



Spiritual Formation in an Age of Entitlement

by Daniel J. Egeler

In my travels around the world, I'm always fascinated by the underlying values that each culture inculcates in the next generation. Every culture has values

that run counter to biblical principles, and each culture constructs myths and lies to promote these values. During a discussion about this topic with Josh McDowell a few years ago, he proposed a provocative idea for an elective course for Christian schools. What if we taught students to identify the top 10 cultural lies being taught by American culture and then equipped them with the skills to debunk those lies? What do you think some of those lies would be?

One of the first cultural lies that I would identify is the primacy that American culture says should be on comfort and wealth. Dr. Richard Swenson, while speaking in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at the ACSI 2004 Leadership Academy, made the statement that the new American dream is now "more possessions—more quickly." In his book *The Overload Syndrome*, Dr. Swenson writes the following (1998, 43; italics in original):

Getting more and more of everything is wonderful—as long as that is what we need. When saturated, however, getting more and more of everything faster and faster becomes a problem.

Most of us don't need *more*. And we certainly don't need it *faster*. Instead of being our friends, *more* and *faster* have now become our twin enemies.

I believe that this value system has also infected our Christian schools and that it is an insidious threat to the healthy spiritual formation of our young people. Too often, those held in high esteem are people who have succeeded in terms of comfort and wealth. Rather than the focus being on the quality of the spiritual character of a man, it's the size of his home, the type of car he drives, and the type of clothes he wears that dictate the level of respect he receives in Christian circles. It's not that comfort or wealth is bad in and of itself, but a person's wealth should be of far less importance than the character of that person. The book of James has a lot to say about judging a person on the basis

of outward appearance. Why do our Christian kids want to grow up to be like our cynical and ungodly music, athletic, or even business celebrities rather than like the godly janitor, educator, or neighborhood pastor? The reason is that we live in a celebrity culture that values comfort, wealth, and image.

One of the negative by-products that often result from a focus on comfort and wealth is the disease of "affluenza." The authors of the book *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* define *affluenza* as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more" (De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2005, 2). This current generation of American young people is growing up with so much stuff because their parents have achieved the American dream by accumulating a stupendous number of possessions. By any economic indicator, our American Christian families are the wealthiest in

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recent history, and our kids have become infected with this disease. *Affluenza's* costs and consequences are immense, although often concealed. Untreated, the disease can cause permanent discontent (De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor 2005). This discontent leads to a sense of entitlement and the accompanying rejection of self-discipline, a deep repugnance for delayed gratification, and the embracing of self-indulgence. After all, don't we all "deserve a break today," as McDonald's commercials used to proclaim?

The fallout is that indulged children are often less able to cope with stress in an increasingly complex world because their parents have created an atmosphere in which the children's every whim is indulged and the children then believe that they are entitled to a life of comfort and wealth. This indulgence promotes a lack of frustration tolerance and produces an inability in children to persevere in the face of difficulties. Dan Kindlon, who teaches child psychology at

Harvard University, writes the following (2001, 59–60):

One of the hallmarks of what we call emotional maturity is the ability not to be fazed by setbacks; to roll with the punches and persevere in the face of difficulties....

Kids today can press a few keys on their computer and order up a video and dinner. They can instant message a half-dozen friends at the same time. So much appears to come to them so easily. We need to teach them how to develop skills such as frustration tolerance, and, more generally, how to cope with stress. Unfortunately, there is no magic in this. The only way a child can accomplish this is by actually experiencing frustration and stress, which is painful for him or her, and for us as parents, to watch.

One of the key arenas in which children today can learn to persevere and not to accept the option of quitting is athletics. Unfortunately, our culture has focused solely on winning and the self-glorification that comes from be-

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ing number one rather than on the character traits that can be learned from competing valiantly. My second son is a wrestler, and he began to compete in a number of top-flight wrestling tournaments. For the first two-thirds of the season, he did not win a match, and he was being pinned consistently in the first period. As his dad, I helped him set some realistic goals; he was competing against nationally ranked wrestlers. His first goal was just to make it through a match without getting pinned. This goal wasn't very glamorous—he ended up spending six grueling minutes fighting while on his back. I celebrated the first match in which he did not score a point and was beaten badly but *did not get pinned*. I celebrated and honored my son because he learned to persevere, and that lesson was far more important than what he could have learned from winning. The sport of wrestling was one of the few avenues I had to teach my son the importance of learning to persevere.

The disease of affluenza and all its symptoms is not the norm in other cultures. Thomas Friedman, in *The World Is Flat*, illustrates this by pointing out the different mind-set that Chinese kids have (2005, 264):

I heard a similar refrain in a discussion with consular officials who oversee the granting of visas at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. As one of them put it to me, "I do think Americans are oblivious to the huge changes. Every American who comes over to visit me [in China] is just blown away ... Your average kid in the U.S. is growing up in a wealthy country with many opportunities, and many are the kids of advantaged educated people and have a sense of entitlement. Well, the hard reality for that kid is that fifteen years from now Wu is going to be his boss and Zhou is going to be the doctor in town. The competition is coming, and many of the kids are going to move into their twenties clueless about these rising forces."

Friedman then comments on what American parents need to do to confront this future (2005, 303):

Helping individuals adapt to a flat world is not only the job of governments and companies. It is also the job of parents. They too need to know in what world their kids are growing up and what it will take for them to thrive. Put simply, we need a new generation of parents ready to administer tough love: There comes a time when you've got to put away the Game Boys, turn off the television set, put away the iPod, and get your kids down to work.

The sense of entitlement, the sense that because we once dominated global commerce and geopolitics—and Olympic basketball—we always will, the sense that delayed gratification is a punishment worse than a spanking, the sense that our kids have to be swaddled in cotton wool so that nothing bad or disappointing or stressful ever happens to them at school is, quite simply, a growing cancer on American society.

I believe that Friedman is onto something; these thoughts were reinforced by the findings of a research team working with Graybeal and Associates. The team conducted spiritual formation audits at three ACSI member schools. These audits used both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive assessment of a school's climate for spiritual formation. The audits also provided an unprecedented objective look into the very heart of Christian schooling. One of the most significant threads that began to emerge from this research endeavor was the lack of a heart of gratitude among students, parents, and faculty. I believe that this lack of gratitude can be directly linked to the disease of affluenza.

Research by Michael Zigarelli reveals what is especially troubling about this lack of gratitude (2005). In the book *Cultivating Christian Character*, Dr. Zigarelli analyzed the data from an online survey of more than 5,000 respondents in 60

countries and all 50 states of the United States. The analysis of data showed that there were three clusters that differentiated between high-virtue Christians and average-virtue Christians. These were a heart of gratitude, a life of joy, and a God-centered mind-set.

The most important of these three clusters, the one that “the philosopher Cicero called a ‘parent virtue’—a virtue that begets other virtues”—was gratitude. Gratitude most distinguished high-virtue Christians from average-virtue Christians. Dr. Zigarelli goes on to say, “In my study

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of Christians, I found solid, confirming evidence of this. Growing one’s gratitude has a radical and transformational effect on character, because gratitude is one of God’s primary vehicles for *inducing* other Christian qualities” (2005, 27; italics in original). It’s quite sobering to realize that a lack of gratitude was the strongest thread emerging from the spiritual formation audits conducted at three ACSI schools. Zigarelli’s research points out the importance of cultivating a heart of gratitude when pursuing spiritual maturity. I suspect that a lack of gratitude would be a significant thread in the spiritual climate in other ACSI member schools. If that suspicion is true, Christian schools have a considerable task before them if they’re going to be serious about fostering spiritual growth.

I suggest that to provide an antidote to the disease of affluenza, Christian schools must develop appropriate educational strategies that will help our kids do the following:

- resist the consumptive lifestyle
- identify and counter the cultural lie that wealth is the measure of a person
- cultivate a heart of gratitude
- learn to persevere—never accept the option of quitting
- become self-disciplined—embrace and celebrate delayed gratification
- overcome the temptation of self-indulgence

To foster spiritual maturity in young people, Christian schools must teach them to confront the disease of affluenza and to cultivate a heart of gratitude. Christian schools should not just throw up their hands and accept the way our culture is, deciding they can’t do anything about it. Christian schools need to strive to be countercultural, and the cultivation of Christian character is what should set Christian

schools apart from their secular counterparts. It would therefore behoove us to recognize the threat of this disease and to be intentional about confronting its insidious impact on the lives of our young people.

References

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