is it maturity? Or is

it just a solid defense because she has no choice? I don't know how many tears she's gone through, or if they just evaporate in the heat of anger and unfairness. I do know she just has the equipment—the heart, soul and brains—to say, 'My life will not be *that* way, it will be *this* way.'

As illustrated above, our character is not something that changes easily. One aspect of this constancy has been demonstrated through the reactions of individuals when subjected to extreme situations — in particular, to torture. In an article by Darius Rejali in the Opinion Page (Section E) of the December 16, 2007 *The Oregonian*, the writer highlights several myths about torture. In debunking the belief that you can train people to resist torture, he states,

“Simply put, nothing predicts the outcome of one's resistance to pain better than one's own personality. Against some personalities, nothing works; against others, practically anything does. Studies of hundreds of detainees who broke under Soviet and Chinese torture, including Army-funded studies of U.S. prisoners of war, conclude that during, before and after torture, each prisoner displayed strengths and weaknesses dependent on his or her own character. The CIA's own 'Human Resources Exploitation Manual' from 1983 and its so-called Kubark manual from 1963 agree. In all matters relating to pain, says Kubark, the 'individual remains the determinant.'”

In other words, our character is a bank in which daily deposits and withdrawals have only a small effect on the total amount available should there be a run on the bank. It behooves, us, therefore, to make deposits as frequently and as consistently positive as we can throughout our lives because changing one's character is not something that is achieved by “cramming” for a final exam. This was stated using slightly different terminology by Elder Delbert L. Stapley, a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a General Conference address on October 4, 1974:

“We are not born into this world with fixed habits. Neither do we inherit a noble character. Instead, as children of God, we are given the privilege and opportunity of choosing which way of life we will follow—which habits we will form....

Good habits are not acquired simply by making good resolves, though the thought must precede the action. Good habits are developed in the workshop of our daily lives. It is not in the great moments of test and trial that character is built. That is only when it is displayed. The habits that direct our lives and form our character are fashioned in the often uneventful, commonplace routine of life. They are acquired by practice.”

Despite the many indicators that rarely do we change much or change quickly, there are those recorded events which reflect significant and speedy change in character. One of the most well-known of these is the dramatic change recorded in the New Testament regarding Saul (later, the Apostle Paul) from one who was persecuting Christians to one who became their most ardent of missionaries. A parallel event occurred for Alma the Younger as recorded in the books of Mosiah and Alma in *The Book of Mormon*. In each case we have someone who was publicly opposing a religious position and then, after a Heavenly visitation, became a life-long committed convert for that body of worshipers.

For both of these men, what we do not know is whether they always possessed the character qualities of commitment, dedication, perseverance, humility, charity, etc, or whether these dramatic visitations actually changed their fundamental make-up. I personally believe it was probably more the former, and they had simply allowed a few personal experiences or teachings to so affect their perspective that their underlying character was directed toward being opposed to what they should have instead been supporting. They do represent examples, though, of individuals who did change significantly in their outward actions not only at that time but for the remainder of their lives.

One of the most famous fictional individuals who made an abrupt and long-lasting change in his fundamental make-up was Scrooge from *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Because it is fiction, the author can create whatever definitions he so chooses to

bestow on his leading figure in the story. In Scrooge's case, Dickens gave him layers of insensitivity (Bah! Humbug!) to the needs of others that held him back from showing compassion even when a ghost takes him to scenes from the past and then scenes from the present. It is only when he is forced to accept reality of what the future could bring that a sense of humility and kindness pushes back all that meanness and selfishness so obvious before.

By the author's declaration, his change was real and long-lasting-- ("He knew how to celebrate Christmas the best of anyone"). Of course, the author doesn't address the difficult status of Marley who seemed to display all the repentant loyalty that was finally scared into Scrooge's soul while not benefiting from any of the forgiveness so obviously granted to Scrooge while still living. It would be interesting to talk with Dickens after his creation of these individuals and ask him to assess whether each man received his just reward and whether the change in Scrooge was any more real or sincere than that of Marley. Was it that one repented before dying while the other repented only afterwards? If one believes in the continuity of character, then one would have to allow Marley that same opportunity to convert his contrition into one of a pronounced born-again kind-hearted person. But, then again, these guys were both just fiction. Our own process may be a little more complex and dependent upon the persistent identity of our basic character. And our author is not a fiction writer.

In The End, We Are Who We Are

One of the lessons Laurence Gonzales reports about in his book, *Deep Survival*, (W W Norton & Co), is that In a real emergency we have to live with those internal resources and strengths built up from prior experiences and preparation. As he states on page 223 of his book,

"A survival situation brings out the true, underlying personality. Our survival kit is inside us. But unless it's there before the accident, it is not going to appear magically at the moment it's needed. When you consolidate your personality as a survivor, what you get is the essence of what you always had. A survival situation simply concentrates who you are. It drives the natural system you've developed over a lifetime, and it

drives it harder. Whether or not it becomes chaotic at the boundaries depends on what you've put into it over a lifetime. Your experiences, education, family, and way of viewing the world all shape what you would be as a survivor."

Impact of Situation on Those Character Traits Displayed

In a radio interview on public radio "Talk of the Nation" in February 2008, one of the invited guests shared some results in testing honesty among individuals. Their results highlighted the significant influence that particular situations had on how honest or charitable a person was.

For example, cheating in a spelling test was not a good predictor of whether that person would cheat in math—or vice versa.. They also observed that if a person came upon a scene in which others seemed to be ignoring someone's need for help, then that person was far less likely to be helpful themselves.

There is no doubt that we are influenced by our interpretation of the context of the setting in which we take some action, but that setting usually serves as a temporary and peripheral adjustment rather than a fundamental change in our basic character. However, because we can be influenced by our setting, it is incumbent upon ourselves to view the broader picture and to avoid as much as possible being influenced by our immediate surroundings. After all, a bad habit or response if repeated often enough can indeed make changes to our basic sense of self.

What Others Think of Us is Not The Final Determinate

Although positive character qualities are usually recognized in actions observed by others, the determination of character is not solely defined by what others see. One can appear charitable by giving to the poor while actually doing so primarily to avoid losing an account with another firm or facing a boss who may otherwise give a negative evaluation.