

## The Hidden Hungers

*Fred T. Wilhelms*

**E**VEN in this rich and lovely land of ours there are people who go hungry; babies whose bellies stick out and whose legs grow spindly because they are ill fed. But food bulges our granaries, and we know we can wipe out hunger in our land any time we get good and mad. Production is our forte. And, by and large, the immemorial scarcities plague us no more.

Yet, rising grim in the midst of all this affluence is another set of hungers not so easy to quench. Our young people—and, only a little less consciously, their elders—are hungry for a life-significance they are hard put to find. To many of them the old *de facto* values are repulsive, and the *professed* values are phony. The standard morals and mores are in question, and all religion is open to doubt.

The desperation of our young people's lives is not so "quiet" as Thoreau said of men's lives in general. As in every previous generation our adolescents are the most idealistic—the most inclined to yearn for perfection—of all mortal beings; as in no previous generation our adolescents are aware and articulate about it, even noisy and rudely bumptious. But, rude or not, they *are* searching, searching for something they dimly perceive as "better." They are in a mood to study life—and man; to ponder what is of most worth, and boldly to jettison the junk.

For a largely different—largely inferior, to be blunt about it—set of reasons their parents and other adults also want them engaged in a study of values to live by. In the main *they* want it because they are scared—frightened by youth's aggressive questioning of much that they hold sacred. Many of them see, not a quest for a high morality, but simply a *loss* of morals. Nevertheless, they do want the schools to get to the problem.

### **Relevance to Life**

And so the door is open. If the schools wish to engage themselves in helping young people understand themselves and others and grow a sense of identity, if they want to help each young person face up to the great

questions of ethics and values, of life-significance and commitment to purpose, then they are free to do it. If they do it with genuine relevance to life, as their students perceive life, then they will also have learners whose motivation is powerful.

Is this what “the humanities” are about? I hope so. I hope that the thousands of unified humanities courses which are springing up around the country—mostly in the twelfth grade—are an intuitive response to the great soul-hungers. But if that is what we mean, it will take strenuous effort and a radical rethinking to capture it.

We could, you see, develop unified humanities programs with a very different set of goals, dedicated to aesthetic sensibility, to critical acuity, to erudition about the arts and music and literature—and everything that “culture” used to mean. Such programs would be much easier to achieve; we could build them by combining the several aesthetic fields into one powerful synthesis. And, make no mistake about it, they would be valuable in their own right.

But if we mean to go to an authentic “study of man”—if, more basically, we intend to help youngsters *become* men—then the problem changes. Then it is no longer enough to “teach about” literature or art or whatever (which we know how to do); instead, we have to learn to *use* the stuff for purposes beyond itself—purposes startlingly like those of the authors and artists and composers when they produced it—and this we are not yet good at.

The implications of this great shift are very broad. The standard didactic mode, designed to help children “know about” a piece of literature, is simply irrelevant to letting that piece of literature do its quiet work in his person. The cliché that “you can’t teach values” probably has only a little truth in it. In a fairly high degree one can; the question is whether he *should*. The better goal is to put each youngster into a situation that enables him genuinely to hammer out a fine set of values for himself—and that calls for a mode of school life which we still only glimpse vaguely.

## To the Hearts of Men

Furthermore, in this 20th century an authentic “study of man” must reach beyond the literary-aesthetic fields for its resources. With his intuitive grasp of the human condition, Shakespeare offers deep insights into man. But so, in a different way, does a Carl Rogers or a Ruth Benedict. The great, scholarly engines of inquiry which we call the behavioral sciences have so much to say that a “study of man” which ignores them is a one-sided view.

It must be clear by now that we are dealing with something far bigger than one course. If the idea behind the humanities is valid, then we have to be talking about one of the great streams that run through the whole curriculum. Facts can be amassed quickly. But all that is fundamental in a person is the product of long, slow growth, helped significantly from the outside but essentially growth from within.

In my estimation the development of a true humanities program is the greatest opportunity of our generation. The climate of our society is favorable to it, and the mindset of our young people yearns for it. It will be difficult, yes, but it is possible *and it would work*.

I do not mean that a humanities program could solve all the aching problems of the lone individual riddled with *anomie* and doubt, or all those of a society suddenly unsure of its commitments. But, used with wisdom, the media we can bring to bear in the humanities have a power that dwarfs everything we have in the sciences and the social studies. To young persons striving desperately to true up their vision of what life can be, and make their commitments—or to a society trying to do the same thing—these are the resources that count.

For a little while yet, we are free. A handful of inspired pioneers have begun to break a new trail. There are as yet no limiting state syllabi and college entrance examinations—and, more important, no limiting traditions. The freedom may not last long. But now, in this little moment, we are free to choose whether to design just one more “subject”—or go to the hearts of men.

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