

A Secular Approach to Moral Education

"MORAL education" is sometimes a narrow subject concerned with teaching moral ideas, their history and their diversity. It may also be an effort to indoctrinate and strengthen conventional standards so that there will be less academic cheating, less delinquency, and more conformity in sexual behavior and integrity in public life. Yet true moral education is more like art or science. Just as each of these is more than a subject with a specific body of knowledge and techniques, but embodies an overall approach to the whole of life, so in its deepest sense, moral education is concerned with the most profound values of human life.

How children and youth experience life, how they become aware of values, and how they discriminate and choose among them, is important in the educational process. In the minds of many, the priority of values is considered a matter too private to be touched and too intangible to be grasped by the instrumentalities available to the school. Individuals differ in their sense of the order of the importance of values. Moreover, their evaluations of things shift with immediate needs and changing long run goals. When a human being is sick,

health becomes the number one value. When he is in pain, relief has high priority. When he is starving, bread is most important. When he is alone and lonely, social contact and friendship may take first place in his hierarchy of values. For some individuals the need to seek wealth, power or status, plays an overpowering part. For others, the pursuit of truth or beauty or the service of man with compassion and love is the persistent determining force.

American culture is a mixture of traditions and attitudes and values brought together from many places and many periods of history. Innovation from within and from without makes for constant change and conflict. Moreover, the adult community differs within itself concerning values and what constitutes happiness and success and a good life. It is out of the complex influence of many different standards and behaviors and of many diverse material, racial, religious, economic and other forces, that values become confused and inverted. Yet whatever the different and shift-

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ing value patterns in the homes and community, the school has to be a center for human growth in which some values have priority over others. It cannot permit itself to be neutral, or party to, destructiveness, corruption, prejudice and violence.

This raises the basic question whether the schools are merely reflections of attitudes, intergroup relations, and the power structure and value system of the community. Is the school to accept and transmit the American symbols of flag and Star Spangled Banner and Constitution as sanctification for great ideals which are not to be taken too seriously? Or does the school stand for an all out commitment to the realization of the democratic values in human terms? This is something more important than saluting the flag or singing the national anthem. It implies commitment to the principles of equality in the Declaration of Independence and the principles of human rights spelled out in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution. To know them and to hang them on the wall next to the flag and the picture of Washington and Lincoln and the Nation's Capitol and to study them seriously should be a vital influence in the school's program of moral education.

Many obstacles confront the school in its efforts at moral education. Prejudices of religion, race and class negate the respect for human personality. Drives for status, power, popularity, and material values cut across the emphasis on human worth. Human relations are distorted when student conduct is moved by emotional disturbances due to unmet psychological needs. Where the school is large and understaffed, where classes are too large and where extreme specialization of departments exists, stable class groups and good interpersonal relations

are difficult. The danger is that teacher to student and student to student relationships will become partial, temporary, casual, and irresponsible. Then the individual is neglected and lost.

Respect for the Individual

One most important thing the school can do to meet the need of the individual and society in the area of moral education is to stress the respect for the individual. Whatever the differences of theology and politics, this is one value which can enlist the affirmative support of all men. A respect for the dignity of every human being, his potentialities, his needs and his rights is a basic moral value. It is essential to democratic society and a peaceful world. Unless the child can learn this respect, the teachings of religion and the teachings of American democracy will be of no avail. This is something which must be learned "from the inside." The child must learn to respect himself, to value himself; and he can learn this self respect only if he feels that he is respected. Because of the very complex and changing culture of which he is such a small part, this self-evaluation is particularly important. For without it his life and his choices and activities seem unimportant and meaningless.

This is why it is imperative that he be accepted and loved in his home. It is essential that he have some of the same feeling about himself as he enters the school doors. In the school he must feel that here he can be himself, that he has nothing to be ashamed of, that he belongs and that this is his community and his place for growth and fulfillment. With this respect for self and others he can sort out his values among the conflicting standards and pressures. He can develop personal integrity. He can make

his own judgments on what is right and wrong. He can be helped to carry the responsibilities of freedom and use freedom wisely.

The first step is the creation, within the school, of a moral climate which affords the experience of respect for the individual. In a way it might be said that this is the primary need of American schools today. It is the pearl of great price in moral education. It is the beginning on which it is possible to build. In order that the school shall provide a positive climate for moral values and moral growth, two other elements appear essential. One is the respect for truth and an atmosphere of freedom of expression and a stress on personal integrity in work and in relations. The other is a stress on responsibility, and with it an atmosphere of sharing the task of education, and a relationship of trust between and among teachers and students.

The curriculum presents many opportunities to go beyond subject matter and beyond knowledge and techniques. Every subject provides material through which students can become more aware of the nature of man, his needs, capacities, and the problems of the human condition. Science is man seeking truth, the truths of the natural world and the knowledge of his own nature. The release of nuclear energy, space exploration, the conquest of disease, the investigation of the nature of the living cell present challenges to intelligence and cooperative action and the human conscience. The world of industrialism, automation, urbanism, and increasing global interdependence, present a new social environment in which moral challenges abound. Art is the way human beings experience life. It is the way an individual interprets what he sees. It is a key to the depths of an individual and the heart

of a culture. Language becomes a way of expression and a means of understanding other people and other cultures. It can give men more security as they move about on the earth trying to cooperate with one another and to find solutions to common problems. History and the social sciences can throw light on why men behave the way they do. The story of man's growth toward maturity and civilization demands an honest "Know thyself" from individuals and peoples. Especially is this so where men have held one another in slavery and serfdom and colonialism. The atomic and space age may be an age of liberation from fear and hate in human relations.

A Special Program

Although interdepartmental cooperation is usually difficult because of lack of time and the rigidity of schedules, there may be advantages in bringing together those who work in specialized fields. Printing and literature; metal working and economics; art and business administration; mathematics and music—these are examples of interdepartmental groupings from which students and also teachers can benefit by joint exchange and investigation. Such an approach can enrich the learning process, can help the student integrate his knowledge and grasp of the larger human enterprise. Most of all, this approach can help students to respect one another's divergent interests and inequalities of ability on the basis of shared experience. This approach can foster the element of mutual respect and the identification of the school as a center of many human concerns.

A special program on "Life Problems" or "Life Adjustment" or "Good and Welfare," by offering special times for the

informal discussion of common personal and social problems, may constitute a valuable addition to the educational process. If it is planned, there must be flexibility which allows for student need and interest. Among the subjects which can form the theme for discussions at various age levels are these:

The History and Meaning of Freedom

The Development of Community and the Idea of Justice

Personality Development and Problems of Growing Up

Unity, Diversity, and Intergroup Relations

Work, Career, and Ethical Problems of Economic Life

Citizenship, Rights, Duties and Challenges in Democratic Society.

Such a series may rely upon problems and factual material worked up in regular academic subjects in which there may not have been time or interest to deal with moral issues. The series may take as its starting point a recent school assembly or film showing, events on the sports field or the student election or community service or publication programs or student social activities. It may also grow out of reaction to current events. Yet whether there is a syllabus and plan or whether the teacher and student function on a flexible basis from period to period, it is desirable that students be exposed to a systematic exploration of man's great and persistent moral dilemmas.

It is desirable that the discussion of the major moral issues should go beyond the exchange of opinion to a consideration of factual material so that the discussants will respect fact and truth. The test of such sessions lies in their informal-

ity, freedom of expression, participation, frank sharing of experience and diversity of viewpoints. Such sessions can be a safety valve for feelings and thought which cannot find expression through the structured operation of the academic program. These sessions can bring students closer to one another. They can foster the awareness of the relationship of the school as a community and the school community's relation to the larger world. Such sessions can also be disturbing in that they may touch sensitive points in the value systems of individuals and families. They may generate hostilities from those whose inner conflict is disturbing to themselves and to others. This may be all to the good if it is part of a dialectic process in which there is security and affection along with the conflict of personalities and viewpoints.

Positive gains are to be found in student awareness that the school provides for consideration of human problems and is concerned with human values. For many, such a program may contribute to the clarification of the most important problems in the life of the individual. The program may help the individual to see the meaning of the things he is learning, the values implicit in his life decisions. It is to be hoped that whether the attempt to deal with human values is planned within the academic curriculum or as part of a special supplementary program, the results would be better self-understanding, more mutual appreciation of differences, and a more thoughtful approach to human relationships.

There is no one simple and easy way to develop moral and spiritual values in human beings. No one method can guarantee the growth of character. A

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tical book is on the role of parents in helping the severely retarded child to lead as full a life as possible without sacrificing the personal and family life of the parents and siblings. Dr. Egg describes the symptoms of severe retardation and urges parents to secure medical help, but she advises parents, if it is necessary, to accept the fact that their child's retardation will probably become more pronounced as time goes by.

Parents are urged to follow-up a realistic appraisal of the retarded child's limitations and the limitations upon their energy with a program aimed at stimulating the child's limited attention and abilities so that he does not become a "basket case." The author has many practical suggestions aimed at helping the retarded appear and act normal and attain the limited amount of independence and social acceptance which is possible for him. The book does not discuss the problems facing the retarded and their parents in the teens and in adulthood.

A group of Russian scientists published *The Mentally Retarded Child*. They summarized the present state of their knowledge concerning various types and degrees of severe retardation caused by intrauterine or early childhood disease or as a consequence of heredity. The electrical activity of the brain illustrates the pathologically changed background against which the reflex and higher mental activities take place. While speech processes play a much smaller role in the organization of activity of these children, the authors discuss experiments which have shown that within severe limits a correctly arranged system of training and instruction can accomplish a great deal toward helping children compensate for their defects.

In *The School Dropout*, under the editorship of Daniel Schreiber, more

than a dozen authors examine the various societal factors involved in the dropout problem and the implications of the problem for the schools. At times the authors pointedly disagree, and they do not pull any punches. The result is thought provoking. Friedenbergs says that education has served in the past as an opiate, but that the children of the poor have gradually come to see that most of the dropouts would not have a better chance, even economically, if they finished high school. These children and young people are now getting over their addiction. He thinks that we must explore the possibilities of a rapprochement rather than merely trying in vain to keep lower-class youngsters on an "education kick." The jobs the dropout's parents knew are gone, and mastery of the language and at least some of the rudiments of middle-class life are necessary if these children are to operate successfully in today's world. A number of the authors have suggestions for schools interested in establishing closer teacher-parent relationships and in raising the sights of children and parents. In order to have a significant effect on the dropout problem, teachers and parents must have a sense of participating in an educational advance, not a rear-guard remedial program.

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A Secular Approach—Black

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great civilization can go down in ruins if its people are confused in values and fail to develop moral character. So long as there is effort to share the finest fruits

of the culture with all the people and so long as there is effort to develop the rich potentials in all the people, there is hope. This is the basic assumption of democratic society. This is why the schools are the most important institutions in a democratic society. It is their task to bring forth and refine the ore which is the most precious raw material, the children. They are the power plants in which is generated the moral power of the people.

A Strategy—Raths

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dures outlined in this paper, they may perhaps become truly "influential Americans."

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Destiny—Wiles

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cerns of the entire earth—health, education and nuclear warfare, to mention a few. The question, if the world continues, is not whether we will have world government. This is a certainty. The question is whether it will be a totalitarian one or a government in which people have opportunity to participate through their representatives. We need to put a primary emphasis on participation and constantly seek a form of international government in which participation in making decisions that will affect them is a right of all individuals. To hope to achieve a world government that will incorporate this value means that we must demonstrate that it works by being sure that it functions in our schools and in every town, county, state and national government operation.

An open future: It is impossible to hold onto the past. The explosion of knowledge has been unbelievable. From 1900 to 1950 we doubled the knowledge that

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