

When You're Small, You're Bigger

Overview: This character trait has to do with the degree to which a person sees himself or herself as the *center of the universe*, vs. *being a small part in much larger realities*. Is he about just serving himself, and having life serve him? Or does he humbly take a place in the bigger picture, serving things larger than himself and his own interests?

These transcendent things may be God, values, the mission of the organization, its stockholders, humanity, or many other “larger” causes that **transcend** just one person’s own interests. To the degree that a person can submit to things that transcend him and his own interests, he will build a large life. To the degree that he asks the “bigger” things to submit to him, he is trying to be God and will destroy not only himself, but the very things he is tied to as well. The corporate meltdowns like Enron illustrate this principle. A few who asked the “whole” to exist for their purposes brought down the “whole.”

1. The biggest character question anyone will ever answer in life is whether or not they are God, and if not, “who is?”

Most people, when asked, will tell you that they are not God. They will check the right box on the form and say “no.” But, if you follow them around for very long, even though they have said that they are not God, they act as if they are. They think the world, or their company, or their relationships exist to serve them and their purposes. They act as if they are the center of the universe. But whenever anyone acts that way, they ultimately come to destruction. The corporate scandals of the last few years have really shown that to be a reality.

Prov. 11:2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

Prov. 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Prov. 29:23 A man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.

Is. 2:11 The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

The opposite of this kind of character is the person we are referring to as “transcendent.” It is the person who has gotten beyond, above, or transcended ordinary human selfishness and self-centeredness and lives in a very different reality than thinking life revolves around him or her. He or she realizes that there are things larger than themselves. Their life is about fitting into those bigger things and serving them, and finding their role in the bigger picture.

Phil. 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Phil. 2:4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Phil. 2:5 ¶ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Phil. 2:6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
Phil. 2:7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
Phil. 2:8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Insert Illustration: This is a good place for an illustration from business, or personal lives where someone's arrogance and god-likeness was their eventual ruin. And also, you may want to bring in the opposite of where someone's humility brought them honor and accomplished great things.

2. There are things bigger than us that we are here to serve.

Thomas Merton said, "To consider persons and events and situations only in the light of their effect upon myself is to live on the doorstep of hell." If everything is just about me, then I am really in trouble. But to see that there are bigger things at stake and that my life is about serving the big things is where life gains its meaning, its structure, and its direction.

Values are one of those things. Values form a lot of the architecture of a person's character, his shape and personhood. What we value is what we esteem, or put above all else. If a company values people, for example, it will make sacrifices that cost money to serve either its employees or its customers. But if money is its highest value, then people's needs will bow to the dollar. This is what happened in the huge corporate meltdowns. Money became more important than long-standing values. In their egocentricity, they served only themselves and did not serve their values of honesty and commitment to stockholders, employees, customers and the like. As a result, everything crashed.

If we obey God and his values, then that does not happen. If we are in tune with higher values of love, faithfulness and service, for example, we do not destroy the things we care about:

Deut. 12:28 Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you, so that it may always go well with you and your children after you, because you will be doing what is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God.

Psa. 111:7 The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

Psa. 111:8 They are steadfast forever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness.

Psa. 119:40 How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.

And, there is also the need for a person to establish his own personal values that he or she is going to embrace in a special way that have to do with his particular mission or calling in life. Likewise, marriages, companies, organizations, etc. have to have their own particular transcendent values as well. You cannot value “everything,” and to define oneself as having some particular things that you are about is an important aspect of personal definition of mission before God and others. This is why organizations will have a values statement that they always keep in mind in making every decision, and those values will be different than other, equally good, organizations. They just have a different mission, culture, goal, purpose and emphasis.

3. To live a transcendent life, we have to develop awareness that there are things at stake larger than us.

People find that out either through the character that they develop in their growing up years, or they find it through “hitting bottom,” as their self-centered life crashes around them. Addicts, or people who do not serve their marriages, or their companies well, find out that they cannot live that way forever as their friends, spouses or someone tells them to “get it or get out.” That is hopefully followed by some sort of enlightenment.

Christians are to also look to God and his word for that kind of “getting it” experience, even daily. As Jesus said, we do not exist on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God. (Matt. 4:4)

We are also to get our awareness from other people as we submit to them, and to the authorities in our lives. To receive correction and teaching, and to obey that is an important aspect of character transcendence.

Rom. 13:1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Rom. 13:5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

Eph. 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

If we cannot submit to authority, and others, then by definition, we are saying that we are the ultimate authority. That is to sit in the chair of God. Some will say, “I submit to God only,” but that is not true because He says in his word that we have to submit to others. If we are not doing that, we are not submitting to him either.

Awareness also comes from studying God's values and ways and "hiding those things in our heart" until they become a part of who we are:

Psa. 119:11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

4. The person of transcendent character is able to practice self-denial to serve those "higher" things, self-correction when his desires bump into them, and have the ability to adjust to their demands.

When we are faced with the conflict between what we want and what our values demand from us, or what they needs of the "bigger" realities demand from us, we must be the one who gives. If we do that, we join the bigger things and become transcendent ourselves. If we do not, then we are asking the bigger things to serve us, and we will be destroyed in the process.

Self-denial is the ability to die to what I want in the service of something else that I want *more*. If I want the ultimate values of love, faithfulness, service, love of God and others, and other values more than my own life, then I will become a transcendent person and be lifted up by those things. But to do that, I must be able to "deny myself" for those things. The bible puts it this way:

Matt. 16:24 ¶ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Matt. 16:25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

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Lev. 23:32 It is a Sabbath of rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your Sabbath."

Values and transcendent things become real when people actually do something about their values in real-life situations, and actually give and serve. They have the “works” to go along with their “faith.” Companies who give up money and time to the community, for example do this. People who spend time in service are doing it. Wherever my interests collide with the needs of the bigger picture, and I die to my own interests, that is transcendence. When a parent sacrifices for a child, and serves his or her needs, that is transcendent character, submitting to the value of the child’s development.

Insert Illustration: Here is a good place to illustrate sacrificial giving that cost someone. In the book, I chronicle the example of Tylenol who denied themselves a lot of profits to serve their value of safety when they pulled all Tylenol off the shelf when there was the scare in Chicago. The chance of many people dying was small, but their values were that one life was too many to risk, so they pulled all Tylenol off the shelves everywhere. They were lifted up in the end for living out this transcendent value.

Other personal applications would be to bring this down to the very small things of life: if you value family, for example, but continually make choices that just serve yourself and your hobbies, or your work, then you are asking your family to bend the knee to you. The transcendent character does the opposite. He bends the knee, or submits, to the value that he has chosen even when he wants to do something else. (Remind them, though, that taking care of themselves should also be a value. We are not talking about anyone becoming a doormat and having no time or things for themselves.)

Tag Line Quote from the Integrity book: “The immature character asks life to meet his demands. But the mature character meets the demands of life.”

It is all about “who is adapting to whom.” Do we adapt to the realities of what our God, values, family etc. demand from us? Or are we continually asking those things to adapt to us? If we are asking them to adapt to us, then we are the center of the universe, and that is danger.

To have character integrity, we have to make the personal shifts that are demanded for our values to truly drive the direction of our lives. It is a reality that “faith without works is dead.” To say we love God, our families, our values, our communities, and yet not make the adaptations that they require, is self-delusion.

Conclusion: Transcendent character is about living life “right side up.” It is having the big things guide the smaller things. In life, God, values, and other things that are larger than we are should guide our actions, not the other way around. When there is a conflict, the more we humble ourselves and submit to the things that are lasting and large, the more we are taken to a higher plane by those transcendent realities. We are “lifted up,” by the things that matter, and the biggest one is God.