



New York: Scribner; 2002.
ISBN 0743210581.
299 pages. \$26.

The Biggest Job We'll Ever Have: The Hyde School Program for Character-Based Education and Parenting

by Laura and Malcolm Gauld

Review by T L Max McMillen

In the town of Bath, Maine, a small private school is redefining how we teach children; in the process, a renewed vision of education is being created. The Hyde School requires a commitment not just from students but also from families. This is a school committed to the personal growth and character development of children and their families. At a time when society cries out for “character education” in schools but is unable to define what character means, the Hyde system calls upon families to make a commitment to pursue excellence. At a time when families are in crisis, the Hyde system offers a lesson in being a family—a process that involves developing integrity, family values, and character.

Having practiced and developed this system for the Hyde School, the Gaulds have turned it into the *Biggest Job* workshops, a national parenting program out of which springs this book. The *Biggest Job We'll Ever Have* focuses on parents—a child's first and foremost teachers—and on families. The book is neither a quick fix nor a popular solution to the challenges families face. The Gaulds' experience has taught them three things about commitment to excellence: “It is hard; it is doable; it is never too late.” The authors firmly believe that character is more important than innate ability, and their “Ten Priorities” support and build upon that belief.

The hollow statements that were said to us as children—and we, in turn, say to our own children—are debunked: “You're a bright kid; you just need to apply yourself.” “We don't care about your grades as long as you try.” “You can do anything you want if you just work hard enough.” “We don't care what you do as long as you're happy.” The Gaulds point out that these statements are freely used but are rarely supported by action. Children are aware that even though we tell them to “just do your best,” grades reflect the product of work, not effort. This principle allows children for whom accomplishment comes easily to get good grades without being challenged and without taking risks, whereas children for whom work is difficult become discouraged. The Gaulds also refute what they call the “Cult of Self-Esteem,” the mindset that children must feel good about themselves all the time. The Gaulds declare that self-esteem is something to be worked at, something to be earned; it requires enduring difficul-

ties and overcoming obstacles. The result is tangible and solid—not like the hollow compliments of those who believe that self-esteem can be bestowed.

“The underlying premise of the Ten Priorities is that every individual has a *unique potential* that defines his or her destiny.”^{1:p47} Through a series of exercises and journal questions, this book guides the reader through the Hyde system of developing these Ten Priorities to apply to daily life. These priorities are a framework to guide parents in making daily choices.

The Ten Priorities seem obvious when read. For example, “Attitude over Aptitude” encourages kids to follow their dreams and is accompanied by two examples of successful musicians—Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles—whose dreams might not have materialized had aptitude alone guided their lives: “... Aptitude Culture can cause the dream to get smothered by the disability,”^{1:p125} but incorporating these dreams into day-to-day life requires effort and hard work. This book offers tools with which to undertake that work.

Although this book is written as a guide for parents who want to help their children and to improve their families, the book is a perfect guide for all of us to do the hard work of building our own character and becoming proactive in our own lives. We no longer need to blame our parents for where we are: we can take responsibility for our own lives.

The Gaulds offer two quotes for consideration: “When we do the right thing, we raise ourselves in our own eyes” (Eugene Delacroix)^{1:p289} and “Our chief want in life is someone who will make us do what we can” (Ralph Waldo Emerson).^{1:p289} Asking our children to give their best effort is nothing short of what we must ask of ourselves. For me, as a parent of a teenaged boy, this book is encouraging reinforcement of the belief that if I am honest and do the work, I can build my own and my son's character. These principles can guide not only my own life but that of my child. ❖

References

1. Gauld L, Gauld M. *The biggest job we'll ever have: the Hyde School program for character-based education and parenting*. New York: Scribner; 2002.

“When we do the right thing, we raise ourselves in our own eyes.”
—Eugene Delacroix

T L Max McMillen
is Assistant Editor
and writer for *The*
Permanente Journal.