

CAROLINA MUSEUM OF THE MARINE

On Honor, Courage, and Commitment

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United States Marines are distinguished for many achievements, and we may reasonably say that their accomplishments follow in a direct line from the kinds of people the Marine Corps seeks to develop: men and women marked by the core values of honor, courage, and commitment. These values provide a firm foundation for the three important contributions of the Marine Corps to our country, which is to make Marines, win our nation's battles, and return to our society quality citizens. In what follows, we will consider these core values of the Marine Corps and how they may be acquired by all Americans. We begin by quoting from the Corps itself how these values are defined and understood. [i]

Honor

“Honor guides Marines to exemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior. Never lie, never cheat or steal; abide by an uncompromising code of integrity; respect human dignity and respect others. Honor compels Marines to act

responsibly, to fulfill our obligations and to hold ourselves and others accountable for every action.”

Courage

“Courage is the mental, moral and physical strength ingrained in Marines. It carries us through the challenges of combat and aids in overcoming fear. It is the inner strength that enables us to do what is right, to adhere to a higher standard of personal conduct and to make tough decisions under stress and pressure.”

Commitment

“Commitment is the spirit of determination and dedication found in Marines. It leads to the highest order of discipline for individuals and units. It is the ingredient that enables constant dedication to Corps and country. It inspires the unrelenting determination to achieve victory in every endeavor.”

Note that a person graced with these qualities possesses the character required of a Marine, has the inner resources needed to persist and overcome in combat, and the self-possession and maturity needed for responsible participation as a citizen in a free society. Another point of interest here is that these are *core* values, there are others that identify a well-developed human being but for the mission of the Marine Corps, these martial virtues are indispensable. Finally, Marines are able to develop their core values because they are essentially human qualities, and thus all people, Marine or not, may develop them.

As the Marine Corps defines honor, it leads to the “ultimate in ethical and moral behavior.” This language is important because it attests to a truth known by

Marines from more than two centuries of experience in warfare, namely that moral behavior is an expression of human nature, that it can be done well or badly, and that for this reason, it is not a matter of personal taste in which no actions a person may perform can be wide of the mark of moral excellence. This is indicated in the use of the word “ultimate” which identifies the pinnacle of a scale of values and not a spot on a sprawling sea of possibilities. However, the definition enjoins each Marine to abide by an uncompromising code of integrity. There are two important elements at work here. First, our English word “integrity” derives from a Latin word that means an unimpaired condition (both inner and outer), soundness, health, uprightness. Integrity is a critical component of a well-developed human being. Second, the Marine is enjoined to follow *an* uncompromising code. Because we share a common nature, honor, courage, and commitment will be expressed, we may say, as the same song for everyone. However, because we are each individuals with our own personalities, and because codes of integrity are personal things, we will each sing that song in our own key.

Courage is held to be mental, moral, and physical strength. This is an important part of the definition with its origin ultimately in the work of the great thinkers of ancient Greece. We have minds, wills, and bodies and there are excellences of each one, and courage requires that we work to develop those excellences. This kind of comprehensive fitness is important for every kind of human endeavor that demands focus, skill, and steadiness of purpose in the face of possible failure. The Marines’ definition goes on to acknowledge this in saying that courage allows the Marine to perform the function of a warrior in combat where for any healthy person, fear is present. That part of our psyches we call “will” may be understood as rational desire. When it functions properly, we are drawn to that

which is good for us, and repelled by that which is bad for us. We can see quite readily that death at the hands of another human being is not a good for us, and so one has a natural urge to get away from such a danger. Yet every society needs disciplined warriors for its defense and independence. Courage is thus the virtue by which a Marine remains focused and skillful in the presence of fear.

The definition then steps back a bit to widen the focus on courage. “It is the inner strength that enables us to do what is right, to adhere to a higher standard of personal conduct and to make tough decisions under stress and pressure.” There are three parts here that apply to every human being. Courage is an inner strength needed to do what is right. Human beings are flawed in that we are often tempted to do what is not right. This can happen in many ways, but none of us, upon an examination of our lives, will be able to say that I’ve never said or done anything I wish I hadn’t said or done. Courage is in part the strength to do what is right when one is tempted not to do what is right. Courage is also in part the strength to do what is right when it is unpopular with others. Humans have always known, at least in principle, that what are the right things to do are not determined by popular opinion. Sometimes, doing the right thing may be socially or professionally costly. Courage is also the strength to adhere to a “higher standard” of personal conduct. We might take this to mean that one should look at others and try to act just a bit better than they, but in doing this we may inadvertently establish low standards that look high by comparison. We might better read this part of the definition to hold that a courageous person is always trying to improve. Finally, courage enables us to take tough decisions under stress and pressure. Stress and pressure can make clear and perceptive thinking difficult-to-impossible. Courage enables one to bring to bear proper discipline of mind and focus under pressure.

It is admirably clear and concise to say that commitment is a “spirit of determination and dedication.” We can imagine someone objecting that a spirit of determination and dedication is hardly a virtue in a liar, a thief, or a bandit, but these occupations are not honorable. Determination and dedication are plainly good qualities in someone engaged in honorable pursuits. Commitment leads to the highest order of discipline, and it is important that this quality of discipline is placed in individuals first, and then units. This can’t be overstressed because in any demanding endeavor there are distractions, perhaps dispiriting setbacks, pointless criticism, weariness, and the occasional desire to be anywhere but here doing anything but this. Indeed, we want not just discipline, but discipline in its highest order, which is a great advantage in seeking “victory in every endeavor.”

Honor, courage, and commitment are virtues. They are not the only virtues we can develop, but they are important for human flourishing. What is virtue, and importantly, how can people develop them? We might begin by observing that human nature, as the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle put it, is moral and intellectual. It is moral because we have wills, and it is intellectual because we have minds. When we are born, we have all the human nature we will ever have, but the moral and intellectual powers of our nature is unactualized potential. So, the process of growth and development, understood in this way, is the process of converting the moral and intellectual potentials of our nature into actualized abilities under the responsible control of the individual. As we grow, the powers we develop can be used for good or for ill. A virtue is a power which one uses for good and not for evil purposes, the opposite of which is a vice. This gives rise to the first principle of practical reason, that is, the principle from which thinking about how to act in any situation begins: good should be done and pursued, and

evil avoided. Stated briefly, as noted above, good is what we are naturally attracted to, and evil is what we are naturally repelled from.

In the theory of virtue, there are four that are held to be cardinal virtues, that is, those from which the other virtues take their purpose and character. The cardinal virtues are wisdom, courage, prudence, and justice. These are not the only virtues, of course. As we have seen, honor and commitment also are virtues, as are frugality, generosity, and patience. The virtue of prudence allows us to see in any set of circumstances the action that virtue requires. How might this work?

The circumstances within which we act are often complicated, and while definitions of the virtues are important, they don't tell us how to act in one or another set of circumstances. Years ago, I was browsing in the bookstore of the University of Virginia medical school. In particular, I was looking to see what kind of writing the store had on issues in biomedical ethics. I came upon a book that had an unusual shape, being narrow and long. Inside the cover, one read that the book was the size and shape it was in order to fit into the pocket of a lab coat. Further reading revealed that the book was a guide for clinicians on how to find the ethically correct answer for any moral question that might arise in treating patients. The book is, the reader was assured, a "moral calculator." Plug in the relevant facts, out comes the morally correct answer! There is no such thing as a moral calculator because such a device would lack completely the capacity for subtlety, judgment, and moral imagination required for moral reasoning and analysis. A better approach was offered two millennia earlier by Aristotle. He called his "moral calculator" the golden mean.

For any set of circumstances, Aristotle held, the virtuous action is found in the middle between excess and deficiency, between too much and too little. He offers a few examples, one of which is generosity, or what Aristotle calls “liberality.” We generally think that human beings have a moral obligation to help in the relief of the poor when we are able. If someone with means encounters a poor person and withholds his hand, Aristotle would say his behavior is miserly. If, however, the same person gives all he has leaving nothing for his family, his action may be called foolish. For Aristotle, the virtue of generosity expresses itself in actions that lie between these two possibilities. It is the function of the virtue of prudence, or practical wisdom, to discover the actions that lie in the mean between excess and deficiency in any circumstances we encounter. This virtue is abetted by the advice of others in possession of the virtue, but it is acquired only in practice, as with all practical abilities. Moreover, it should be said that for many people, reasoning prudently about how to act can be frustrated by contrary emotions (see our essay “On Reason and Emotion” here: <https://www.museumofthemarine.org/on-reason-and-emotion/>).

This question of virtue and how virtues are acquired is as old as western civilization, and while appreciation for the virtues waxes and wanes, they remain central to human flourishing. Americans are blessed in this regard to have among us not only excellent definitions of critical virtues like honor, courage, and commitment, but an American institution, the United States Marine Corps, skilled at producing them in Americans and from which our country may benefit.

[i] The source for these definitions may be examined

here: <https://www.marines.com/life-as-a-marine/standards/values.html>