

VIRTUES MUST BE TAUGHT, THEY AREN'T JUST NATURAL
August 12, 2003

Old habits are hard to break. The thought occurred to me the other day as I checked to see if my shirt pocket was buttoned. You would think a 76-year-old man could care less if he had a shirt pocket unbuttoned, especially when one is at the age where it's not too unlikely to find you have forgotten to zip your fly. Those of you old enough to remember when pants had button flies will know what I am talking about.

My particular idiosyncrasy's roots go back 57 years to my military service. We had to drop and do 10 pushups if we were caught with a pocket unbuttoned. One of my fondest memories of those days was discovering a certain sergeant's lapse and drawing attention to it. I still pride myself with being the only one of a group of us with the guts to raise the issue. Yes, he did pay the penalty.

Think back at how many of your true virtues were instilled in you by your parents. They became habits through repetition and discipline. They were habits that became a part of our character and way of life. In retrospect, they are a reflection of our parent's character and integrity; the younger the student, the longer the indoctrination, the more permanent the results.

The world is seeing the real downside to all of this staring us in the face in the problem in the Middle East. Prominent are the recently departed sons of Saddam Hussein and the millions of school children who are having hatred and intolerance for westerners pounded into their minds instead of science and learning that will insure a better life for them and their children.

Few of us in my generation learned any bad habits from our parents or teachers. From the behavior and actions of later generations, it is evident to me that is no longer true. Add that to the propensity of all of us developing bad habits on our own and it is not a pretty picture. We like to think that many habits of that nature only affect those indulging in them. In most cases that is not necessarily true.

Heavy smokers and drinkers impinge on the lives and economies of families and the public. Worst of all in that regard are bad driving habits. We see more and more of those effects as the roads become more congested and our hurry-up lifestyles become more prevalent. Bad habits seem to be hard to break as evidenced by the tendency for all of us to traditionally start the New Year with a goal of overcoming at least one.

Like most things in life, virtues do not come naturally. They are taught. Like the tree that has a straight trunk to begin with, it stays the course throughout and its value is enhanced.

My oldest daughter teaches seventh grade in an inner city school. She is concerned about the pattern she sees in the development of her charges characters. When questioned about the course they would take after finding a lost wallet, only two of the youngsters would consider returning it to the owner - and then, only after keeping the money. It is a sad commentary on the times, sadder yet when you consider these will be the future leaders of this country and they will be responsible for forming their children's characters.