Value Clarity, High Morality: Let's Go for Both

Knowing what constitutes a moral life and actually living one are different matters. Students need moral leadership, but they also need guidance in sorting out their own values.
This story starts with Louis E. Raths, my first values teacher and a genius educator. Raths was a master at getting inside the thoughts and feelings of students. And he was a genius at crafting penetrating teaching strategies. That genius showed up in his theory of values clarification. Values clarification activities grabbed students' interest and generated serious, deep value thinking.

I say this on the basis of direct experience, for beginning in 1960, I had the good fortune to help Raths write about his values work. It began as pure good fortune. But the purity soon got clouded, for values clarification was soon attacked for undermining traditional values, such as diligence and respect for authority. Critics claimed we were telling students to choose their own values, while many chose only self-indulgence. They insisted we were promoting value neutrality, while the era craved renewed morality.

In Retrospect: Balance Necessary
In truth, I must agree with some of that criticism. Our emphasis on value neutrality probably did undermine traditional morality, although that was never our intent.

Consider a values clarification activity called the "proud whip." A teacher might say to a class, "Let's use a few free moments to whip down this row. When your turn comes, tell of something you have at home of which you are proud. Or tell of something you did recently that makes you feel proud. Or, if you like, simply pass, and we'll go on to the next person." Imagine this series of student responses: "I'm proud of my new TV," "I can't think of anything," "I'm proud of the article in the paper about our club," "I'm proud of the way I play baseball."

Guidelines for the proud whip tell us to accept student responses nonjudgmentally. The activity carries no intention of telling students what they should be proud of; the main purpose is to heighten awareness of the role of pride in their lives, so that students are more likely to consider what makes them proud when they choose the values they want to live by. So, in the example above, the teacher might merely nod acceptingly at each student response, perhaps with an occasional word of encouragement, but would not suggest, for instance, that it is silly to be proud of a new TV.

A problem arises when that nonjudgmental orientation, common to many values clarification strategies, is carried into situations for which it is inappropriate. Imagine, for example, that the next student in the proud whip series says, "I'm proud of the way our dog fights. He even kills stray dogs in our neighborhood."

To me, such a comment merits more than a neutral nod. A response of serious concern is called for. "Is that safe, Bob?" the teacher might say. "Let's take some time and look at this." It might well be a time to speak up and perhaps even take action for community safety, nonviolence, and our responsibility for one another's well-being.

My point is simply this: Although it is often useful to accept students' value statements nonjudgmentally, values clarification theory does not call on us to accept all student statements that way. Nor does it suggest that teachers in any way cease acting as moral leaders. It recommends simply that teachers go well beyond moral leadership—that they also help students learn to think through their personal values and understand what it takes to live a committed, value-directed life.

As I look back, it would have been better had we presented a more balanced picture, had we emphasized the importance of helping students both to clarify their own personal values and to adopt society's moral values. Indeed, combining value clarity and high morality, like combining process and content, is just plain smart.

We have learned a good deal in recent years, both about values clarification and about other approaches to character development. It is a mixed bag, to be sure: different voices, different assumptions, different points of view. But I think it can be pulled together. And I have tried to do so here in the form of some recommendations. My guidelines fall into two categories: practices that advance our moral values and practices that advance the clarifying process. But one recommendation is overriding: Let's avoid either-or; let's learn to do better at both together.

Advancing Moral Values: The Wisdom of the Past
When I talk about a moral value here, I refer to a certain kind of value, one that involves good or right. There are other kinds of values, those that do not usually involve good and right. It rarely makes sense, for example, to say that a person who values guitar playing and living in small towns is better than a person who values bowling and living in large cities. Those are simply different values.

It makes a good deal of sense, however, to say that truthfulness is better than deception, caring is better than hurting, loyalty is better than betrayal, and sharing is better than exploitation. I use the term moral values, or simply...
morals, to refer to those values that have a good or a right associated with them. And while I do not recommend that we promote one personal value over another, I wholeheartedly recommend that we promote our heritage of moral values. How might we do this?

- Speaking up for morality. Teachers sometimes hold back on expressing moral indignation, but there are, of course, natural healthful ways to express it. "I don't care who started it," a teacher might proclaim, "We need to learn to control our tempers here. I insist you find a way to handle disagreements that does not hurt others." Another teacher might say: "Some people here never get a chance to shine. And that's not fair. How can we do better at giving everyone a fair chance to feel important and successful?"

- Stating personal positions. Teachers sometimes avoid stating their personal viewpoints, but it's possible to speak up for our positions without stifling discussion or putting down those who disagree. For example, a teacher might say: "Equal pay for equal work seems right to me, but not everyone agrees. What do you all think?" And another teacher: "My position is that the President should never violate the law, and I have written to him saying so. Yet this editorial takes a very different position. Discuss this in your groups, identify positions other than those two, and list some of the advantages and disadvantages of each position."

- Explaining rules. Sometimes teachers merely announce rules rather than taking the time to explain the advantages of, for example, respecting each other's property, taking turns, and giving special consideration to those with special needs. A teacher might say: "I will ask you to become quiet when I begin speaking. Why? Let's brainstorm some advantages of that guideline. If the discussion does not generate some reasons, the teacher might say, "I want us to respect each other and listen to each other. I need that respect too. That is one reason for you to quiet down when I begin to speak."

- Speaking forthrightly. We each are different, and we each must be sensitive to different communities. There is no single recipe to follow, but there is no reason for us to keep mum about our value wisdom. Indeed, there is good reason for us to speak up. When we speak forthrightly for our values, without diminishing those who hold different positions, we share the wisdom of the ages. We also advance value understanding and demonstrate the kind of respectful free speech democracy demands.

- Increasing moral experiences. As I work with teachers, I find the gap between our words and deeds to be a tricky issue. Like students, we too are under a lot of pressure, and it is easy not to do what we tell others to do. Yet if, for example, we want others to strive diligently each day to speak truthfully, to be tolerant of individual differences, to listen carefully to others, to keep an open mind, and to forgive themselves for their inevitable imperfections, we would do well to monitor our own behavior to see if we can better exemplify those qualities.

Do we value beauty? If so, we may want to invest more time in getting beauty into our classrooms. Similarly, if we want students to do better at handling choices, we can give them more choices about what and how to study. We can also give them more time to reflect on ways they could do better at handling their choices.

We might also listen to how we talk. "All those turning in their work late lose 10 points," for example, supports values of individual responsibility and punishment. If we also say, "Let's discuss better ways of getting everyone to turn in work on time," we add weight to the values of cooperative responsibility and problem prevention.

These issues touch on what is often called the hidden curriculum. Sometimes we are unaware that our classroom experiences promote values we do not favor, such as teaching students to value grade grabbing more than learning. "There will be a test Friday" puts the emphasis on grades. "Learn this well enough to teach it to your partner" puts more emphasis on learning.

Similarly we may promote uncritical deference to authority rather than respectful deference to authority. For example, "No sense fighting City Hall; you'd better do what they say." tends to call up a different reaction than to say, "You can respect their position and present your point of view, even if you later choose to do what they say."

Advancing the Clarifying Process: The Skills of Value-Directed Living

I have suggested some ways we can advance our moral values. But that is far from enough. It is one thing to know what is morally valuable. It is quite another to live a moral life, consistently and fully. Reality puts us all into many value conflicts. A student may value sound health but nonetheless be tempted by alcohol or drugs. We may tell students to respect people of another culture, but a parent may slander them. We may insist that students settle disputes peacefully while
the media saturates them with scenes of violence.

Even with personal values, such as losing weight, earning a degree, or mastering the guitar, it is one thing to choose a value and quite another to work through the realities well enough to be able to live that value. Consequently, if we care to help people with their moral and value development, we must do more than advocate our own values, model our values, and provide experiences consistent with our values. We must also help them sort through their value confusions so they can actually live by their values. This is the theme of values clarification.

What is a teacher to do? Do what you can, I would recommend, to help students exercise and master the following seven skills. Each skill plays a part in living a value-directed life. All are based on Raths' original values clarification model.1

1. Opening our minds. Opening ourselves to the available alternatives in choice situations includes the skill of being receptive to others' points of view and to our own creative resources. When we are not very open—as when we ignore options, assume no new possibilities exist, fail to look for alternatives, stay stuck in either-or's, or otherwise proceed with fixed minds—we lose our power to find our best responses.

To encourage open-mindedness, for example, we might say to a student, "You seem to be stuck. Have you tried backing up and looking at your situation from afar, or from the future, to see if that new perspective offers any new ideas?"

Or following a lesson involving a scientific breakthrough, a teacher might say, "Sometimes people fail to excel because they assume they cannot do better. Are there some areas in which you have been assuming that you cannot do better? If so, make a note to yourself about them. If you would be open to the possibility that your assumption is untrue, that you have not yet reached your limits, check that item. Later we will share our ideas."

2. Anticipating consequences. We want students to do more than face value issues open-mindedly and identify alternatives. We also want them to collect data and think ahead to consequences, so they can weigh the alternatives and make informed choices.

To stimulate the practice of such thoughtfulness, we might say to a student who suggests a remedy to a problem, "In the long run, what positive and negative outcomes do you predict will result from your suggestion?"

And to a class that finished a history lesson, "Notice how unanticipated events came up to surprise the leaders. Have any of you ever been surprised that events did not turn out as you expected? Let's see if we can identify hints for avoiding such unwelcome surprises."

3. Sensing inner guidance. When it comes to considering values issues, rationality is not our sole source of data. Sometimes we get information from outside our minds, from our hearts or guts.

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"Deep down," we might ask a youngster wondering how to handle group pressures, "what does your best self want you to do?" With a young man facing time pressures, we might ask, "Do you get a sense, maybe even a body sense, that one choice is more right for you than another?" The intent here is that people learn how to take advantage of their intuitive awareness.

Sometimes a teacher can use some extra time for a whole-class activity that sensitizes students to inner wisdom, the "good deed report." A teacher may, for example, ask, "Anyone here recently do something you would say was a good deed? Perhaps you didn't do it yourself but saw someone do something that was good or right, even when it was troublesome for the person to do it. Can anyone report such a good deed?"

4. Choosing. The three preceding processes focus on collecting data: we open our minds to possibilities, we think about outcomes, and we check for inner guidance. But data collection does not equal choosing. There remains the process of drawing it all together and making the choice.

People often have trouble with that process. How can we assist them? With students, we can give them more choices to make, starting with reasonably easy ones. We might, for example, ask students to choose individually how much they will read, when they will finish a task, or how they want to complete a task.

Following a history lesson, we might say, "We saw one example of a decision delayed too long. How about your own lives? Please make note of any times you were tempted to delay a choice too long and overcame that temptation. Note also any time you did delay too long and were sorry you did. When you are ready, let's open the discussion and see if we can collect any ideas for knowing when a decision is too long delayed and how to avoid that."

And as an example of adding to choice-making awareness, we might say to a student, "Can you see that you have been choosing to remain apa-
With winter vacation over and January upon us, the topic of discussion in my elementary school was how to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I browsed through several packets of suggested activities, but none seemed to convey adequately the serious issues of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. I knew if I began my lesson with the typical question, “Is it fair to judge someone by the color of his or her skin?” I would get the expected “no” answer. I needed a way, without revealing my purpose, to measure the stereotypes my 6-year-olds had already formed.

The idea came to me to make a series of cards picturing pairs of people identical except for one selected characteristic of age, sex, race, or handicap and then to question my students on their perceptions about them. Each card had an “A” and a “B” half. I asked my students to choose A or B (C if undecided) in response to questions designed to measure the presence of stereotyped thinking.

For instance, one card showed two identical girls, one seated in a wheelchair, the other sitting in a regular chair. I asked, “Who is the better student?” I was amazed and saddened when many of them exclaimed, “Oh, that’s easy” and immediately recorded their answers. Of my 42 students, 29 chose the girl sitting in the regular chair, 6 said the girl in the wheelchair, and 7 were unsure.

Another card depicted an elderly man on one side and a young man on the other. When asked, “Who is happier?” 25 chose the young man, and only 15 picked the elderly man.

When I displayed the card showing a boy and a girl and asked, “Who is better behaved?” another stereotype was revealed: 27 children chose the girl. However, when asked “Who is better at sports?” 38 chose the boy. Not one child picked the girl.

On a brighter note, the responses to issues of race were not so clear-cut. For example, I showed my class pictures of a white boy and a black one. Responding to the question, “Who is smarter?” another stereotype was revealed: 16 chose the white boy, 10 selected the black one, and 16 said they didn’t know. When viewing the card with a white businessman and a black businessman, 18 children had difficulty deciding who was richer.

When we bring such attitudes out into the open to be examined and challenged, students realize how unfounded their views are. For example, when discussing the attributes of a good student, my students agreed that good listening skills, the ability to follow directions, and good communication skills are all necessary. When asked if the wheelchair prevented the girl from having these attributes, they realized that their choice was based on learned bias and snap judgments.

Activities like these illustrate the variety of stereotypes that educators must deal with on a daily basis, not just in January. If we are really to pay tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., we must remember his commitment to the belief that all people should be judged fairly at all times.

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thetic all this time and that, actually, you could choose to be another way?"

5. Acting. Then there is action. As you may have noticed, some people can "talk a good game" but not act on their ideas. To help someone develop the ability to integrate choosing and acting, we might say, "You say the building should be open earlier in the morning. Would you be willing to do something to bring about that change?"

Or to a class that just learned about a productive artist: "How many of you have been very productive in some way? Do any of you have habits that limit your productivity? What helps you overcome blocks to productivity? Please make some notes. Then let's share our thoughts and see if we can learn something beneficial."

6. Persisting. A solitary act is one thing. It is quite another to build a pattern of actions around a choice, to commit ourselves to what we care about, so both we and others can count on our sticking with it over a period of time. "You sure enjoyed doing that," we might say. "Do you want to reserve time in your life to do more of that in the future?"

Or following a lesson about someone who demonstrated strong commitment, a teacher might say, "Consider what helps you follow through on your commitments. Are some decisions difficult for you to stick to? Any hints to share about strengthening our resolve and sticking to our choices?"

7. Speaking up. Here, as before, we want to encourage students to use all their capacities, in this case their capacity to stand up and be counted for what they believe in, to speak up and give voice to what is important to them. For example, you might comment to a student, "You say you appreciate the leader. I wonder if you have told him that."

Or after a class discusses a current political event: "We saw an example of someone who spoke up forthrightly. When is it difficult for you to speak up honestly about your beliefs? Do any of you have ideas for doing better, so we can be more honest, stand up more readily for what we believe in?"

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A Call for Value Clarity and High Morality
We do not have to look far to see that many young people have difficulty living a clear, consistent, moral life. The good news is that we have learned something over the years about helping them do better. According to my best reading of the available research, we can expect recommendations like the ones presented here to make a difference.

Young people today certainly need moral leaders. They need us to speak up for the value wisdom of the past, to inspire them to do good and be good, to call them up short when they slip into bad habits, to voice indignation when we see violations of what is right, and to be living examples of what we know is good. They need guidance and support.

We do not serve young people well when we act as if morals are not important. Yet we do not serve them well if we act only as moral leaders. There are too many other leaders and too many confounding inner and outer temptations and pressures. Young people need help in sorting it all out for themselves and choosing what to do. As leaders, we can point the path to the good life. But we cannot walk it for another person. Each must find a way to walk it alone, even when no one is watching. We do well to give young people practice in the skills that will help them find and walk their paths.

The call I make, then, is for both value clarity and high morality. Let’s go for both.

1. The seven skills are discussed more fully and with many examples of how teachers can blend them with classroom lessons in Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon, Values and Teaching (Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill Books, 1987).

Recommended Readings

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