

Sallie and I read an article by David Brooks this past week that prompted us to reflect on current events and the world's situation. The essence of the piece asked the question, Why are so many people good?

The writer went into detail to review religious, ethical, and philosophical concepts about why some people are viewed as being good. One point was that some people can, at times, put the good of a group or cause over their own immediate personal ambitions. They are willing to sacrifice personal gain for the benefit of other people. To borrow the Rotary motto, they put service above self.

After all the religious and philosophical considerations, the author of the piece put forth the simple thesis that people who pursue excellence in their personal lives contribute to the overall good of a community or even a country. In most simple ways, these good people contribute to human flourishing and the enhancement of life. I thought what a simple idea, but true. In this media-driven, attention-crazed society, it is what individuals do in conducting their own lives that overall impacts everyone.

Later that day, I was listening to the NPR coverage of the terrible flooding in Kerr County, Texas, where so many people perished, especially the children at the Mystic Summer Camp. The piece featured Jane Ragsdale, who was the owner of another summer camp nearby. Her first camp session had just ended before the flooding hit the Guadalupe River, where her camp was also located. She was the only person left at her camp before the holiday, but tragically, she lost her life in the flood. People in the community are devastated by her loss. On the radio, they played a recording of Jane leading campers in songs, a task she loved doing, as well as all the camp activities. Residents talked about how Ms. Ragsdale had mentored and influenced so many young people for over four decades. They also pointed out that if she had survived, Jane would be on the front lines of relief and recovery; that was just who she was. Jane Ragsdale modeled the idea of the pursuit of personal excellence and service that enriches us all.

Later in the week, Sallie and I hosted a performing artist for the Highlands-Cashiers Chamber Music Festival, Zitong Wang. She arrived at our house on Wednesday night at about 8 pm. After settling in her room, Zitong came up to our grand piano in our living room and at once began practicing. What a treat for us! If that were not enough, later in the evening, she gave a Zoom lesson to a younger musician. This routine of continual practice and teaching went on all week. What struck me was Zitong's commitment to personal excellence in the musical arts. That commitment translates into advancing the musical arts that inspire and move so many people. It is a testament to what individuals can do to promote human flourishing.

At the local level, I had the honor of attending Wayne Crow's graveside service on Saturday. Members of our fire department, dressed in their formal uniforms, fully represented us. The hook and ladder fire truck was parked by the tent where the service was conducted. One of the most moving parts of a firefighter's funeral is the last-call ceremony. At the very end of the service, the radio from the fire truck came on, and 911 dispatch issued the firefighter's last call. Wayne's name was called three times, with a moment of silence in between each call. In the end, the dispatcher thanked Wayne for over 20 years of service to the Highlands Fire Department and to the Highlands community. Here again, Wayne was an example of a person striving to live a life of personal excellence. I know that as a younger man, Wayne would always answer those fire calls because he was concerned about his fellow Highlanders' safety and their property. His commitment helped Highlands and its citizens to flourish. He also set an example for all of us to pursue the good, to seek personal excellence, and to serve others. He was a good man that his family and this town will miss. A life well-lived is what we all should strive for.