

“Hold the Moral High Ground!”  
by Steve Irwin

Adolescent boys the age of my seventh graders often deal in power. Listen to their conversation sometime and note how often concepts of power come up. These concepts are often expressed in terms of physical power: an awesome check in hockey, a fly ball that rocketed into the woods, an arm wrestling contest at recess.

7B (B for Boys) is a place where we try to instill a calm, quiet confidence. It really is a group effort, especially considering the “hormonal fog” (a term copyrighted by Gail Simons, 8th grade teacher, BACS) which requires frequent reminders from classmates as well as teachers. The hope is that the oft repeated affirmations about calm, quiet confidence, together with confidence-building experiences will develop in these very young men a sphere of competence—translated “power”—which is appropriate to their state and growth. Bravado is common in the world around them. Quiet confidence grounded in serenity is uncommon. But when they have tasted it, sometimes fleetingly, the memory remains. College students from my first 7B class still remember the three words—calm, quiet confidence—and comment on the importance they have had in their lives.

Why is this so? Because regardless of bravado, most boys want to become the strong silent type! Yes, there is strength in silence! The Lord’s silence in the face of His accusers is a poignant example which the boys understand. They can see that behind the silence the Lord knew who He was, what He stood for, and where He was ultimately headed. What a wonderful example for our youth. The story of the Lord’s struggle in the garden is an important part of this example, one that allows for our own faltering, yet supports our efforts to do the Lord’s will.

But how? How do we help these boys develop these important qualities? We can help by teaching the moral virtues and encouraging the practice of them.

Sometimes a subtle approach is the most effective, but sometimes it takes repeated clear examples for the boys to recognize what humility, alacrity, friendship, etc., are. The best examples are times when a student has demonstrated one of these virtuous qualities. Expressing appreciation for that effort can instill a delight that makes the practice more effortless in the future.

As teachers, we can provide a framework or reference point for our students to remember these concepts and feelings. Here we come to my reference point about the moral high ground. In our extensive coverage of the Battle of Gettysburg in 7B, it becomes clear to the boys that terrain is an important consideration. They’ve already engaged in discussions of tactics and know from simulated experience that it is easier to defend a hill, harder to attack one. The concept of a flanking maneuver is similar to football plays where linemen pull and the offense makes an end run. These are easy concepts to demonstrate to the boys. They can readily imagine alternatives to real battle actions and enter lively debates over what would have worked. They even “refight” the battle with board games! The 7B students also build a diorama of Gettysburg, laying out the terrain, marking roads and rivers and placing small soldiers to represent the Union and Confederate forces.

One part of our Gettysburg unit is a day we bring pillows and food (oh, the food!) and watch the movie, *Gettysburg*. Near the beginning, the Union cavalry commander gallops through the countryside at the head of his troops, halts at the edge of an orchard and surveys the terrain ahead. With hawk-like vision and a perception borne of years of battle-hardened experience, he describes what will likely take place unless his men can “hold the high ground!”

The boys recognize the tactical advantage, the potential power, in “holding the high ground.”

Their understanding of the physical high ground is an apt analogy from which they can make the leap to the more abstract “moral high ground.” This concept is at the center of our discussion of the Emancipation Proclamation, which gave the Union the moral high ground by declaring slaves in the Confederate states free. However, that position is immediately called into question because slaves in the border states which were loyal to the Union were not freed by the Proclamation.

A more personal version of the high ground, again illustrated so well by the story from the Word mentioned earlier, brings together an array of virtues into an integral mix we call integrity. A man who has integrity and holds the moral high ground need not be overly aggressive in making his point. Often it is enough to let the hells beat themselves out against the immovable house built on the high rock of truth. Caution: it is easy to slip into the position of holding the high ground so as to have an advantage over other people. It is particularly easy for competitive young men to fall into this trap, and it is here that the ability to separate person from principle is tested.

Winning on principle is important, winning at the expense of another person isn't.

There will be plenty of chances for the boys to maneuver their way through life practicing, and yes, sometimes failing, to mold a positive character. At times they will feel that it is too tough to do what's right. The more practice we can give our students in recognizing the “right” and being confident in it, the more endurance they will develop. Along with their developing competence, this calm, quiet confidence in what's right can become an integral part of the men they will be. As their teachers, who fail and pick ourselves up to regain or move on to new heights, let's support these youngsters in their efforts to “hold the high ground!”