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Educating for a Life of Virtue and Purpose: Starting Points

Terrance D. Olson

Sept 19, 2014

Conference on Civic Virtue, Civic Life

Regarding contemporary public educational endeavors to foster moral virtue, my task is to ask two questions: “What now?” and “How is it done?” Including education for moral virtue in a curriculum is basic to nurturing the three “Cs”: character, civility and citizenship. Without these ethical anchors, the fruits of being in a democracy are less likely to be realized. Corruption undermines the rule of law, community cohesion and quality relationships. When the moral fabric of a culture unravels, the quality of a culture deteriorates. Our purpose is to start right by showing how moral virtue is realistic, practical and mutually beneficial for the quality of individual and family lives and necessary for the benefits of freedom in a democracy to be realized.

I ask that we consider how to foster individual responsibility and what constitutes humane treatment of each other. To do this, I must link theory and philosophy with research and practice. I address theory and philosophy because the solutions we adopt in seeking to build a humane, moral and stable society will be dictated by where we think the problems originate. I address research because we need to monitor possibilities of successful intervention. And I address practices because we learn from doing. When we succeed in our educational efforts to foster virtuous living, our understanding of how that

was possible is grounded in what theory or philosophy we use to make sense out of the data we have collected. When we fail, the same process is relevant.

My thesis (revealing a philosophy regarding where to start in educating for moral virtue) is that moral sensibility is central to being human, especially regarding how to treat others. By focusing on a view of what it means to be human, we make it possible and legitimate to address matters of moral virtue in the public domain.

The Relevance and Meaningfulness of Everyday Life

Before elaborating the what now and how is it done questions, please consider this example of the need for, and the possible success or failure of, moral education efforts reported by one of the teachers we had trained in character and citizenship education in Albuquerque New Mexico.

Two weeks in to the delivery of a secondary school character education curriculum, Bertha, the teacher, was ill for a day. The substitute teacher's work with the classes in the morning was uneventful. But the first class after lunch was memorable—for all the wrong reasons. The substitute teacher had a rather bouffant hairstyle, and several of the students who had lunched in the school cafeteria had been given small boxes of raisins, which they had not eaten. Seeing the teacher's hair as an inviting target, a few of them, when the teacher's back was turned as she wrote on the board, began throwing one raisin at a time. The raisin-throwers earned 1 point for any raisin that hit the teacher, and 3 points if it stuck in her hair. The teacher had a bit of a 6th sense that something was going on, but even when she suddenly turned around a few times, she was not quick enough to see what was going on. Stifled student laughter tipped her off further that

something was afoot, but it was not until her habit of running her hand through her hair produced about nine points worth of raisins that she realized the truth. She berated the students and stomped off to the principal's office. He returned with her and scolded the students further. The substitute went home. I do not know what the principal did about the rest of the afternoon classes. The next day Bertha returned to school to find a note stuffed in her box in the faculty lounge. It was from the principal, and began with, "Bertha, yesterday your ETHICS students (he had written the word ethics in all caps and underlined the word) . . ."—his note went on to report the recreant behavior of Bertha's students.

Bertha felt a hot flush of anger and as she crumpled the paper. She began plotting how she would handle the situation with the class. She had already presented the material on what it means to be human and on how to recognize the difference between humane and inhumane behavior. That students—HER students—could have behaved as reported was a slap in the face to her. She could not imagine they had violated their own understanding. She threw the note in the garbage and headed to class. Vengeance would be hers.

As the morning classes unfolded, however, Bertha reflected on whether she would end up doing to the students verbally what they had done to the substitute teacher with raisins. She knew there was a moral difference between self-righteously blaming others and compassionately holding them accountable. After all, that was a way of understanding such situations that the curriculum was cultivating.

So she began to ask herself a different question regarding how to proceed with the post-lunch class. She reported afterwards that she entered the class really not knowing what she would do. She did ask herself the question, “Of all the things I could do when I go in there, what do I believe is right to do?”

As she entered the room, the students fell silent. It was as if they knew this was judgment day. Bertha nodded at the students, but said nothing. Then she asked, “Which one of you is willing to tell me that how you treated the substitute yesterday was the right thing to do?” Silence from the students. “Well, then,” she continued, “who is willing to explain why what you did was wrong?” Finally a student said, almost inaudibly, “Ah, she was boring.” Bertha: “Are you saying that raisin-throwing is O.K. if the teacher is boring?” One of the students responded with a very seductive comment: “You’re not boring.” Bertha did not comment on the manipulative flattery. She continued, “Can anyone give me a reason raisin-throwing is a humane way to treat someone that is not just an excuse for wrong-doing?” Finally one, then another, then a small chorus of students admitted that what had been done was wrong. Bertha: “O.K. then, think on what we have talked about regarding your own moral sensibility regarding how to treat others, and tell me: Given what happened yesterday, what feelings of conscience as to what can or should be done now are you experiencing?” Someone finally said, “We could invite the teacher back and apologize to her.” Some students groaned at that idea—as appropriate as the suggestion was. Several other options to make the wrong right were presented, but finally the class generally agreed that they should write a letter of apology to the teacher. Bertha seized on that option and said, “We have time right now. Let’s take a few minutes.

I ask each of you to write a note of apology, which I will deliver to her.” Most of the students pulled out sheets of paper and began writing. But two students sitting next to each other just sat looking around without paper and without writing. Bertha, not wanting to interrupt the other writing students, simply asked them a question with her eyes. One of the two students blurted out, “Why do we have to write an apology—we didn’t throw nothin’!” Bertha’s response? “And are you telling me that when the raisins were being thrown that doing nothing was the right thing to do?” The two students pulled out sheets of paper and began writing.

This example was just the beginning of Bertha’s success with that class in turning theory into practice and in changing students’ ways of seeing themselves and others. It was opening the door of understanding how matters of character and civility are grounded in moral sensibility and in living true or false to one’s felt moral obligations, especially regarding what it means to treat others humanely.

The Big Picture

So as to the theory and philosophy that guide the curriculum, we propose that a cohesive and stable democracy may only be possible to the degree that individuals and families honor their moral obligations towards each other. To engage one another according to common moral and ethical grounds is basic to the quality of individual lives, harmony in relationships, and cohesiveness in communities. Human enterprises fail when trustworthiness, honesty and integrity are no longer hallmarks of interaction. Moral education, formal and informal—in homes, public schools and corporations—is intended

to reaffirm, maintain, and, where necessary, *restore* the ethical foundations that make cultural life flourish and that foster individual well-being.

Many indicators suggest that moral education too often falls short of achieving its most noble and essential purposes. This is partly to be expected since we can anticipate recurring difficulties and destructive patterns of behavior in any human context that entails human interaction. Of greater concern, however, is the very real potential for failure if the beliefs and behaviors in a community or culture have drifted from ethical foundations, thus weakening the infrastructure that otherwise could and should strengthen moral education. That drift may suggest a cliché, but one that harbors an essential understanding: “With great freedom comes great responsibility.” We may have moved towards attending to the great freedom part while neglecting the great responsibility component. If the drift has been too great, the moral tone and tenor of society may instead operate to sabotage the very purposes for which moral education is undertaken, not the least of which is to foster civility and enhance civic virtue. James Davison Hunter (2000) states the problem succinctly:

As it is currently institutionalized, moral education does just the opposite of what it intends. In its present forms, it **undermines** the capacity to form the convictions upon which character must be based if it is to exist at all. . . . We want character but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral

community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it. (p. xv)

If Hunter is right, any moral education enterprise must begin by working to repair and restore the ethical grounds, both cultural and philosophical, that make any effort at moral education, at any level of culture, realistic and worthwhile. Otherwise, moral education efforts will remain, by and large, impotent.

The example from Bertha and the raisins comes from our work in moral education that began decades ago. We were the beneficiaries of a series of federal grants that allowed us to train selected teachers in 16 school districts spread across four western states. These teachers volunteered to be trained in a character-citizenship curriculum and then to invite their students to consider the meaning of being ethical in everyday life. The first obstacle for us in obtaining permission to operate in school districts in California, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona was the fact that, figuratively speaking, BYU was tattooed on our foreheads. You can imagine the hesitancy of some administrators and teachers to embrace the task of taking concepts to the public domain as sensitive as the meaning of being ethical, moral, and persons of personal virtue, and even more so, to allow us to be the messengers.

My colleague Chris Wallace and I had developed the curriculum before we received the grant, and we anticipated we would not tread on either of two paths others had typically taken. One path we planned to avoid was to begin by identifying some set of universal values that everyone would supposedly agree on. We knew that path could become blocked if even only one teacher or one student would claim that such and such a

value was not what they believed in. After all, a belief that is deemed ethically legitimate just because it is espoused short circuits how beliefs are to qualify as ethical in the first place. It is not that we would avoid talking about specific qualities of virtue, but that student understanding would have to be grounded in their lived experience, and not in as yet un-discussed abstract concepts.

Another path we knew we had to avoid was the one where matters of right and wrong were considered as merely culturally based, and thus could differ not only individually, but also by cultural background. If we were to grant such an assumption, it would be a way of deciding, in advance of discussions about moral virtue, that any espoused personal belief must be considered as morally or ethically legitimate, just because it had become normative behavior in any given society or sub-culture. We wanted to show that the value of any value had to be evaluated by some criteria other than by merely affirming them because they had become cultural norms. Will Rogers once noted that “Common sense ain’t necessarily common practice,” and we feel the same can be said about behaviors and attitudes that have become common practice in a society, but ain’t necessarily ethical, moral or virtuous. Without any way to evaluate a value or belief or commitment, the pursuit of almost any character, citizenship or virtue education, as Hunter has implied, would be a waste of time. That is, without the ability to discuss what makes a value valuable, educational efforts regarding character and citizenship and civility—let alone classic understandings of moral virtue—would be ethically hollow.

I was startled to see this ethical relativism demonstrated in one of the sessions of a conference on moral education. After a day-long seminar delivered by nationally known professionals, the question and answer segment included this question from an audience member: “I do not want to put words in your mouth, but aren’t several of you saying that ‘all moral values are neutral’?” Three of the five panelists agreed with the statement. They had bought the notion that what is moral is determined by the norms of a culture, and thus cannot be considered absolutes. Our invitation is to see such a philosophy, not as moral neutrality, but as moral relativism, where the grounds for determining the moral have been abandoned in favor of what a given culture or individual has decided, without grounds, is defensible moral conduct. With such a starting point, it is not that such education would be ethically neutral. It would install some form of ethical relativism as an alternative to providing a foundation for how individuals are to get along, how communities are to be connected, and how democracies can be cohesive.

Yet as we are often reminded, we live in a pluralistic society where there seems to be no common ground for teaching virtue, citizenship or qualities of character. But perhaps there is a way to move forward effectively in fostering virtue and improving stable and caring societies. If we acknowledge the possibility that no culture is ethically perfect, and almost no culture is ethically bankrupt, there is room for movement toward restoring or enhancing the ethical. If the moral and ethical and virtuous can be defined and distinguished, at least one additional path is open to educators in the goal of building and maintaining a humane, moral and stable society. This path does not begin in concepts, rules, principles or even reason. It begins in our hearts—in who we are. The quaint

phrase, “You can’t give what you ain’t got” is perhaps truest when it refers to who we are when delivering education for character and virtue.

Finding Solutions

Prior to defining virtue or evaluating values is a person’s view, implicit or explicit, of what it means to be human, and of the reality of having a moral sensibility of how to treat each other. When we see ourselves as capable of virtue or vice, of moral character or immoral action, we sense those differences through our lived experience. We may only have an implicit understanding of how we see ourselves and others, but those views are fundamental to how we engage knowledge or develop skills. How we understand knowledge or how we use skills spring from what we call our moral way of being in the world. This way of being precedes how we benefit from knowledge and dictates the purposes to which we apply our skills. Thus, we first focus on how we understand the human condition. Our view of what it means to be human, however informal, informs how we reason and how we feel about ourselves, others, and our situation. It can be said then, that the heart of education for moral virtue begins in the quality of the human condition we bring to our relationships and our circumstances. Specifically, we are saying that the heart of change—towards or away from moral virtue—is a change of heart.

We chose this as a starting point for a third path in moral education, feeling that it would avoid both common prescriptive declarations as well as morally relativistic ones. It meant we made being a person of moral virtue central to the quality of human experience, and a way of being in the world available, somehow, to almost anyone.

We assumed that no matter what the content of any given curriculum, two practical realities operate prior to the ideas and concepts to be shared. First, is the quality of the student-teacher relationship, which we see as the major vehicle of influence or success in programs designed to alter attitudes and behavior. Also, the quality of family and friend relationships the students are connected to will either strengthen or undermine the intended outcomes of the program. These relationship realities are evidences that humans are relational beings, inescapably connected to and developed by, interaction with others. This notion of being relational stands in contrast to a philosophy of individualism, where the freedom of individuals to do as they wish is deemed inviolable. Individualism that stands in contrast or in opposition to being relational unravels the necessary social fabric that makes cohesive communities and individual development possible. Private behavior does have public consequences, and to uncouple the two as if they were not unavoidably linked is to shut down the progress in life for individuals, families and communities.

Psychiatrist Robert Coles, who is famous for just about everything—including being on the scene during six year old Ruby Bridges' integration into a New Orleans public school—illustrates this idea of humans-as-relational beings through an experience he had during his second year of medical school. He and his fellow students felt weighed down by the drudgery and pace of learning expected of them. But they convinced the Dean of the medical school to invite an MD (William Carlos Williams) who also wrote poetry, to speak to the entire medical school. Williams was a general practitioner serving the immigrant poor in northern New Jersey. He thought he had no time to speak to those

at a “big-shot medical school.” But at age 70 and not at full physical strength, he came anyway and among the thoughts he offered the med students was this: “An important part of [y]our lives w[ill] be spent ‘listening to people tell you their stories’; and in return, ‘they will want to hear *your* story of what *their* story means” (p.).

To Coles, this concern for patients was cold water to his thirsty soul, and he sought permission from Williams to go with him some time on his rounds in the tenements. He did so and recorded this gem from Dr. Williams:

I don’t know what I would do without those patients! Everyone thinks doctors are good people because they help other people who are sick. But if you ask me, the people who are sick are helping us all the time—if we’ll let them help us. How many times I’ve gotten up and felt lousy; I’ve felt lousy driving over there, and then I’ll knock on the door, and someone opens it, and it’s a mother or father, and they want me to go right to their kid . . . and you know what, the next thing with me is that I’ve forgotten myself— isn’t that an achievement!—because I’m all tied up with someone else. (Coles, 1989, 104).

Such an attitude reveals much about the character of Williams, but also of Coles, who found the doctor’s openness and humility so meaningful.

The second reality, after the nature of relationships with others, is the quality of each student’s moral way of being, beginning with how they see themselves and others, and how they approach life itself. That is, are students willing to explore possible revisions of their attitudes and decisions that would enhance the quality of the futures

they hope for? This view of the moral, individual and relationship contexts informed how we began the content of our curriculum:

1. The call to citizenship, moral character & personal virtue is an invitation. The response to that invitation springs from a person's living true or false to their moral sensibility of how to treat others.
2. When doing education for character, citizenship or virtue, a person's lived experience must be the first measure of the value of the information—or the ideas remain abstract and unconnected to a person's daily life.
3. Our lived experience is an ideal, realistic, inescapable and fortunate ground for addressing, in the public schools, issues of character, citizenship, civility and virtue.

We measure the moral by experience first. All experience is relevant, whether it is in ways we honor our membership on an athletic team, in our conduct in the school hallways, in our responsiveness to or disdain for those in need, or in our determination to be civil at all times and in all places.

Foundations

Our approach sought to dissolve the false wall of separation in the public culture between the moral grounds for individual character, citizenship and civility and the way we behave in the democratic communities of which we are a part. So how, in practice, were we to implement moral education based on understanding what it means to be human? We embarked on practices that were grounded in where we thought lack of virtue and incivility originated: In the human condition. Our first task was to see if

everyday secondary school students and their committed teachers would resonate with our focus. Here is how we began.

Consider these two questions (which we originally used in training selected teachers in the school districts, and used to introduce secondary students to the curriculum): *Have you ever been in a situation where you felt or sensed something was right to do?* Everyone says yes to that question. But having gotten simple consensus on that idea, we asked for concrete examples. We could not afford to leave the idea of experiencing felt moral obligations to be vague and abstract. Once we had five or six examples from the students themselves, we paused to give time for additional comments and questions.

One student in a class we visited gave this example in response to the question: “My mom is raising me alone, and we have a deal where one night she does the dishes, and the next night I do them. One night when it was her turn to do the dishes, I looked away from the TV to the kitchen and noticed how tired she looked. I had this sense come to me that, her turn or not, I just ought to go in there and do the dishes. Is that what you mean by having a sense of something that is right to do?”

We used the remainder of the class period obtaining additional examples of specific incidents and affirmed that felt moral obligations such as these are common to human experience. The next class period, we asked the second question: *Have you ever been in a situation where you felt or sensed something was right to do, but you simultaneously refused to do it?* Everyone says yes to that question. In fact, although results varied across classrooms and school districts, we were amused that of the

incidents that were given as examples for question 1, about 60% of them turned out to be illustrations also of question 2. In the case of the student who felt a moral sense do the dishes for his mother, reported, in answer to question 2, "I didn't do it." He noted that notwithstanding his feeling to help her, he turned back to the sports report on TV.

After getting additional examples in answer to Question 2, especially from those who hadn't provided examples to Question 1, we were able to explore the following issues:

1. Reflect on when you felt or sensed to act on something you believed was right to do, but you didn't. Can you describe your thoughts and feelings before you refused to do the thing you believed was right to do? The answers were simple ones of having not taken much thought about the matter, but just going and doing.
2. What did you say to yourself after you went against your conscience?

Typical answers systematically illustrated a certain quality of thoughts and emotions that were distinct from, and more extensive than, the comments made when they were being true to conscience. Those refusing to do what they believed reported their emotions were resentful, hostile, and included complaining about others (the non-dish-washing student said that if he disrupted the sequence this once, his mother would think he ought to do it every night, and the process would no longer be fair). Often their resentments or guilt included getting down on themselves. Their thoughts became self-justifying rationalizations of wrong-doing and flat out excuse making that, while they

were still going against conscience, seemed, at the time, like legitimate reasons for not following through.

Student responses made it easy for us to show how, in matters of conscience, we live in one of two possible worlds of experience. When acting according to conscience, both emotions and thoughts seemed to be of the same quality. Emotions typically included compassion, concern for others, willingness to forgive, patience, and so on. The quality of thoughts was reflective, rational, inquisitive, affirmative of others' ideas, and so on. By contrast, people who reported resisting or going against conscience reported emotions of resentment, jealousy, impatience, hostility and bitterness. Resistant thoughts included accusing and blaming, being defensive, offering reasons to justify their behavior and even included thoughts that buttressed their co-existing feelings of superiority while yet insisting they were victims of others or of their own imperfections. It was also clear that the observations about their thoughts and emotions when they were going against conscience were not recognized until after they had given up their resistance. Here is an example from a senior in high school:

I had finally made the football team my senior year after having been cut the previous two years before the season began. But near the end of the last day of practice before the season began, the coach was demeaning of me in a way I felt I simply could not take any more. I resolved to abandon that which I had fought so hard to obtain. I was going to quit the team. My dad heard my decision and said, "If you are quitting because you believe it is right, I will support you. But you worked hard these past years and never gave up. If you are quitting in order to

punish the coach and get revenge, you face a year where you will either not go to the games at all and be miserable, or you will go to the games and be miserable if they succeed without you. You will want them to fail and will feel empty after any game, no matter whether they win or lose.” I didn’t want to admit that my dad had described exactly what I had been unwilling to see. I decided to stick with the team—that was the real right thing to do. (AANCHOR Archives, unpublished).

Sometimes in class discussions students who were carrying attitudes of resentment would deny their feelings had anything to do with going against a moral feeling. They would be insistent that their feelings were justified and that they were not making excuses. We needed to caution our teachers that when students were insistent in this way, we could not afford to diagnose, interpret or label them as resistant to a moral feeling. In spite of those students exhibiting what might be considered classic examples of moral resistance, we as observers often do not know the hearts of those who treat others abrasively or find life to be a burden. We can distinguish between the two worlds of experience as to their relational quality, but it is unwise and inappropriate to use someone’s symptoms as evidence of a moral feeling they have not acknowledged. We can offer the possibility of being resistant to conscience, and yet leave open the door to their ongoing self-examination and considering of possibilities.

Human Nature and Moral Being

The two worlds of experience are of distinctly different qualities, but as C. Terry Warner (2002) has pointed out, the meaning of behavior is deeper than the behavior itself. Besides, if a person’s bitter anger, for example, is really a symptom of their resistance to

a felt moral sense of how to act, then they are blind to the source of their feelings anyway. To them, feelings and attitudes that might look to others like excuses, are genuine, justifiable reasons for their feelings and actions. They are not pretending to be bitter or jealous or resentful—the feelings are real to them. If such feelings were the consequence of moral resistance, only after giving up those feelings would they consider the possibility that their refusal to live true to their own moral sense had anything to do with their attitudes or behavior.

In responding to students who are in the midst of such defensiveness, teachers, by not imposing the idea that all such symptoms are signs of betrayal of conscience, leave the door open to consider other possibilities. Often in such class situations, the teacher would acknowledge that ultimately the individual must figure out for themselves the roots of their thoughts and feelings. More than once, a teacher who faced a student who rejected the idea that their bitterness was linked to moral resistance, came later to the teacher and said, “you know, I see it now, but I wouldn’t see it then.”

To understand this phenomenon more directly, consider a time when you felt defensive or hostile or aggressively angry about someone or some situation. Then at some later point, those feelings dissolved and you felt forgiving or sorrowful over how you had acted. Simon Wiesenthal, the life-long hunter of Nazi war criminals, published a book near the end of his life titled, *Justice, not vengeance*. (1989, Grove Wiedenfeld, New York). It was, in part, a response to critics who suggested that what had happened was a long time ago and why did finding the perpetrators still matter? Whatever malice Wiesenthal might have harbored across perhaps years, had disappeared as he continued

the search for justice. And it was the search for justice Wiesenthal believed the holocaust victims and their descendants deserved.

If our negative feelings towards ourselves and others really are an expression of resisting our own sense of being virtuous, then they really are the price we pay for going against conscience. One of the key concepts in our curriculum, especially relevant when we are talking about how to be free of moral or ethical resistance, is the definition of self-deception offered by C. Terry Warner (2002) , with whom we had had a decades long association, and whose philosophical work informed our curriculum He describes an alternative way of how to see the truth about ourselves, which our betrayal of our own ethical sense blinds us to, and offers hope that our most troubled feelings, attitudes and thoughts can be given up. Unpacking that idea for secondary students is simple, but not necessarily easy, and is a bigger task than this chapter can undertake. It is, however a way of understanding human experience that offers genuine hope for change, rather than settling for just being able to cope with the injustices, discrimination, disappointments and tragedies of mortal life.

But regarding when we experience strong emotions and thoughts, consider that they can be of two different qualities. There really is something akin to “righteous indignation”—although I am not convinced someone experiencing it has ever labeled it so. Such emotion attends those who seek justice, or who engage in preserving those who have been mistreated and abused. But there is also a self-betraying bitter anger, often felt helplessly, that is more likely to be a symptom of moral resistance, where we become like the people we resent by resenting them. The two types of anger do not inhabit the

same world of experience at the same time. But our point today, and important for any moral education curriculum, is to note that to build cohesive communities and foster democracy requires us to be compassionate, willing to search for solutions to problems and even to mourn for those who are demeaned, rejected or dismissed as to their value. The alternative to that way of approaching societal ills and injustices is to be bitter, to answer injustice with injustice with an insistence that we are either justified or excused in such behavior. That second approach will undermine the very principles and practices we claim to be defending.

Responses, Responsiveness and Resistance

Is virtuous behavior, where people live true to their moral sense realistic or possible? Surely we have all experienced extensive periods on our lives when, precisely because we have been true to our moral sense of how to treat others, that we have not succumbed to betraying conscience. My oldest son, eventually an all-state high school soccer player, while in elementary school, came upon a group of boys ridiculing a new boy in the school that my son had already befriended. The boy had some leg deformity that required him to limp, and that defect was the substance of the ridicule being thrown at him. Most of those doing the bullying happened to be members of my son's soccer team. Without hesitation, my son went up to the boy being targeted, put his arm around him and said, "Hi, Charles"—how are you doing? Hey guys, have you met my friend Charles?" That ended the confrontation. My son could have behaved differently. If he had, it would have been evidence of his moral resistance. Resistant options would have

included joining in the ridicule, or resentfully and condescendingly chewing out the members of his soccer team.

We were often reminded that it is very seductive to see the past as something that is constantly (and perhaps even inevitably) acting upon us so that in the present moment we really cannot see moral meaning or act according to conscience. It is possible to see that our moral way of being in the present moment defines how we see the past. This alternative way of seeing and being opens possibilities for change that may not seem likely, but are possibilities nonetheless. A teacher reminded us of how the quality of the past need not dictate the quality of the future, or the compassionate sensibility of someone in less-than-ideal circumstances:

I had assigned students to go home and find out from their parents (or the person(s) responsible for raising them) what the circumstances of their own birth had been. They were to report the next class period—not anything that was private or inappropriate to disclose—regarding what they learned about their own beginning and what the family situation was. One girl in the class, Jenny, was really silent as she left, and it dawned on me that I may have set in motion a bad situation for her. The common gossip in the teacher's lounge was that this girl's mother was a prostitute. I wondered what the girl's home life was and began worrying about whether the assignment would be an invitation for the girl to stir up a past full of sensitivities best left alone. The next day the discussion went quite well, and we were able to make several points on how we can use the past to chart a course for the future. But I was not enjoying the dialogue as much as the

students seemed to be, because the girl I had worried about was silent as always, but to me, in my nervousness, silent in a more intense way. The bell rang, and as the students filed out, I saw that Jenny was lingering. Once the room was empty, she came up to me and said, “Mrs. Johnson, thanks for giving me that assignment. My mom has been sick lately, and my older brothers have hit the road and don’t come home no more. My mom’s boyfriends don’t come ’round no more and my brothers tell me to get out of there. But you know what, I won’t leave, because my mother needs me. I also found out, through your assignment, that I have an older sister that I never knew I had. Mom and I talked about it. She doesn’t want the life for me that she has had, and neither do I, but I am going to help take care of her and still do the best I can in school.

Another example of a person retaining, in the present moment, a way of being that does not make them a victim of the past, is the well-chronicled story of Ruby Bridges, who was escorted daily by highway patrol troopers to her New Orleans school past screaming mobs, was asked one night by Robert Coles what she thought of the threats and obscenities being thrown at her. Her response was, “Oh Mr. Coles, they got it bad. I’ve got to pray for their souls.” Coles later said that he just knew that Ruby was in denial and that the day would come when the effects of this trauma would surface and Ruby would have some kind of breakdown. He kept track of her for decades and once declared to me in a phone conversation that he was now convinced that she would never have a breakdown—that she was of the same spirit as an adult as she had been as a six year old walking past the mob.

In example after example, we saw the possibility that it is not the circumstances we pass through that necessarily dictate what or who we become, but who we are when we pass through those circumstances. Of course, we also saw examples where individuals were convinced that they had no say, no role in creating what their tomorrows might bring, and were insistent that their lot in life could not and never would change. Admittedly, we sought to pull the rug out from under that point of view. Our purpose was not to replace it with an unrealistic view that life is always easy or automatically wonderful. Rather, we demonstrated that once we insist that we cannot do anything in a given situation, the idea of hope is a naïve concept from a world of fantasy. That view is frequently embedded in our being false to conscience. We may find ourselves in disheartening circumstances because we don't know what we need to know or because we do not have the skills that would help, but if we retain our willingness to give our best to what we believe is right, we will still have a starting point in an honest search for solutions to the problems at hand. It is this phenomenon that allows us to propose that our willingness to act in accordance with conscience is more fundamental than our knowledge or skill, and that expresses moral courage.

Moral Dilemmas

Although moral dilemmas that call forth being morally courageous are not foreign to human experience, using artificial dilemmas that create ethical “traps”—perhaps insolvable ones at that—may not nudge students forward in moral understanding or moral action as much as has been thought. If, in education for moral virtue, we offer contrived moral dilemmas and simultaneously restrict the boundaries for moral solutions, we run

the risk of squashing a student's confidence in their moral intuitions and suggesting that there are just no answers to some dilemmas.

It may be that some dilemmas in real life will not be solved, but that fact is not just because there are times when the situation itself makes a solution impossible. More frequently, it is due to the moral agents in a situation being untrue to conscience, and thus creating the moral dilemmas they are supposedly, but self-deceivingly, trying to solve. If dilemmas are to be used as a teaching tool at all, those from someone's lived experience are better springboards for ethical discussion and debate than are contrived dilemmas that are also linked to rules of engagement that restrict the full range of options that a person being virtuous might propose.

We do not have hard data on how often moral dilemmas are still used in the public schools for the hoped-for purpose of enhancing moral reasoning, but if they are to be used at all, the starting point for solutions might include honoring the notion that students, in their humanity, bring a moral sensibility to dilemmas that are fundamental to the solutions they may propose. We were the guest speakers in one classroom and had answered a question about moral dilemmas. We used the now classic (or perhaps clichéd) case of the people in the sunken ship's lifeboat dilemma to show why we felt the use of such dilemmas was problematic. The assignment given is to decide which three of the eight people in the boat should be thrown out so the other five may live. Students must give their reasons for throwing out the aging golf pro with tuberculosis, instead of the left-handed rock star, etc. We pointed out that such dilemmas, if used at all, should allow a completely open range of solutions. Those can then be examined and discussed as

to their moral validity. We also noted that while the future in such a situation looks grim, most people do not have a crystal ball handy to know absolutely what tomorrow may bring. Resorting to people-throwing implies we unfailingly know the future.

After class ended, a high school sophomore came up to us and said that she had been given that assignment in a class the previous semester, and had told the teacher that she felt it right not to throw anyone out of the boat. The teacher explained it was part of the exercise and she would have to do it and give her reasons. She complied, but after writing whatever she figured out to write to justify throwing people into the ocean, she wrote something close to, "If I were really in this situation, I would not throw anyone out of the boat. To me, the moral question here is not whether I live or whether I die, but how I live and how I die." Such wisdom from this student was at least as valid a moral reason as all the other reasons offered to justify the taking of innocent lives.

A common consequence of curricula designed as an invitation to be true to conscience was that students generally saw the meaningfulness of the starting point in contexts unique to them. Their own experience became the measure of understanding how to solve problems, meet challenges, or even meet discrimination and disadvantage. Any case or example where moral solutions are to be contrasted with the virtuous alternatives can hardly be helpful if virtuous alternatives such as refusing to throw people in the ocean are ruled out in advance. And if students deceive themselves about what options a person being morally virtuous in any situation could consider, their solutions will be self-deceived as well. Any curriculum is only as good as the moral responsiveness it invites and allows in students.

Possibilities

Each student sees the meaning of the curriculum in their own story and either relates it to how to be true to conscience, or finds a new level of avoiding how they could do more to foster a quality future, no matter what their past disadvantages might have been or are in the present moment. The curriculum is just an invitation and a starting point. The moral warmth and virtue of teachers and coaches and friends either fans that flame of future possibilities or, however unintentionally, starve students of their hopes and dreams. Any curriculum for moral virtue can align common sense with common practice if the educators themselves are true to conscience in the ways they are inviting the students to see and be.

One example of how our curriculum came to focus on the future was an assignment that invited students to align their present behavior with their hopes and dreams. In line with having their own experience be the first measure of what is realistic, we had teachers conduct what we came to call the “Trilogy assignment” simply because it consisted in three assignments across three class periods and included assigned interaction with available parents.

1. What if you were born tomorrow? What would you want the circumstances to be? Students were asked to write answers down and they were discussed in class. Aside from about 15% of the answers being joking or mischievous (I would want a split-level swimming pool, rich parents, super-powers), students generally focused on the compassionate-relational dimension in the family. They wanted nurturing, caring, protective parents, and a stable home

environment. We then asked them to go home and find out the circumstances of their own birth (as in the example from Jenny described earlier).

2. If you were to become a mother or a father tomorrow, what would you want the circumstances to be? At this point students became very practical—in a temporal sense. They wanted housing, food, clothing, financial means, and a spouse they could trust. We didn't realize it at the time, but the way we asked the questions may have skewed the answers a bit. That is, the first question almost invited a self-centered, all-about-me approach. This second question is inherently relational, and students generally rose to the occasion of pondering what it would mean to have the well-being of an infant as their responsibility.
3. How will you have to live—what decisions do you need to make—between now and when you really do become a mother or father, in order to help make possible the things you indicated you needed in question 2? Students began to plot educational and financial goals, and even how they would want not to have to face parenthood alone.

Takeaways

Besides avoiding the traps of prescribing behavior or deferring to moral relativism, what are the advantages of using a focus on the human condition as the springboard for education in moral virtue? Given that character and citizenship are foundations for the success of democracies, how can a mere curriculum make a difference? Alone, it cannot. While cultural norms are not always in support of the foundations of moral virtue, culture does matter in fostering or encouraging practices. U.S. culture prohibits some destructive

behaviors, some through enforcement of law, but mostly through encouraging behavior and attitudes that constitute being obedient to conscience and to the unenforceable. Cultures also permit some behavior that is deemed less than ideal (and thus to be tolerated), but the human cost of that permissiveness is no less real. Finally, cultures promote some behaviors that are deemed to be for the good society at large. Character and citizenship education can pre-empt or exist parallel to the criteria that define categories of prohibition, permission and promotion of behavior. Seeing humans as relational, and capable of acting in each others' best interests, rather than trying to find compromises that seek to align or harmonize each individual's distinct self-interests, does not take into account whether a self-interest is beneficial or destructive to one's self or to others. It helps, for example, if the schools in which character and citizenship education are offered, make citizenship a pre-requisite to representing the school to the public. Whether it be on the debate team, in the choir or on the football team, citizenship and civility are hallmarks of living a quality life and of building community. The boundaries between prohibiting, permitting and promoting may slide along a continuum, but the first question for school personnel is to ask, "when we examine what we believe is right about how to treat others, how do we conduct ourselves in and out of the classroom, in the hallways, on the streets, on the athletic fields, in our homes and on the job?" An individual's willingness to consider such issues is the pre-requisite to solving relational problems that are produced by betrayal of moral virtues we already accept in our hearts. Unwillingness to address matters of conscience and of the moral virtue of how we treat

others creates a dead end for efforts to enhance the freedoms and responsibilities democratic societies are uniquely organized to make possible.

So what are we to make of a foundation for moral education that begins by addressing what it means to be human—and then establishes, through students' and teachers' own lived experience, that we all have experienced times when we have felt a moral sensibility to take a certain action, and have either lived true or false to that sense? How do these kinds of moral education efforts operate and what is teachers' experience with it?

Our research results varied slightly by state, but overall students with this curriculum, in contrast to the control groups, reported more feelings of loyalty to family, and more conservative attitudes regarding early sexual involvement, and more discussions with parents about values and beliefs. Teachers understood that the relevant foundations of the curriculum delivery included the following:

1. The human condition is related to the successes and failures of almost any attempt to educate for virtue and purpose. Democracies flourish when individuals live lives of moral virtue.
2. An approach to virtue and how to act in each other's best interests can be the foundation of any approach to citizenship and moral education.
3. Moral relativism can be replaced with practical moral foundations regarding humans having a moral sensibility to which they can be true or false. This can be done without dictating or prescribing behavior.

4. Replacing individualism (pitting the Self against the Group) with being relational shows how moral virtue regarding how we treat others includes the benefits of honoring both obligations and commitments. This includes showing how others matter and how our treatment of them is an inescapable feature of living lives of high quality—and that especially are made possible in a free democracy. These qualities are at risk if we go against conscience both in public and in so-called private life.
5. The best laboratory for learning about human experience is everyday life. Situations both simple and extreme can be met more effectively when practical moral foundations and moral commitments regarding how to treat others are honored.
6. No curriculum or idea offers a guarantee that student attitudes and behavior will change or be permanent. This is because individuals retain their ability to live true or false to conscience in any given moment. Yet, there is a starting point that can invite youth to make choices that enhance the understanding of virtue and purposes in life, and identify the possibilities of how they can help create for themselves a quality future.
7. How we see ourselves and others is a function of whether we are living lives of moral virtue—as teachers or students. It is a sign of how we are or are not strengthening the cohesiveness of democratic societies. Teachers are not only not exempt from being examples of what they teach, but will undermine their

best efforts to foster virtuous living if they are not on the path of being true to conscience.

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