**Excerpt from “Money for Morality” by Mary Arguelles**

Misplaced virtues are rampant through our culture. I don’t know how many times my 13-year-old son has told me about classmates who received $10 for each A they receive on their report cards—hinting that I should do the same for him should he ever receive an A (or maybe he was working on $5 for a B). Whenever he approached me on this subject, I give him the same reply, “Doing well is its own reward. The A just confirms that.” In other words, forget it! This is not to say that I would never praise my son for doing well in school. But my praise is not meant to reward or elicit future achievements, but rather to express my genuine delight in the satisfaction he feels at having done his best. Throwing $10 at that sends out the message that the feeling alone isn’t good enough.

As a society, we seem to be losing a grip on our internal control—the ethical thermostat that guides our actions and feelings toward ourselves, others, and the world around us. Instead, we rely on external “stuff” as a measure of our worth. We pass this message to our children. We offer them money for honesty and good grades. Pizza is given as a reward for reading. In fact, in one national reading program, a pizza party awaits the entire class if each child reads a certain amount of books within a four month period. We call these incentives, telling ourselves that if we can just reel them in and get them hooked, then the built-in rewards will follow. I recently saw a television program where unmarried, teenaged mothers were featured as the participants in a parenting program that offers $10 a week “incentive” if these young women don’t get pregnant again. Isn’t the daily struggle of being a single, teenaged mother enough of a deterrent? No, it isn’t, because we as a society won’t allow it to be. Nothing is permitted to succeed or fail on its own merits anymore.

I remember when I was pregnant with my son I read countless child-care books that offered the same advice: don’t bribe your child with ice cream to get him to eat spinach: it makes the spinach look bad. While some say spinach doesn’t need any help looking bad, I submit it’s from years of **kowtowing** to ice cream. Similarly, our moral taste buds have been dulled by an endless onslaught of artificial sweeteners. A steady diet of candy bars and banana splits makes an ordinary apple or orange seem sour. So too does an endless parade of incentives make us incapable of feeling a genuine sense of inner peace (or inner turmoil).

The simple virtues of honesty, kindness and integrity suffer from an image problem and are in desperate need of a makeover. One way to do this is by example. If my son sees me feeling happy after I’ve helped out a friend, then he may do likewise. If my daughter sees me spending a rainy afternoon curled up with a book instead of spending money at the mall, she may get the message that there are some simple pleasures that don’t require a purchase. I fear that in our so-called upwardly mobile world we are on a downward spiral toward moral bankruptcy. Like pre-World War II Germany, where the basket holding the money was more valuable that the money itself, we too may render ourselves internally worthless while desperately clinging to a shell of appearances.