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They do care: An interview with William Damon and Anne Colby on moral development

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**Abstract**

What follows is an interview with William Damon and Anne Colby, pioneers in the fields of moral psychology and education. Throughout their careers, they have studied, moral identity, moral ideals, positive youth development, purpose, good work, vocation, character development in higher education, and professional responsibility. In their words, they are interested in the ‘best of humankind’—not only the competencies, but also the character necessary for living a good life—not only for the sake of the individual, but also for society. They have received numerous academic and civic awards and honors. Their publications include *Some Do Care*, *Greater Expectations*, *Educating Citizens*, *The Path to Purpose*, and most recently, *The Power of Ideals*—in addition to editing, for example, *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* and *The Handbook of Child Psychology*. As a married couple, their vocational journeys have mostly been separate, but have always complemented each other and sometimes converged. This interview asks about reflections on their careers, their own sense of purpose, their greatest contributions, current needs in our field, and advice to emerging scholars.

**Keywords**

moral development; purpose; character development; virtue; ideals; agency; education; higher education; adolescence; lifespan

**Common themes in their careers**

King: If one were to weave a tapestry out of your two distinct and, at times, overlapping careers, what is the general picture that your collective work offers? How have each of your own distinctive interests been woven in and contributed to the big picture?

Damon: Anne and I have had in common our interest in how people can, through reasoning and good judgment and their moral purposes, control the choices that they make rather than being forced into them by biological impulses or external social forces. This theme goes back to Kohlberg’s theory, which basically claims that people, through their conscious judgments, can make the kinds of moral decisions that define their lives and their behavior. Our own work has departed from Kohlberg’s sole focus on moral reasoning in
emphasizing the commitments that people make, their purposes in life, which drive behavior over the long term. We also focus on the power of moral identity—a person’s reflections about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of life I want to have, and what I believe in.

We also believe in moral agency. This is a major theme from my early writings on ‘the moral child’ (Damon, 1988), through the period when Anne and I did Some Do Care (Colby & Damon, 1992) and looked at how people’s moral commitments became a big part of their moral identity and affect their choices, up to our work on the life purposes people commit to. We’re interested in what we think of as the best part of human nature, which is moral agency. Agency allows people to stand up and say, ‘Look, this is the right thing to do. This is the kind of person I want to be.’

Colby: Yes, I agree with that, although I did not really start from an interest in developmental psychology, or psychology at all. In the beginning I was more interested in what the world needs. Because you can always point to ways in which the world is a big mess. That was true when Bill and I were young, and it certainly feels true now. But, at the same time, there are people who represent the very best of what humanity can be. (And thank God for them because if we didn’t have those people leading the way, pushing back, helping to create institutions, helping to create the culture and be good to each other, what kind of situation would we be in?) So my work is motivated by prescriptive questions. I took a lot of philosophy courses when I was an undergraduate. I was curious, ‘What should people be like? What do we need people to be like in order not only for them to flourish themselves, but for the world to flourish?’

It’s this prescriptive orientation that has created synergy for Bill’s and my work. We have asked what can be done to help people be as good as they can be. The world depends on it. I think everybody, on some level, wants to be a good person, and they don’t necessarily know what that means. They don’t have control over their impulses or they’re confused about what’s ultimately in their self-interest. I think it’s a pretty common thread among humanity that there’s some place inside you that wants to be a good person. Giving some guidance to activate and develop that sense of goodness is what we have tried to do.

Damon: Yes, and this explains our enduring commitment to education, which we see as a means of enabling people to find their own moral purposes and to freely follow their own consciences in as complete a way as possible.

King: That’s so fascinating, Bill. I remember an early Thriving Indicators Project meeting in Santa Fe when you made a very bold claim: ‘Positive youth development and thriving need to be prescriptive (in the sense that they are directed towards pro-social ends).’ It’s interesting to hear that for Anne this issue has been a longtime driving curiosity.

I am intrigued by this notion of moral prescriptivity, because as social scientists, we are generally limited to a conventional understanding of ‘what is good.’ How do you navigate this issue? Through using exemplar methods you have found a way to be social scientists and poll experts about what is
moral or good without having to draw on explicit philosophical or theological systems for definitions.

Colby: The exemplar methods we’ve used are meant to build on common assumptions about what’s good that cut across philosophical and theological perspectives.

Damon: We both try to be ideologically inclusive in our work. In terms of faith traditions also, we very much believe in the importance of faith, but we define the boundaries of faith very broadly. That said, one thing we are not is moral relativists. I’ll put it in a scientific way, because the science of human development is by nature non-relativistic. The concept of development means that we have to define which changes count as advances rather than mere changes.

Algebra is a better way of doing math than counting on your fingers. In morality, the capacity to balance multiple perspectives is an advance, for example. This is what developmental science is based on—trying to understand how people move forward, progress, become better able to function. So the whole idea of development is, in a sense, prescriptive—even though it is very broadly prescriptive. In moral psychology, we try to see the ways people organize their thinking, the ways they become deeper and more reflective, the ways they become more agentic, exerting active control over their emotions and behavior. These developments are good, and useful, for everybody. They make us more capable and effective in life.

King: Given that the notion of thriving involves clarifying and becoming more committed to one’s beliefs, values, ethics, how as moral developmental psychologists do you address the reality that people’s ideologies can conflict? The attempt of some people to be ‘good’ may contradict or get in the way of other people doing their best to be ‘good.’ How do you understand morality or moral development in light of two potentially conflicting systems?

Damon: People disagree on lots of things. An important orientation in approaching conflict is the virtue of humility, which means that you earnestly listen to the other person’s point of view. Of course, you assert your own point of view. But you don’t go into it assuming that you have all the answers and that the other person is an idiot. If just that one rule could be put in place—that people approach conflict with humility—we would have progress right there.

Colby: I’ve been really pleased in recent years to see the field pay attention to intellectual virtues, which include open-mindedness, curiosity, a desire to learn, and humility. In our roles as educators and moral psychologists, it’s really important to promote these. If you’re not open-minded, if you’re not willing to listen and take seriously another person’s point of view, you are not going to develop. The willingness and capacity to see where you might have made a mistake is essential. Genuine communication is essential. As Bill said, virtues such as humility, open-mindedness, fairness, and kindness are especially vital during conflict.
Their own path to purpose

King: You both have written on the topic of purpose in life. This leads me to ask where you gained your own sense of purpose.

Damon: I have a great memory I’ll share with you. I changed schools when I was in the ninth grade, and I entered a very challenging, difficult high school. I was a mediocre student. I did just enough to stay out of trouble but never got really engaged in anything. But the one thing I did enjoy at that time in my life was sports. In the ninth grade, I was too young to make any of the school’s sports teams, but I realized I could hang out with the players if I covered sports for the high school newspaper. So I joined the high school newspaper. But because I was so amateurish and a terrible writer, they always assigned me to the games that nobody was interested in.

So one game that I was assigned to was a junior varsity soccer game. Nobody was interested in soccer in those days, and it was against a team of kids that had just come over from Hungary because the Communists had basically forced their families out of the country. These kids were fabulous soccer players. They totally wiped out our team. I hung around after the game and got to meet these kids, and they amazed me. First of all, they had so little. They were dressed in raggedy clothes. Their mothers had packed them green pepper and bacon-fat sandwiches for lunch, which looked really disgusting. But they were so happy about being in America and having freedom. Their families were so joyful to have escaped communism. So I didn’t write up the soccer game for the school newspaper. I wrote up a story about how these kids were loving being in our free society. None of us at that age appreciated how much we had and how lucky we were. My friends read that story and said, ‘Wow, that’s really cool. I never thought about this. That was so great!’

That experience sealed in me the idea, ‘Wow, I can actually do this.’ It was an amazing thing to find out something new and write about it. The only problem was that I was a lousy writer. So, I become a hard-working student. I paid attention in my English classes. I learned how to write! That was when I began to become purposeful. I worked to acquire the tools needed to pursue my purpose. One step after another, gradually over the years, I became fairly good at doing this. That was my big breakthrough moment when I still remember deciding, ‘Hey, this is something that I could do in life that I really believe in and that I can learn how to do. And it was fun.’ I had the feedback from my friends (who, of course, I valued), saying, ‘Hey! This was really a worthwhile thing you did.’ That feedback was huge at age fourteen. That was a pretty big deal for me.

King: That’s a great story, Bill. Anne, when and where did purpose begin to surface for you? When did you experience this life-enduring and -forming desire to make the world a better place?

Colby: I was probably finishing high school and starting college; I had kind of a crisis, asking, what’s the meaning of life? All of a sudden, the answers that I had been given, which were sort of basic Protestant Christian beliefs, stopped
making sense to me. I started thinking, ‘Oh, my God! Does life have any meaning at all? Maybe it doesn’t?’ It was kind of the existential crisis. It was the terror of the idea that maybe life doesn’t have meaning and, if that turns out to be true in some sort of metaphysical sense, how do you live? I think that’s why I got interested in philosophy and also religion courses when I was in college, and I majored in psychology. I was really interested in trying to understand the larger truth about life and its meaning and how I would relate to that.

When I got to graduate school, it was at the height of protests against the Vietnam War. I was very opposed to the war. I thought it was causing a lot of destruction, a lot of death, and wasn’t accomplishing anything. That experience, combined with my long-term interest in understanding how to make a life worth living, propelled me to ask, ‘How can I help people become smarter about moral questions?’ This included issues in people’s daily lives and the big moral questions like whether a particular war is justified. My early graduate studies didn’t really relate to these topics so I switched fields to study moral development.

**Future directions in the field**

**King:** Turning towards the future, where do you think your combined fields of study need to go in the next decade?

**Damon:** One important area is education. There’s been something called character education, bubbling up now for about 40 years. The way I read the data, character education programs that involve some kind of community service along with self-reflection have effects on behavior that stick around for a while. But that is only one small fraction of all the things that have been tried. We simply do not have good studies at this point that have confirmed that any of these other ideas have long-term consequences.

In terms of developmental science, we need to understand better how the adult generation can pass on to the younger generation cherished values that we require to have a civilized life in order to make the younger generation’s world as promising as possible. It’s a very complicated question because you can’t simply tell young people what to do. For one thing, what’s really important to them is to develop their own agency and ability to figure things out. You want to provide young people some kind of guidelines but not any final answers. How do you do that? The traditional answer is, ‘Well only families can do that.’ Unfortunately, not every child is fortunate enough to be brought up in a well-functioning family. So, as a society, what can we do to make sure all young people have opportunities to develop their character in the way that best serves them and the world?

**King:** Peter Berger (1977) in the 70s referred to ‘mediating structures’ as inter-generational institutions in which youth were formed into productive and civically engaged adults. In these traditional institutions like congregations and other civic organizations, youth were both educated and gained
competencies, and they were also formed in their character. These traditional institutions are not as systematically available these days. School is the one place we try and get everybody through.

Damon: That's exactly right. What we do know is that some types of organizations and institutions can do a lot of good for young people—such as welcoming religious congregations. The army and navy have been great socializers for many young people, as have national service programs. The US Job Corps is another organization that has been shown to promote enduring, positive results.

King: Anne, given your work in education, what do you feel the field of character strength or virtue development would benefit from? Are there other strands of psychology or other interdisciplinary approaches that are helpful to promote character?

Colby: I agree with Bill that education is crucial. But I would take a more lifespan-developmental perspective. A while back, when it was new, the lifespan approach emphasized that development and the potential for growth can happen across all of life. Bill talks about the family as a source of moral learning, and I agree, but the family, at its best, provides basics. If you consider the work that Bill and his colleagues did on ‘Good Work,’ (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001) and the work my colleagues and I did on essentially ‘Education for Good Work’ (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003), in different professions, it is apparent that morality develops throughout the lifespan in different contexts. For example, particular professions have particular ethical demands that require specific training beyond general human development: Becoming an ethical lawyer, businessperson, or physician requires specific education and ongoing interactions with the institutions, persons, and issues of the field. This kind of moral development is not complete in childhood because it has to address complex issues within fields that children don’t encounter.

King: Anne, could you elaborate on the role of higher education in character formation?

Colby: I think it has a huge role. Higher education institutions are organized around a set of character virtues, based on what the institution stands for: a concern about truth, honesty, and open-mindedness. Those who say ‘higher education has no business trying to foster morality’ don’t understand the moral foundations of the higher education system. Without truth, honesty, and open-mindedness as guiding values, higher education would lose almost everything that’s valuable about it.

My colleagues and I tried to identify the ways that undergraduate educators can foster moral engagement, understanding, and skill. We were able to identify quite a few things that go on in the most committed institutions: everything from innovative active pedagogies like simulations to structured ways to link academic learning to contemporary issues in the world, to engaging students in the community, to creating a morally grounded institutional culture, and much more.
In terms of research, we can learn a tremendous amount about higher education practices just by observing closely what is being done, how students seem to react to it, and how faculty think about it. But then we need to go on to find out how to make educational practices as effective as possible with more systematic assessment.

There’s a very swiftly moving trend toward undergraduate education that focuses almost entirely on providing marketable skills in occupational fields, such as business. So many students are majoring in those fields, which is fine if broader learning is well integrated with it. But if education is reduced to preparation for making money, with no moral roots and depleted of any kind of purpose that will be a destructive trend for our world.

**Career priorities**

King: Shifting gears to reflecting on your careers, the social relevance and excellence of your work has pulled you both toward the academy, but also toward being public intellectuals. I’m curious how you’ve navigated those two areas and how they relate to each other.

Damon: My academic work is my number-one commitment because I think that if my research started becoming less than rigorous and acceptable in scholarly sense, I would not have the confidence to go out and talk about it in a broader circle. When I do write for the public, it’s a challenge to write in a way that’s accessible without over-simplifying or cutting corners or making claims that go beyond the evidence we actually have. There has always been some tension with that. But I try, because, like any writer, I want to reach as many as I can who can use the work. Also, when I have given talks on media shows or met with parent groups and such, I learn a lot. People bring me their concerns, issues I wasn’t even aware of. A lot of the progress in my work has come from feedback that I receive in the public, not the academic, domain.

Academics tend to pose disciplinary questions, whereas a parent will say, ‘Oh, my God. My daughter won’t speak to me. She hasn’t spoken to me in three weeks because she’s so mad because I want her to study math and she doesn’t want to study math.’ I become aware of things that people are confronting from day to day. Sometimes it’s similar to experiences I’ve had with my kids; other times it’s not, because people are living in different circumstances.

Colby: I have quite a different answer to that question because I haven’t focused much on writing for the general public. In addition to academic researchers, my other audience has been educators—especially during my 14 years at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, where our goal was promoting various aspects of teaching and learning in higher education that we believed would make a difference. We always worked in teams, which was good because some of my colleagues had experience working directly with educational organizations and university-level educators. The books we wrote were accompanied by specific implementation plans. This enabled several of those books to have really big impact. For instance, the book we
did on moral and civic education at the undergraduate level, *Educating Citizens* (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003), was adopted by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) as a guide to a national program called the American Democracy Project, which is still ongoing. I was blessed with colleagues who were excellent at implementing our work.

Damon: I will just say one more thing: when you write for a public audience, you never know who’s really going to end up using it. When I wrote *The Path to Purpose* (2008), I mostly had parents in mind; the original subtitle was *Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life*. But it turned out when I started giving talks about it in public venues, such as New York’s 92Y, I noticed the auditorium filled with 20-somethings who were interested in the book for their own lives. I began to realize that a lot of young people are drifting, but they’re searching very hard. So you never really know who is going to pick up on a concept.

### Purpose, means vs. ends, moral identity, holism, and virtues

King: When you talk about purpose, you imply that it is rooted in a moral system and you raise questions of prescriptivity. How does your work address purpose and thriving and the need for moral ideals without being prescriptive?

Damon: That’s a very profound question. It’s a question that ultimately goes beyond psychology—kind of a meta-ethical question asking, ‘What’s the place of morality in life?’ Anne will speak for herself, but I would answer in a very general way because I’m always hesitant to prescribe specific moral views.

Whenever I’ve written about purpose, I emphasize pro-social purpose that conforms to general moral principles such as ‘the means doesn’t justify the ends’: no matter how noble your purpose is, if you’re going about it in a way that involves violence, or cheating, or lying, or something like that—that’s not good. In the long run, following the basic moral codes is a huge advantage to the world and oneself, whether those codes come from the Ten Commandments or any other religious or philosophical principles, such as the Golden Rule—treating people in the way you would want to be treated.

King: How do you encourage people, on their own or through institutions, to differentiate and define their own moral system?

Damon: Well, your last phrase is the operative phrase to me. It’s important for people to act from their own agency and find their own moral solutions—especially younger people. They’ll figure the world out for themselves in ways that I couldn’t possibly anticipate. The world is changing, and I really do believe in the importance of young people making their own choices that will define their own futures.

Colby: This goes back to that prescriptivity question. I think there’s a strong trend for people to think about purpose and happiness in a manner that is very
focused on the benefits for their own self-interest and self-advancement. Part of the challenge right now is that our society is very competitive, winner-take-all. And for that reason, people are scared for themselves. They’re scared for their children, asking, ‘Are they going to make it? Are they going to be okay?’ These concerns have led people to value purpose and character largely for the benefits it will bring them or those close to them. I hate to say it, but these motives fuel some of the schools and groups that are so excited about the Path to Purpose (2008). They are excited about the concept because they believe purpose is the next thing that will help their kids succeed. This may well be true—those with purpose probably will do better in school—but which is the means and which is the end? Isn’t purpose at least as much about contribution beyond the self?

Bill and his early collaborators have been very insistent on purpose requiring a commitment to something beyond the self, something larger. That’s a big controversy in the field, as you know, and a lot of people say, ‘No, that’s just your extra thing. It really should just be whatever I’m after. If it’s meaningful to me, that’s good enough.’

This is a question that has to be confronted. In Ryan and Deci’s (2000) work on personal well-being and happiness, one of their big review articles ended by reminding us that ultimately the question has to be, ‘How do all these individuals pursuing their own well-being fit together to support collective well-being?’ This is a complicated and deep set of issues that every person can benefit from grappling with over and over again throughout life.

Damon: One of the many values of having purpose is that it’s a deterrent from becoming self-absorbed. Even apart from spirituality and transcendence and morality, simply at the level of mental health, it’s really dangerous to be self-absorbed. You expose yourself to all kinds of anxieties and worries, including everything from psychosomatic illnesses to psychological impairment. Purpose is more than simply meaning or goal-directedness; it contributes to engagement in the world, trying to accomplish something, trying to make a difference, getting excited and passionate and committed to things beyond the self. That effort to go beyond the self into the world and make a contribution of consequence to the world is good for the world, obviously, but it’s also good for the self because it prevents self-absorption. There’s a great line that opens Rick Warren’s book, The Purpose Driven Life (2002): ‘It’s not about you!’

King: In 2000 in Chicago at SRA (Society for Research on Adolescence), the second academic conference I attended, I met Kyle Matsuba. He was presenting a poster that commented on the field of Moral Psychology being in the wilderness and in the process of looking for the Promised Land (Matsuba & Walker, 2000). He explained that the concept of moral identity had radically shaken up the field of moral psychology that had been previously defined by stage theory; we had left the known land of Kohlberg’s stage theory, had moved into the unknown wilderness, and were looking for the answers to lead us to the Promised Land. I’m curious now, has the field of moral
psychology reached the Promised Land? If not, what would move us toward it? Or what would you say is the Promised Land of the field?

Damon: Well, I do think Kyle was onto something then, and I think the good news is that the field has moved energetically in a more promising direction, what I think of as ‘a whole person approach.’ This means that we’re no longer making artificial distinctions between cognition and emotion and behavior. We are talking now about moral identity, the kind of person that someone wants to become and what it takes to get there. This involves making good judgments and good choices, having the motives to do the right thing, having purpose and commitment, developing the right habits—all of which are cognitive, emotional, and behavioral at the same time. The holistic enterprise moves on all of these fronts: behavioral, cognitive, emotional, motivational.

Colby: I agree on the need for a holistic approach. The field has come to recognize that there are a lot of different threads that have to be taken seriously and woven together to understand the full person. This includes identity, one’s relationship with culture, person-context relations, inborn human qualities like the potential for empathy, and so on. We took a stab at trying to put it together in the theory chapter of our book *The Power of Ideals* (2015).

**Personal joys**

King: Completely changing gears: What gives you the most joy these days in your work?

Colby: For me, it is my students and younger colleagues as well as my long-standing friends in the field—people. I find joy in trying to contribute to younger people’s careers and helping them move forward and seeing that happen. I also find joy connecting with the old timers that we’ve known for decades. So, people, really, give me the most joy in my work.

Damon: My short answer is that I love mixing it up with younger colleagues and hearing their great ideas and having a chance to share thoughts and seeing that people are benefiting or appreciating them in some way. I really get a kick out of giving talks and having good dialogues with people.

**Influences in your own lives**

King: Who are one or two people who most influenced you professionally or formed you as a person in your life?

Colby: Well, for me (at least on the professional side), that’s easy: Larry Kohlberg. It started when he was on my dissertation committee and went on until his death years later. I was pretty clueless about the whole field in the beginning, and I was just fortunate that I got to work with him for almost ten years. He became one of my closest friends personally, too, during that time. Even
though we didn’t always agree and I’ve certainly moved away from his work being the center of what I do now, he was an amazing person and mentor.

Damon: More recently in my life, or by the time I was in midlife, two great leaders, John Gardner and Vartan Gregorian, had very profound influences on me in terms of modeling the kind of person I want to be and, to the extent I’ve been in a leadership role, the kind of leader I would like to be.

Earlier in life, I had a number of teachers who influenced me because they taught me how to take things seriously. I’ll tell you one story. When I was that young, mediocre student, I handed in a half-baked assignment to my English teacher and foolishly said, ‘Well, I didn’t do a very good job with this but I know it doesn’t matter that much since it’s just a weekly assignment.’ The outraged teacher glared at me for what seemed like eternity. Looking furiously over his glasses, he said, ‘Mr. Damon, always remember that everything you do in this life matters.’ That stern reprimand has had a lifelong effect on me.

Contributions, accomplishments

King: What are one or two professional accomplishments you’re most proud of?

Colby: I always struggle with that question.

Damon: I can easily answer for her! Anne has lots to be proud of and if she can’t come up with things, I’ll come up with things in her career that I’m proud of her for doing. She pioneered the systematic assessment of moral judgment, directed a world class longitudinal research center for 17 years, took the lead on our widely-known studies of moral exemplars, and wrote books that promoted, in a highly influential way, citizenship education in colleges and universities.

For me, the number one thing I’m proud of is that I have an amazing number of students who are all over the place, thriving, really doing well, and I keep hearing from them. They are still part of our family, in a sense, our academic family. From when I was a new assistant professor all the way until recently, they number in the dozens. And I’m very proud of some books I’ve written—Path to Purpose (2008), Greater Expectations (1995), The Moral Child (1988), Good Work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001), Some Do Care (Colby & Damon, 1992), and The Power of Ideals (Damon & Colby, 2015).

Colby: I think of it more in terms of gratitude than pride: ‘What do I feel happy that I got to do?’ ‘What do I feel grateful for?’ I was so lucky to be a part of the Carnegie Foundation for 14 years. People said over and over, ‘This was the most powerful community—intellectually and personally—that I’ve ever worked in.’ Every single person who worked there said that. It’s probably the experience of my professional career that I most cherish and feel grateful for. Also, one of the best things about being in this field all these years has been the relationships I’ve developed—because it’s kind of a small, fairly
cohesive field. So people end up knowing each other for long periods of time, and that—that is just an incredible blessing!

King: Off the top of your head, what is the legacy you would like to be known for?
Damon: I think that would be that I brought to the table or put on the radar screen, in both science and, to some extent, in the public discourse, the importance of some central strengths and developmental needs that have not been really appreciated for one reason or another. My research on purpose in life is the best example of that. It’s not that I was the first person to write about it—of course, there’s Victor Frankl’s great book (1959) and Rick Warren’s (2002), and Carol Ryff’s (see Ryff & Keyes, 1995) work. Other people have written about purpose before me, but I helped make it into something that now has significant attention in developmental science and education. Because of this, purpose has now become an important concept for schools and other places that influence young people.

Also, the work Anne and I did earlier on moral commitment, similarly, had been a very elusive concept. People hadn’t gotten a handle on it, and yet it’s always been important. Just thinking about it, even if what Anne and I had to say about it turns out to be superseded by better ideas in the future—which is the nature of science—the fact that people are actually paying attention to such central parts of human life things and working on them is already a big step forward. So, I think our legacy could be that we brought to the table some central parts of human nature that have now gotten more attention.

Colby: I think of our efforts as having ripples. If you drop a pebble in the pond, then the ripples go out and they hit other things that hit other things. And so it sort of relates to that issue for Bill and his teacher who said, ‘Everything you do is important.’ Why? Because it affects the next thing that affects the next thing, and the ripples spread out. I think that’s all anyone can hope—and you can’t control, you know, what happens as a result of things that you do—all you can do is throw some pebbles into the pond and hope they end up being constructive on the whole.

King: Anne, of these stones that will continue to have ripple effects, which stones are you particularly grateful to have had the opportunity to toss into the water?
Colby: Given the reality that people don’t read old books very often, I wouldn’t flatter myself to expect anyone is going to read my books after I’m gone. But, even so, I do feel grateful that I learned how to put things down on paper in a way that is available to people who want to read it. So I’m grateful that I have the capacity to write out some of those ideas, somebody thought it was worth publishing, and other people thought it was worth reading. The piece that I think has had the most ripples? I think Some Do Care (Colby & Damon, 1992), for whatever set of reasons, got picked up by a lot of people. And I can still see some pretty useful new ripples that maybe could be traced back to that book Bill and I did together.
A word to young scholars

King: Any advice you would like to offer younger scholars?
Damon: I will say something I’m grateful I learned in my career: study what you’re interested in and what you think is important—and don’t let other people tell you, ‘Oh, you know either this or that area is too outside the box,’ or ‘science doesn’t go there,’ or ‘people won’t be interested in this, or anything like that.’ Follow your instincts, because if you choose your topics based just on what you think other people will be interested in, you can be sure that no one’s ever going to be interested in it. Only when you yourself are really passionate about something will you inspire others to be interested in your work.

King: No doubt, our field is grateful to these luminaries who have followed their passions even when their interests were not in the mainstream of science. They have endeavored with such innovation, conviction, intellect, and expertise that these concepts not only became mainstream in science, but also meaningful to the public. Through their work and lives, we are inspired to live purposeful lives marked with moral commitment and agency.

Bill and Anne, thank you for your ongoing contributions to the science and practice of lives that matter. We look forward to what’s next!

Notes on contributors

Anne Colby is Consulting Professor at Stanford University. Previously, she was director of the Murray Research Center at Harvard University and Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. She is the author of nine books, including, most recently The Power of Ideals with William Damon. Her other books include Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility; and Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession, which won AAC&U’s Frederick Hess Award for best book of 2012 on liberal education. Colby is also co-editor of three books. Her contributions to the field of moral psychology were recognized by the Association for Moral Education’s Kuhmerker Award. She was named a 2017 Influencer on Aging by Next Avenue for her recent research on purpose beyond the self in older adults.

William Damon is a Professor of Education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and Senior Fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution. He is one of the world’s leading researchers on the development of purpose and author of the widely influential book The Path to Purpose. Damon’s other books include The Moral Child, Greater Expectations (winner of the Parent’s Choice Book Award), Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment (with Anne Colby), Good Work (with Howard Gardner and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi), and, most recently, The Power of Ideals: The Real Story of Moral Choice (with Anne Colby). Damon’s current work includes a study that explores the development of purpose in the college years and a study of how older people find new purposes late in life. Damon has been elected to the National Academy of Education and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Pamela Ebstyne King is Peter L. Benson Associate Professor of Applied Developmental Science at the Thrive Center in the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. Her primary academic interests focus on the intersection of human thriving, moral, and spiritual development. Her current research includes studies on environments that promote thriving and on the nature and function of spiritual development in diverse adolescents and emerging adults. She has extensively studied and written on conceptualizations of thriving and positive youth

**References**


