

A key to

Values for Educators

IN his inaugural address, President Kennedy reminded us that we confront life situations which shall try our mettle to the full. Yet at the moment when so much shall be asked of us, the literature of social commentary is dominated by terms like alienation, estrangement, withdrawal, indifference, disaffection, noninvolvement, neutralism. We are told that especially among youth, the direction of cultural change is from commitment and enthusiasm to alienation and apathy.

If there is even partial truth to these widespread claims, there is cause for concern because values determine what we shall do with our lives. Values contain our conception of what makes life good. We use our life energies to pursue them. We confront a first-order difficulty if we are in trouble with values; if we are pursuing destructive, false values; if we are confused or in conflict about values; or if we have lost confidence and are indifferent about them.

Schools whose concern is with the growing young have, of course, a special responsibility. Will the quality of our work in American schools help youth develop a clear sense of life-purpose to sustain them in moments of crisis—and enable them to be full participants in building a future with imagination and

courage? The answer will depend on whether those of us in the schools are clear and confident about our own values. We shall need our own inner assurance to enable us to confront the inevitable difficulties and frustrations in the daily routine, and to cultivate a quality in our lives sensed by the young to be worthy of their respect. We shall need clarity of values to guide us in making decisions about school programs and policies in a world of revolutionary change and full of clamoring and conflicting voices.

We will here describe a basic condition which must be met if life-values are to be sound and examine briefly some consequences which would follow instituting such a condition.

Values that are vital, that may act as powerful directives in our lives cannot be taken on as easily as an inherited wardrobe. If many of our time-honored values seem to have a tired quality, it may be because we have carelessly let the familiar words slip off the lips too easily, too many times. If we wish to quicken the quality of values in our life

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we should listen to Albert Schweitzer, who has stressed that values must be won out of living experience and hard reflection. "Only if (an ethical affirmation) offers itself as arising from thought can it become spiritually our own."¹ If the advice is sound, honest men, even though bereft of claims to special wisdom, are obligated to get on with the effort. The argument to follow is offered in that spirit. With it is a conviction that the task is possible, for the answer lies within ourselves.

To Be Human

We begin with premises about our fundamental nature. A picture has emerged from the investigations of twentieth century science indicating that ours is a universe in which creative processes are at work. Because we are human, we share in the creative process in a special way. The human condition brings with it unique opportunities—and special responsibilities. To be human means to have the capacity to create value—the capacity to transform the quality of life for better or worse. No one of us is without this capacity. By seeing his life essentially as the opportunity for creating and realizing value, the individual can find his own life acquiring meaning in the daily acts that he performs.

For guidance at this point, we turn to Viktor Frankl,² a man of the twentieth century, whose life and thought were tempered by years in concentration camps. He has thought deeply about the

¹ Albert Schweitzer. *Out of My Life and Thought*. New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Mentor Books, 1953. p. 123.

² Viktor E. Frankl. *The Doctor and the Soul*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1957; and *From Death Camp to Existentialism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.

problem of values and has suggested three categories of values that are accessible to all:

1. Men can give meaning to their lives by realizing *creative* values—by acting, working, building, planning, executing. These may range from the performance of familiar daily acts like planning work for tomorrow's class to rare, trail-blazing breakthroughs such as Einstein's formulation of the equation $E=mc^2$.

2. Men can realize *experiential* values by receptivity toward the world in surrender to the beauty of nature or art. This is the mode of appreciation and contemplation.

3. There are *attitudinal* values, or the ways in which man brings himself to handle the unmanageable or tragic situations in his life.

By seeing oneself as representing an expression of the creative processes of the universe with the capacity to create and realize values, and as having the responsibility to do so, means that one can live from a base of deep honor and respect for what is represented in oneself and all other men. While living more and more from this base of self-acceptance and self-respect, one is freed from the enervating need to please others, to pursue "success" as defined by the social system.

One's essential task becomes then simply to be what *he* can be, to do what he can do, to honor what he sees through his own eyes and to say truthfully what he sees—to live authentically. And he must resist factors which exert pressure on him to live otherwise.

Some Implications

Let us examine some implications of Frankl's three value categories for the work of the teaching profession. The chance to realize *creative* values is intrinsic to the work of the teacher. If this

potential is to flourish, the teacher will need to bring himself to the task that is his as genuinely as possible. To do this he must be engaged in a process of personal growth. He must be seeking to extend his own set of life-meanings. He must be a scholar, for he knows that he can help others get on with the task of attaining wider life-meaning only to the extent that he has this quality himself. He must resist, when possible, the features of school systems which deny him the chance to honor himself and his work. Administrators, acting in the same spirit, will see their job as centering on the task of releasing the productive energies of their faculty.

The forms which characterize emerging mass urban society make this kind of leadership ever more imperative. In our present world-in-the-making, bureaucracy and big organization are here to stay. Most of us will spend our working lives in them. We know by now, too, that they pose threats to meaningful living. Knowing this, teachers and administrators alike, if they have their values straight, will recognize that a major, continuing task is to see that the processes of bureaucracy are developing in such a way as to serve life-furthering ends.

Secondly, we would remind ourselves that while *acting* on life is important, it is not all of it. The chance and the need to create value in the mode of *appreciation* or *contemplation* are also daily present. If aware of this, we can seek occasion to provide for it even in the hurly-burly of busy schedules that jade our sensibilities. There may be a moment really to *see* a child for the first time who for weeks has been in our presence. There are, too, those occasions of satisfaction known to all who practice the art of teaching when a new meaning, a new insight dawns in our students, when one

of them begins to move with an idea. We participate when we savor these moments and permit ourselves to sense the wonder in them—even though “calamity” in one of its infinite manifestations follows immediately.

Beyond this, there is life in its unmanageable aspects. There is much that cannot be bent to our will. The thesis developed by Dr. Frankl asks us to consider the idea that even these areas provide occasions for creating values—those which he calls attitudinal.

The opportunity to realize attitudinal values is always present whenever a person finds himself confronted by a destiny toward which he can act only by acceptance. The way in which he accepts, the way in which he bears his cross, what courage he manifests in suffering, what dignity he displays in doom and disaster, is the measure of his human fulfillment.³

Let us take a familiar, if not quite so drastic situation. When confronted with overcrowded conditions and students from disorganized homes, who are unable to attend to what we can offer, we need not sink in despair or crush ourselves with self-blame. Our task simply is to meet the demands of the day with whatever imagination and courage we can muster. Even in moments of extremity, the possibility for creating value remains, for by the way we bring ourselves to the situation, we show what human life may be.

Range of Learnings

Truly self-respecting teachers will bring to their students the same respect that they have for themselves. This does not imply “soft pedagogy,” for the fundamental climate sought for the school

³ Viktor E. Frankl. *The Doctor and the Soul*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1957. p. 50.

would be one in which people are honoring the deepest that is in each of them. To do this means that each is *responsible*—responsible for doing the work that he can do, for bringing to situations the qualities of which he is capable. No more and no less than this is to be expected. Discovering what work one can do is an important way of discovering who one is. But just as important is discovering the tasks of which one is not capable. This applies with equal force to all students—the fast, the average, the slow. In the context described here, “success” or “failure” becomes strictly secondary as compared with getting on with the central task of self-discovery. American schools, then, should provide the programs for American youth to help them get on with that task.

The range of important learnings and skills needed for the good life is rich and varied. The curriculum itself, therefore, must make available the range of studies and activities needed to provide the right set of challenges for our children with their rich diversity of talents.

Intellectual inquiry and the disciplined study required by it certainly must occupy a central place. Our time and condition require this. But important provisions for experiences in the arts, in physical activities, in useful crafts and skills and in activities of school citizenship will need richly to be provided. The difficult task of seeking a fruitful balance of the rightful claims of each of these is a critical part of the art of the educator. Mundane pressures forever will be present, including generally defensible ones like social or national needs, more dubious ones like the conflicting clamors of warring interest groups, and the doubts arising from our own uncertainties and perplexities.

Somehow, though, the goal of devel-

oping programs aimed at providing opportunities for genuine self-fulfillment for as many of our youth as possible in all their diversity must be held to as our central concern. This will never be easy. In fact, cultural tendencies like status-seeking, nativism, standardization and mechanization may make this harder than ever. If we have sure knowledge of our true obligation, however, we can maintain a main course with confidence—and return to it in due time if we go astray.

While the argument has been that there is plenty to do within the schools and that we have the resources within us to get on with our task—we delude ourselves if we think that abiding values can be built in a greenhouse. It is impossible to have truly effective schools unless the communities surrounding them are supportive of humane values. When the communities fail and are full of shameful inconsistencies, honest youth rightfully will be hesitant about giving wholehearted allegiance.

Communities which deny children of minorities their rightful chance for a full go-at-life, communities permitting themselves to be saturated by cheap, dishonest advertising which may foster cynicism about American society, communities which fail to provide youth with opportunities for useful work, communities blighted by ugliness and dissonance, are guilty of dishonoring life. Parents, teachers, and others, who themselves are life-valuing and who want their children to live strongly and confidently from the creative potential within themselves, will recognize their obligation to oppose such destructive factors. They will actively support efforts to build communities in which all people can come closer to developing the endless facets of the gift of life bestowed on them.

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