



Teaching Character in College: An Interview with Elizabeth Kiss, Director of the Kenan Ethics Program, Duke University

Interview by Gary Pavela

Pavela: How do we have a dialogue with colleagues who have fundamentally different ideas about whether "truth-seeking" is possible, or desirable?

Kiss: I think a dogmatic assertion that no truth exists is deeply self-contradictory. It claims to have ripped the veil of illusion from the face of the world -- which is one of the classic claims truth-seekers make -- and at the same time it declares the whole enterprise of truth-seeking pointless.

Now, there are those who argue that truth is possible in some areas of inquiry but not in others -- that physicists, for instance, can discover truth but ethicists cannot. This is not a contradictory position. It can mean different things depending on what we mean by "truth". For example, some say that we don't discover ethical laws the way we discover the laws of physics -- ethics is more a matter of invention than of discovery, and we don't call inventions "true" or "false." I think it's a fascinating question whether ethics is invented, discovered, or a mixture of the two. But if ethics is invented, it's invented to answer one of the most important questions human beings face: how should we live together?

I tend to think that those who claim that our values are simply reflections of conditions of power belie that claim in the way they live their lives. For instance, most people care deeply about the values they convey to their children. I don't think they would care so much if they really believed that values are arbitrary reflections of power.

So, I think dialogue is possible between people who disagree over whether there are moral truths, and that the dialogue can be fruitful so long as we try to be clear about what each partner in the dialogue means by truth and about how our views fit with, and illuminate, the value judgments we make in our everyday lives.

Pavela: In addition to defining some possible shared values in an age of irony, do you think there are any likely shared virtues? (By virtues I mean habits or qualities of character we would want to develop in ourselves and others). Is the concept of virtue something the larger society--and perhaps the academic world--is starting to take more seriously?

Kiss: There definitely has been a resurgence of interest in the ethics of virtue and character, both in the academy and in the larger society. Focusing on character is a good way to identify shared moral ground. Here in the Durham Public Schools, as in many school districts around the country, there has been an initiative to identify character traits people want children to learn. Communities with deep moral and religious disagreements can reach powerful consensus around traits of character -- like honesty, kindness, respect, and courage-- they all want to affirm and nurture.



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Pavela: If there are any common virtues, how can we go about teaching or affirming them to college students? Why isn't such an effort futile, given the habits many students acquired before they came to campus?

Kiss: Habits acquired in childhood are, of course, powerful determinants of people's behavior. So early moral education is very important. But colleges can still make an enormous difference if they demand high moral standards from their students. Studies show that young people who cheated extensively in high school will often transform their behavior in college if they attend a school which affirms academic integrity.

How we teach character in college is a complex question. I think it needs to be done in a myriad of ways. Explicit discussion of ethics is important, but so is the way rules are formulated and enforced, and the implicit messages about what the school values which are conveyed, for instance, in the alumni it celebrates.

Pavela: The American military does seem to find ways to affirm some basic virtues (honesty, loyalty) and to help young people in a multi-ethnic society bond in pursuit of common goals. Is there anything we might be able to learn from these efforts that can be applied to higher education?

Kiss: For all its serious and well-publicized problems, the American military has indeed been at the forefront of many efforts at moral education and civic transformation. I'm no expert on this topic, but it seems to me that they state their moral principles clearly and link them to institutional procedures and norms. While they are very different in many respects -- less hierarchical, more decentralized, more pluralistic in their aims -- colleges and universities could learn from this example by figuring out what values they want to affirm and then examining how their own procedures and practices can better reflect and support those values.

Pavela: What is the role of peers in teaching or affirming ethics and virtue? What are some of the practical ways we can influence student peer groups in this regard?

Kiss: The selection and training of resident advisors is one example of an area of student life where there is great potential for moral leadership. We can also nurture student moral leadership by providing opportunities for community service, for student participation in the formation of campus rules and policies, and by paying attention to ethics in the work of the career development office.

Pavela: Are there specific "rites of passage" that we might consider (or reconsider) on college campuses? I note some schools are returning to a "signing-in" ceremony for new students, for example.

Kiss: I think efforts to strengthen the extent to which colleges are "intentional communities" are a wonderful idea. At my alma mater, Davidson College, all applicants have to write an essay about the honor code. Mandatory assemblies are, at most schools, a thing of the past. Yet occasions to gather the whole community are an important way to build a sense of shared moral purpose. One way of doing this is a regular campus-wide community service project in which students, employees, faculty and administrators work side by side.

Pavela: Do we need "physical" places and communities to create true rites of passage? How can we think of such rites of passage as we educate more students in cyberspace?



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Kiss: Collaborative projects may help students at cyber-universities develop a sense of community. For instance, one might have students write papers together, or work to compile an edited "volume" of student papers. But this is a very tough challenge.

Pavela: Many students are cynical and distrustful of authority. They see even the highest public figures accused of the most serious ethical lapses. How do we raise the subject of ethics without seeming hopelessly "preachy" or self-righteous? Would it be better to talk about ethics as a process in character-building--a process that will have many failures? Might we suggest that it is not the failures we should lament the most--but the failure to learn from them?

Kiss: I was talking recently about this issue with Robert Coles, author of *The Moral Intelligence of Children*. He suggested that the confessional was an important form of moral education with college students -- that teachers needed to be willing to share their own struggles and failures with students, to present themselves not as moral authorities but as fellow strugglers. I realize that many faculty will not feel comfortable taking this role. But it seems to me to be one important way in which we can bring moral education alive. Students also, in my experience, respond very positively to faculty who have strong moral beliefs so long as -- and this is an important proviso -- they treat those who disagree with them with respect.