Tools for life

by Jennifer E. Copeland in the May 22, 2002 issue

The Good Life: Truths That Last in Times of Need.
By Peter J. Gomes. HarperSanFrancisco, 388 pp., $23.95.

My church youth group once performed a musical featuring a song called "The Good Life." It parodied the consumerist notion of the good life: "boats and cars and kids that are all in good condition," visits to "Spain and France and Greece all part of our tradition" and "art and books and gems placed on exhibition." It concluded by acknowledging that when we have acquired all these things, "we still hunger, we still thirst." I knew that the song was right. Peter J. Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Pusey Minister in the Memorial Church of Harvard University, reinforces what I noted 22 years ago and reiterates much of what philosophy and religion have always claimed.

Gomes makes the obvious claim that "good people live good lives" and lists self-discipline and moral conduct as necessary tools for good living. Quoting Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell's Baccalaureate sermon of 1914, Gomes defines success as "doing something that is worth doing." This is not groundbreaking news but, rather, a confirmation that good living takes a lot of hard work. Such a life necessarily includes germination and cultivation of the four cardinal virtues--prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude--and the three theological virtues--faith, hope and love. These are not inherent traits, but behaviors that must be taught to us, modeled for us and ultimately adopted by us.

Drawing on such thinkers as Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Gomes reiterates that neither accomplishments nor possessions are the mark of a good life. He asserts that failure often teaches us more than does a constant string of successes. Character development requires much practice, and happiness is a fragile goal not always concurrent with goodness. In short, there's no blueprint for the good life. College administrators need not rush to design a new class based on this book to add to the already overcrowded "values" curriculum.

Gomes disagrees with the assumption that the academy weds knowledge to virtue. When I posed the notion of this union to some students, they replied, "Don't you think it's too late?" Yet at our university, as in many other places of higher education, we now have an Ethics Institute, as if goodness could be taught. While it's not true that "it's too late" to learn virtue by the time one enters college, neither is it true that one can ingest ethical characteristics simply by enrolling in the "values" courses now taught in every department from physical education to philosophy.

The numerous citations from theater and literature peppering Gomes's book demonstrate that he is knowledgeable across many disciplines. The preponderance of Harvard references makes it seem as if he has read or heard every lecture and sermon delivered during the 366 years of the school's existence. But the Harvard lore may not be of great interest to those not tied to the place.

Gomes is a bit given to hyperbole, making such blanket statements as "the pope's gesture of self-imposed seeking of forgiveness was the biggest boost for forgiveness and reconciliation in the memory of the modern West." A boost perhaps, but the biggest? These are matters of style, of course, and when such overstatement marks conversation or even preaching, we tend to absorb it along with the rest of the aural encounter. Since Gomes is first a preacher, next a teacher and only then a writer, perhaps we should excuse the book's colorful asides.

Gomes's claim that this particular generation of students is poised for greatness the likes of which have not been seen since the Great Depression/World War II generation is open to question. These students may indeed mature into an impressive and formative bloc of leaders, but each generation has a "capacity for greatness." I certainly do not concur with the pundits who characterize today's youth and college students as bored, angry and idiotic, and I applaud all efforts to amend this harmful delineation.

Much of what defines greatness has to do with circumstances. Certainly the founding of the United States gave the likes of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams the opportunity to strut their stuff, just as World War II offered another generation the opportunity to shine in other ways. We often rise to greatness on the tide of circumstances. Though some people fail to rise even under ideal circumstances, others who have the capacity for greatness also fail to rise because events do not conspire in their favor. Gomes reminds us that the capacity for greatness is no mystery, but consists of an adherence to the basic moral traditions that we all have

at our disposal.

Because Gomes saves the discussion of love as a virtue until the end of the book, he keeps us from reducing love to a trite, interpersonal emotion and presents it as the crowning attribute of the good life. Gomes asserts that the love of God and the love of friends are what this generation of college students most craves. My own experience bears this out. At the beginning of each academic year I gather a group of seniors for a year of weekly meetings devoted to vocational discernment. Rather than pose the typical question, "What do you want to do after graduation?" I start our first evening together with the question, "What do you want most in the world?" Invariably they reply, "I want to stay close to my family and stay in touch with my friends." I call that the beginning of a good life.