

What Makes a Good Person

"There are the good of heart," a teacher observed, and she continued, "there are also the ones with hearts of stone." A group of classroom teachers and I were chilled by the latter thought, of the child who develops into a not very good person. And of course we wondered together what might be done in the classroom (or at home) to make for more good-hearted souls and fewer stony-hearted ones. I had no magic wand to wave, nor did any of them. They asked me what I do (or would do) in the face of some of the dilemmas or troubled moments they described to me—that is, how to make the Golden Rule, the matter of empathy, so crucial to any discussion of morality and of being a "good person," come alive for students in such a way that their lives (their behavior); and not only their minds (their thoughts), are affected. As I sat there wondering what to say, I thought of a brief but powerful story by Leo Tolstoy, one that can be read together or taught to anyone at almost any level, from elementary school through high school and college to the various postgraduate schools. The story is called "The Old Grandfather and the Grandson":

The grandfather had become very old. His legs wouldn't go, his eyes didn't see, his ears didn't hear, he had no teeth. And when he ate, the food dripped from his mouth.

The son and daughter-in-law stopped setting a place for him at the table and gave him supper in back of the stove. Once they brought dinner down to him in a cup. The old man wanted to move the cup and dropped and broke it. The daughter-in-law began to grumble at the old man for spoiling everything in the house and breaking the cups and said that she would now give him dinner in a dishpan. The old man only sighed and said nothing.

Once the husband and wife were staying at home and watching their small son playing on the floor with some wooden planks: he was building something. The father asked: "What is that you are doing, Misha?" And Misha said: "Dear Father, I am making a dishpan. So that when you and dear Mother become old, you may be fed from this dishpan."

The husband and wife looked at one another and began to weep. They became ashamed of so offending the old man, and from then on seated him at the table and waited on him.