

Taking the long view

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

How do you learn to think about the long-range implications of issues in a culture that is fixated on the short term? This question kept recurring to me in the midst of very different conversations recently.

The first conversation was about parenting and the character formation of children and youth. The good news, one person reported, is that a recent survey indicated that the vast majority of children interviewed identify one or both of their parents as their primary hero and role model in life.

But, another responded, “Is that really good news? Too many parents have lost sight of what it means to form children’s character. These days, parents are so busy with their own lives that they look for short-term fixes without regard for the good habits that children need for shaping good character. And then they justify their cop-out by distinguishing their relationship as ‘quality’ rather than ‘quantity’ time. Give me a break.”

There is no substitute for the quantity of time we spend with our children. We ought to hope that it is also quality time, but we cannot afford to contrast one with the other. In a world where we put instant coffee into microwave ovens and are impatient at how long it takes to warm up, is it any wonder that we have commodified time and become preoccupied with “quality” at the expense of “quantity” time with our children?

When I recently asked my kids what they would most like for me to change in our relationship, each one independently asked for more time together. I do a reasonably good job of maintaining a day-to-day relationship with them, yet I am also acutely aware of my own temptation to do whatever I can to make life easier—on them and on me—rather than to focus on what is needed for the cultivation of character over the long term.

After all, character can be formed only over time. Character identifies that which we most value in life, and it reflects the long-term formation of our emotional, moral

and intellectual lives. As Aristotle rightly insisted, character is formed through shaping habits of life through disciplined practice and the cultivation of morally significant friendships. And, particularly with children, there is no substitute for sustained presence over time.

A few days after this conversation about parenting, my wife and I were at dinner with a quite different group of people. Here the conversation focused on the prospect of North Carolina's approving a lottery as a way to deal with looming budget deficits. Most of those gathered were opposed to the lottery, and we rehearsed many of the familiar reasons for concern: its impact on the poor, the possible involvement of organized crime, and our inability to make the hard political decisions about the common good without the "easy money" that a lottery provides.

Yet, recalling my earlier conversation about the "quick-fix," short-term approach to parenting, I wondered whether the deeper problem with the lottery is that it encourages illusions of a personal quick fix to long-term economic issues. It is a commonplace that politics is inevitably preoccupied with the short term, but I wondered whether the lottery didn't corrode the long-term issues of forming worthy character. How do we begin to shape such virtues as prudence, honesty, courage and patience if we create illusions that anyone can—and perhaps will—win the lottery?

Is this perhaps the logical extension of a dominant, amoral approach to economic and political life? Richard Sennett thinks so, and has written a polemical critique of "the new, flexible capitalism" and its impact on character. At the beginning of *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett poses some powerful questions: "How do we decide what is of lasting value in ourselves in a society which is impatient, which focuses on the immediate moment? How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to the short term? How can mutual loyalties and commitments be sustained in institutions which are constantly breaking apart or continually being redesigned?"

Sennett's questions seem particularly poignant in light of my conversations about parenting and the lottery. They also point to the urgent need for the church to reclaim more focused attention on the long-term challenges of shaping character. If we want to bear witness to the gospel of forgiveness that offers new life, we must become skilled at cultivating patience, especially in a world that tries to make us ever more impatient.

But are we ready to take the long view? Can we really come to terms with a God who is patient, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and steadfast love? Are we willing to acknowledge that the making of disciples takes time? That perhaps one of the central reasons for the Bible's preoccupation with such issues as idolatry and greed has to do with the ways in which we search for fantasies to avoid the hard work of patiently shaping a holy character over time?

Even more, are we in the church willing to acknowledge that we need to be more attentive, and involved, in the parenting of children—in churches, in schools, in activities? Why is it that the same parents who are so willing to spend hour upon hour going to soccer practices are so resistant to expectations for a serious confirmation process?

Are we in the church willing to confront the illusions of lotteries, and to challenge the presumptions of short-term economic thinking? Are we willing to tackle the hard questions of what we ought to expect financially from one another in order to cultivate a genuinely common good over the long-term? Or is the quick fix still in?