

Walkmen, the string droppers, the spaghetti spillers, the serious students, the soccer stars—and the staff.

For school rituals are not simply kid stuff. Taking part in them can mean just as much to adults. In a school that may well be one of many where faculty attendance at commencement is optional, and no seats are reserved for the faculty, I feel, if not like an ex-servant, perhaps like the equal of a not-much-loved family retainer.

Would I prefer a return to the old

days of my early teaching experience, when the faculty, in academic regalia and rehearsed procession, were required to march to a sun-baked terrace to sweat under black gowns, velvet-lined hoods, and a 90-degree June sun?

You bet I would.

I want to savor both the private reminders and public recognition of my part in this multifaceted educational process, and it seems quite appropriate that I, robed in the colors of my commitment, should be perspiring, and that the students, dressed

in their uniforms of new beginnings, should not be chewing gum.

Strong feelings surface at these ritual ceremonies; with Proustian sharpness, intangibles are poignantly evoked, making me aware of what, both personally and professionally, I am about. I want all such significant, yeast-like occasions to be scored for French horns and tympani.

For how else, after all, do we realize our selves, except in our passionate, celebratory, ritual leaps from personal images that serve as the objective correlatives of faith and love? □

Beyond Self

Moral Education and the Burden of Self-Centeredness

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The sublime achievements of moral goodness are characterized by effortless—because it is of their essence to spring from love.
—Thomas Aquinas

In April 1980 the Klingenstein Fellows, past and present, held a two-day conference on moral education at Teachers College, Columbia University. I looked forward to it: here was a chance for some new thinking to be done on one of the major issues of the day, an opportunity to exchange ideas, pool resources, and come up with some new directions. But we never got to the heart of the matter, or rather, as so often happens at conferences, we only got close to it as time was running out.

The first day we heard about Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories of moral development. Nothing new there, except the shock of recognition—accepted all too readily as inevitable—that schools typically force students back to a “stage 2”

level characterized by dependence on authority and fear of punishment. What a sad commentary; we might have spent the entire conference on its implications.

The second day we discussed applications to reality and ended up focusing on disciplinary dilemmas: nostalgia for the days of clear-cut values when it was possible to take a hard line; concern about problems with drugs, alcohol, and vandalism; despair over the lack of a real sense of community in a school; regret over the lack of time to discuss moral issues with students and over the limits of trust that would keep students from confiding in a teacher; and doubt that courses in moral philosophy would take hold with either faculty members or students.

We recognized that it was important to set a tone, to have a climate at school that encouraged maximum exchange between teachers and students. We also agreed on the importance of maximum clarity about the

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school's philosophy and of having a strong head who embodies humane values, a warm and compassionate faculty, and good counseling services. Much of our discussion, however, was undercut by remarks that the school can do only so much because schools "reflect society," and the society is in a bad way.

A panel made up of two school heads and a head's wife offered their ideas on the responsibility of independent schools to be concerned with moral education. The head's wife talked of the need to have independent schools become "just" institutions by making them less elite.

One of the two school heads spoke of the moral dilemma of facing a discipline problem involving the use of drugs and of dealing with a faculty whose reactions to the incident represented all the possible values in our multivalued society.

The third panelist, from a school whose faculty has defined "goodness" as consisting of honesty, responsibility, tolerance, humanity, and good will, said he thought we center too much of our thinking about morality on disciplinary issues. His main concern was to find a way to relieve students of "the burden of self-centeredness." Love for the self, he said, is the "only sin"; and it is rife in our society.

Now *there* was an idea worth coming for. But the conference *was* over. We had no time to consider *how* we might relieve our students—or perhaps ourselves—of the burden of self-centeredness.

That, it seems to me, is where we should have started: we will never get to a worthwhile view of moral education simply by defining goodness, teaching values, discussing particular moral dilemmas, or promoting techniques of moral reasoning. We have to get to the person, to the moral being, to the individual moral response.

We should not be asking merely what is goodness or even how we can teach it. What we should be asking is what goodness springs from and how we might tap that wellspring. Maxine Greene, professor in the foundations of education at Teachers College, says that moral response begins with the feeling, when one is faced with another's pain or some injustice, that "a spear is going through you." How does one arrive at that

vulnerability and caring—what Paul Tillich has called "ultimate concern"? And what can schools do about it? Before trying to answer that, we need to get some obvious negatives out of the way.

A few years ago I went to a conference called "Schools and Skills for Tomorrow's World." At one point the speaker asked the audience, made up of 50 or 60 independent school teachers and administrators, to suggest what skills they thought schools should be teaching in what he called the "postindustrial age" that lay just ahead. Here are the "skills" the group came up with: psychic skills, how to study, self-worth, trust, self-awareness, how to cope, empathy, how to love and be loved, how to appreciate, communication, problem solving, accepting limitations, curiosity, and perspective.

I was astonished. For one thing, the group had looked to be a rather conservative lot; these were not the Neil Postmans and John Holts of the world. For another, it must have been obvious to everyone in the room that schools are not even attempting to do many of these things now, much less doing them. I couldn't help wondering what the group would have said if the speaker had asked them what schools are teaching now, or even what they ought to be teaching now. Was there safety in discussing the future? The list seemed to signify the sense of urgency we all have about both "affective" and moral education; it's an urgency I sense in the even longer list of nearly identical suggestions my students give me whenever I ask them what they think schools ought to be teaching. How have we missed the boat?

Clearly education has been, and is still, too concerned with what one of my students used to call "the famous five," which she always referred to as "englishfrenchmathsciencehistory—gym." Perhaps enough has been said about the fragmented, uprooted, subject-centered disciplines to leave it at that, except to recall the remark that Alfred North Whitehead once made about these "inert" subjects: "The best you can say is that it is a rapid table of contents which a deity might run over in his mind while he was thinking of creating a world."

We need to redefine constantly the boundaries between subjects as

knowledge changes, but more than that we need to treat subjects as living bodies of knowledge, not inert structures. We need to focus on real questions and real problems, so that subjects may be less abstract, more connected to people's lives.

Surely questions of meaning and moral issues must abound in any subject we teach, but do we reach for them? To focus on the problematic—to make "the struggle to master the cognitive structures continuous with the quest for meaning to which both teachers and learners are condemned," as Maxine Greene once put it—would be the beginning of moral education. That's step one.

Once my students have listed the things they think schools should be teaching, I ask them to tell me what they think schools are teaching now, and they always say three things: obedience, conformity, and how to beat the system. This is the so-called "hidden curriculum," and it is our shame. We've been talking about it for years, but it's still there.

We say we want students to be responsible, but we give them few choices and few opportunities to make mistakes. We say we want them to think for themselves, but we tell them what to do. We say we want them to be complete and confident human beings, but we do little to enlist the whole person. We say we want them to care about one another, but we pit them against one another in a competition for grades. We say we want them to have self-respect, but we doubt their honesty and make them carry passes.

Stanley Milgram, in an article called "The Perils of Obedience," and in his book *Obedience to Authority*, reports on the results of his now famous experiment at Yale in which paid volunteers were asked to give increasingly heavy electric shocks to "learners" who made mistakes. Most of them continued to push the button even when the "learner" was groaning with pain. It was a shocking demonstration of what educational theorist William Pinar has called "the disconfirmation of the self"—dependence on authority, obedience to duty, separation of feelings and moral concerns, seeing oneself and others as objects, lack of trust in one's own power. Many people, including my students, see in this





tendency the effect of years of schooling by the “hidden curriculum.” That has to change. That’s step two.

Once these negatives are out of the way, what more can we do to help people become moral beings? Erich Fromm, in *The Sane Society*, analyzes brilliantly the essential conflict between the human need for transcendence, creativity, and independence, on the one hand, and the need for relatedness, conformity, and rootedness, on the other. He points out in that book, and in *The Art of Loving*, that it is only the person who, through whatever means, has developed a sense of himself as the *agent of his own actions* who can resist the more insidious forms of conformity and alienation brought on by our need for security. Only such an individual is capable of the “care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” that Fromm characterizes as the essential ingredients of a loving relation to the world. What can we do about that?

First, and most obviously, we need to work harder to find ways to give students responsibility for their own choices. They need to feel that they are the “agents” of their own lives, and very often that doesn’t happen now until they are in college, if it happens at all.

Second, we need to include in the educational scheme as much creative activity as we can, so that students may be called upon literally to act as the “agents” of their own actions and thoughts. This can be accomplished in innumerable ways daily—in the nature of assignments we give and in the nature of the thinking we ask students to do, as well as in the art room and in special projects. As one of my students once put it, “A good teacher gives her students themselves, the ability to think and feel and grow and be aware on their own, to love their own mind and where it will take them.”

Third, we need to put people above systems in every sense of those words, so that individuals may really be seen, responses really heard, relationships really registered, and the consequences of individual actions and gestures matter and mean something. The rules and roles we play in schools now often prevent that.

We still need the liberal arts curriculum for all the reasons we have always needed it, but I would like to see more courses offered in philosophy and comparative religion to provide the necessary framework for understanding ethical issues and existential questions. Students are ready for these much earlier than we sometimes think.

Finally, we need to help students to know themselves. “Self-awareness” was a major item on the list at the “tomorrow’s world” conference, and it always appears in several forms on the lists my students make. But what do we mean by “self-awareness”?

As Benjamin DeMott points out in his essay “America the Unimagining,” our concept of personal growth is impoverished: “The nation prates of self-realization, and rests in near obliviousness that my humanness depends upon my capacity and my desire to make real to myself the inward life, the subjective reality, of the lives that are lived beyond me” (p. 93). Only a person aware of his or her own feelings can imagine how another feels.

But just being aware of one’s feelings is not enough. We have to have some sense of connectedness with others, with the world, with the whole. We need to learn, not only to listen to ourselves, but to feel what others are feeling: to be secure enough, grounded enough, in harmony enough with ourselves and the world to experience what Martin Heidegger calls “the releasement toward things.”

That is a big order, but nothing less will do if we want to create moral beings. Morality must come from the inside out, not the other way around. Self-realization should mean the expansion of awareness and consciousness moving outward like rings from a pebble dropped in a pond, not the kind of frantic personality polishing we are engaged in now. If the basis of morality is what we call “empathy,” and I think it is, then the school head who spoke of “the burden of self-centeredness” was right. That is the key. But how do we rid ourselves of it?

One of the difficulties we have in thinking about this question is in part founded on our conception of ourselves as separate, self-enclosed individuals whose minds and feelings



are all interior and whose tenuous relationships are all established by will and effort, fragile constructs that may break apart at any moment. But this is a misconception on several levels. For one thing, as Marshall McLuhan says in *Understanding Media*, like it or not, we are "all interconnected now." Because of our electric technology, our nervous systems are outside us now, with the result that "the immediate prospect for literate, fragmented Western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his total interdependence with the rest of human society" (p. 59).

McLuhan concludes that "the aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy, and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology" (p. 106). His theory is a fascinating confirmation of what appears to have been happening in our society since the 1960's, but perhaps to most it is still just a theory. And certainly we may question whether the "transformation of the self into a complex and depth-structured person" will happen automatically. We still need to ask what we can do, as individuals and as educators, to increase this awareness of our "total interdependence with the rest of human society."

One of the things we need to do is to change our minds about our selves, that is, to recognize that the concept of the self is being redefined at this very moment, and that we need to take that redefinition, that transformation, to heart. The concept of the self has been transformed by phenomenology, by modern physics, by parapsychology and brain research, and by the influx of insights from the great traditions of Eastern philosophy and religion. Their implications are all of staggering importance to education and, specifically, to moral education. When we have fully absorbed the news, I believe we will find, not only a greater sense of community founded on the real interconnections being discovered, but also a capacity for greater creativity and greater empathy founded on the sense of personal fulfillment both require.

Years ago Heidegger talked about our need to redefine our concept of being. He pointed out that we in the West are inclined to identify *being* with *beings* and to think of ourselves as bounded by our skins. The sad dilemmas produced by this subject-object split, since Descartes and going back to the Greeks, have been recounted numerous times, most notably in William Barrett's *Irrational Man*, in which he attributes many of our ills to the neglect of the experiential mode that binds us to the world. To Heidegger, the human being is a "field of being" including our awareness, our sense of relatedness, our far-reaching consciousness.

Another great phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, puts it this way in his essay "What Is Phenomenology?": "In our innermost nucleus our existence is fused with the world" (p. 379). When we talk about getting in touch with ourselves, that is the self we should be talking about, and it is the least selfish part of us. It has nothing to do with ego gratification, or personality, or uniqueness, but with a sense of communion and interrelatedness of the most profound kind.

Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are not easy to read; grounded as they are in Western analytic philosophy, they struggle to express their insights and we struggle to understand them. But we must understand them because their ideas are not academic; they are the living truth about ourselves.

Since Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty wrote, physicists have explored the vibrating energy fields in the atom and have laid the foundation in their study of subatomic particles and electromagnetic fields for an understanding of "parapsychological" phenomena. Heidegger's theory is no longer a metaphor but a reality: each of us is indeed a "field of being." Kirlian photography reveals the changing shape and colors in the "aura" emanating from the human body as moods change and shows the effect of other personalities in the room on the individuals being photographed.

Telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition have all been demonstrated under strictly supervised laboratory conditions by J. B. Rhine and his wife at Duke University. And Itzhak Bentov's *Stalking the Wild Pendulum* presents all the insights we need into



the sudden and startling connections between science and mysticism, with his analysis of the oscillations of subatomic particles and the pulses from electromagnetic fields that connect us and our brain waves to the cosmos.

The implications of all of these things suggest that we are very near the time when science, religion, philosophy, and psychology will no longer be separate and the time when, having understood our own makeup and relation to the universe well enough to change our minds about ourselves, we will be able to live beyond the ego. As Merleau-Ponty put it, "Transcendental subjectivity can be an inter-subjectivity" (p. 364).

When we talk of wanting to relieve our students and ourselves of "the burden of self-centeredness," we often think that the way to do this is to talk about unselfish actions, service to others, self-denial and sacrifice, loving one's neighbor as oneself, obeying a code of moral virtues provided by some tradition or by our own rational analysis of the good life. But I would

suggest that we may be going in the wrong direction.

The path to freedom from the ego lies within, not without. As Fromm points out, the narcissistic personality is not the product of self-love but of self-hate and self-negation; there is an insatiable hollow that the person tries to fill by grasping at the world of objects, relationships, successes, when in fact it can only be filled from the center outward. So in putting aside an outmoded concept of individuality, the nineteenth-century ego-bound model, we must be careful not to throw out the individual consciousness as well. That is the most precious thing we have.

And this is where the great traditions of Eastern thought can help us; Fromm's conclusions in *The Art of Loving* provide the transition to them. When it came time to prescribe for his readers how to practice the art of loving, he made the following suggestions: discipline, concentration, patience, supreme concern, sensitivity to oneself, reason (objectivity), humility, and faith. It is a fine list, surely a prescription for the art of living as much as for the art of loving,

but of course the two are synonymous for Fromm. Love is the spontaneous positive response to our need for relatedness to the world.

Fromm's list of suggestions for the practice of love could easily have been written by a Zen master, a yogi, or a priest. Fromm recommends a quiet period of meditation twice a day, sensing one's breathing and becoming aware of one's self as "the center of one's powers." About concentration he says, "It is to live fully in the present moment, in the here and now, and not to think of the next thing to be done, while I am doing something right now" (p. 96).

What the East can help us with particularly is an understanding of the relative unimportance of the ego, because the East has known for a long time about the difference between the "small I" and the "big I," what Aldous Huxley called "Mind at Large." We have mistaken our true nature by confusing the ego structure—our thoughts, feelings, memories, and personality—with our selves, when it is only a personal construct, "an illusion," the Buddhist would say.

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The coming merger of East and West, already begun, is of the utmost significance in human history. The East has much to teach us, and we have much to teach the East. What it is already teaching some of us is how to get in touch with the deeper layers of our selves, where we connect with all of existence, with the cosmos itself. That seems to be the best means we have for filling the void at the center. It is a means that was not available to, or was rejected by, the existentialists, who simply stared at the darkness in horror. But the void need not be, is not, empty at all.

Meditation can bring us the knowledge we need. Despite all that has been written about meditation, it is still grossly misunderstood. In the West we tend to think of it as a trance state, a total detachment from reality, or a retreat into the self. It is none of these things. On the contrary, to get beyond the ego to a deeper level of conscious awareness, whether through meditation, chance, creative concentration, or some other means, is an enlivening, enlightening, awakening experience that brings extraordinary insights about the self and the world.

As teachers who value the life of the mind, ought we not to pay more attention to how our minds work? Yet we remain relatively unacquainted with the wellsprings of thought itself and thus remain relatively unable to disburden either ourselves or our students of "self-centeredness." Recognizing that I and my ego are not identical is a liberating experience that brings with it a clarity of mind and a sense of composure that are necessary preliminaries to the "art of loving."

The objectivity provided by nonattachment to the ego and the accompanying realization of the interconnectedness of all things provide the very basis we need for a rational spontaneous generosity toward the world. It is only out of a sense of fullness of being that moral response can come. Greater creativity, greater sense of community, greater equanimity, and greater empathy with others will follow.

The transformation of the concept of "self" is a profound change that surely is the destiny of the human race. How quickly schools, or the rest of society for that matter, catch on is another question. It is possible that

we could deny our destiny, but I don't like to think that we would. The change is already well on its way, but we haven't fully acknowledged it yet. The cultural lag is painful.

Surrounded as we are by the disheartening signs of greed, corruption, indifference, and shallowness, it sometimes seems doubtful whether we will make it into the next stage of evolution even without the nuclear threat. But I have faith in the counterculture, even when it is a small minority, and in the power of ideas whose time has come. I am convinced that thinkers like Teilhard de Chardin and Itzhak Bentov have grasped the true significance of the role of human consciousness in the evolutionary process, and I believe we should listen carefully to what they are saying.

Meanwhile, what can we do in schools? We can teach the problematic. We can treat students as people. We can teach them philosophy so that they may understand their own "ultimate concerns." We can teach the "receptive mode" of thought, whether we call it meditation or not. And we can begin to change our minds about our selves, because only if we do can we convey the new knowledge to students. We have to know, finally, that our concept of the competitive, aggressive, atomistic, monad individual is as outmoded as the dinosaur. □

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The transformation of the concept of "self" is a profound change that is surely the destiny of the human race. But how long will we take to catch on?

