

For The Record: Moral Education And Dissenting Youth

MAXINE GREENE

We have been in many cities this past half year, in this country and abroad; and wherever we have been, we have heard talk of powerlessness and witnessed the collapse of norms. We have smelled the smoke of lassitude, watched young people wandering from place to place in their strange, world-wide community. We have seen draft cards torn and fluttering to the street, spurts of violence, graffiti equating "Che," "VC," and "Love." We have heard the rock bands and the slogans and the obscenities. We have been silenced by cocksureness, fervor, and often by contempt. And still we know that something is a'borning in the younger generation, that moral searching is taking place, that educators have to learn somehow to help.

Two quotations, apparently disparate, come stubbornly to mind. One is from Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*:

In time, almost all men and women will become worthless as producers of goods, food, services, and more machines, as sources of practical ideas in the areas of economics, engineering, and probably medicine, too. So—if we can't find reasons and methods for treasuring human beings because they are human beings, then we might as well, as has too often been suggested, rub them out.¹

The other is from *Introduction to Moral Education*, by John Wilson and others:

One way of expressing our general thesis is to say that we do not have absolute moral rights over children (including the right to make them accept our moral values), but only a mandate over them. We protect and educate them so that they may grow up into free adults.²

We are concerned, at this moment, with moral education—which means, for us, an effort to encourage students to be rational and to create their own values; and we do not think this can be carried on until we learn

once more to treasure human beings "because they are human beings."

It seems to us that one of the several causes of youthful unrest is the sense that the technological society has made the individual "obsolete."³ The feeling of powerlessness is one side of the coin; the feeling of insignificance and purposelessness is the other. Young people talk of being manipulated, of being prepared merely to fill "slots." Perceiving contemporary society as alienating, depersonalizing, they seek their own "life styles" and their own community. It is not a question of creating a new social order; it is a question of being, looking like the kind of person who belongs with others who appear to be the same. Convinced (by the war, the draft, the techniques of societal selection, racism, and inequities) that the establishment places no value on the person qua person, they no longer feel responsible for "making something of themselves." Self-abandonment becomes the solution, merging with others, entering in a spiritual communion in which they can touch their fellow-communicants, tune in, and simply feel. The style they have adopted seems deliberately intended to exclude the adult, the "straight" one, or the "square." An in-group has taken shape with its own ethnocentricity; it is apparently so large, so widespread that it is treated as a culture, with its own mores, its own laws. Rejected by the members of that culture, teachers—like other adults—have imposed a kind of invisibility on the persons who belong to it. "Youth" is used derogatively, as "teen-ager" used to be. Teachers find it difficult to attribute worth and dignity to individual young people who have (or seem to have) contempt for their opinions. Nevertheless, they recognize, on some level, that the person who is granted no respect as a potentially rational, autonomous human being is not likely to become a moral human being. To be moral is to be aware of one's feelings and desires, to be capable of weighing situations, to be conscious of

competing rules and principles, to make rational choices in accord with what one is.

We believe that our rebellious young people are innocent where morality is concerned. Suffering the contemporary tension between anarchy and "law and order," they have fled what they think of as conditioning and settled for a new conformity. There is evidence, we think, of a kind of moral vacuum where they are concerned; there is a need for learning how to choose. Experimenting, groping, the young have not found the fulfillments they are looking for; and the doubts, the frustrations are becoming clear. Many of them, perhaps most of them, may be explained by the political and social situation we have created in America—by the continuation of an irrational war, the perpetuation of inequities, the pollution, the brutalities, the bland efficiency of planning, the evasion and neglect. We are not among those who prefer to rely on psychological explanations only. Granting the permissivism of the young rebels' bringing up, granting their affluence and self-indulgence, we think it absolutely necessary to keep remembering that there are good and sufficient reasons for their discontent. Authority is used illegitimately in this country; our priority systems do put space travel first and the relief of poverty last; people are too often treated like objects, like cogs in a technologically perfect wheel; there is repression of dissent, and policemen's clubs draw blood. But teachers (who ought to be fully conscious of all this) cannot simply attribute what is wrong to "society" and refuse the responsibility for enabling young people to cope.

They need help in learning how to choose; they need help in learning how to secure what they want—how, in fact, to know what they want. (" 'Me, for instance,' said a handsome, red-haired youth from upstate New York. 'But I'd say that people are not political, just very angry, and waiting for something to happen—something apocalyptic.' "4) We can acknowledge the idealism and vitality in many, even as we recognize that their use of brutality (as at Harvard, for instance) is a sign of trouble. We can acknowledge the sweetness and tranquillity in others, even as we see that the dependence upon "pot" for serenity (as at

the Bethel Music Festival) is a sign of insufficiency.

Consider the films the young rebels consider their films and line up to see: *Easy Rider*, for example, and *Alice's Restaurant*. *Easy Rider*, with its evocations of the frontier, of the American quest, may be the new generation's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Wyatt and Billy are lighting out for "the territory ahead"—in their case, New Orleans at Mardi Gras. The towns they go through on their motor cycles are as haunted and evil and narrow-minded as the towns on Huck Finn's river banks. They are frequently on drugs; and Wyatt, who sees so much because of the drugs, becomes progressively more abstracted and melancholy as they move. After their climactic "bad trip" in the New Orleans graveyard, they take to the road again. "We blew it," Wyatt says, just before they are casually shot down; but Billy does not seem to understand. Young people acclaim the film; and, it appears to us, they do understand. The America portrayed is corrupted, prejudiced, "hung up"; but the rebels, the free wanderers are doomed—perhaps because they have no commitment, because they really have no place to go.

Alice's Restaurant, for all its warmth, humor, and the recurring sound of "Amazing Grace," is equally sad. It is true that Arlo Guthrie, with his tie to his dying father, his musicianship, his clarity about what he does not want, survives intact; but the couple with their hippie "family" in the deconsecrated church do not. The enveloping, abstract love they offer to the "aging children" who huddle and smoke on the floor is ineffectual in the face of addiction, anxiety, dread. It is irrelevant to authentic need; it does not sustain relationship nor enable people to live more meaningfully; and the hippie wanderers, at length, are homeless, shrill, and lost. This film, too, is recognized by the young who flock to see it; it, too, may in some measure reveal.

These films were made, of course, by professional movie-makers; and we are not using them as proof of a rebellion's failure. They are suggestive, however; and they may remind us that, for all the young's assertive-ness and assurance, the rebels

have probably not discovered the heavenly city or even the good life. As teachers, we can sit back and condemn the times or the human condition or the ineptness and stupidity of the young generation.

Alternatively, we can attempt to do what we are paid to do: we can work to help our students think about who they are, about the reasons for what they are doing, about the choices they want to make.

This is, unquestionably, complex and difficult. Moral education is not so hard to accomplish when authorities are respected, when teachers are entitled to impose their own values on the young. This is no longer the case, as most educators know. We are not justified in conditioning, indoctrinating, molding—certainly not if we are committed, in other areas, to the promotion of cognitive growth. Courage is needed to confront the fact that we do not know what is right for the individuals in our classrooms, although—secretly—we may be sure we do. Courage is needed to confront the possibility that successful moral education may result, in individual cases, in intensified rebellion, in the choice of ends which teachers cannot approve. The first step, then, for the teacher is to define his own commitment. Is he serious about his devotion to the rearing of free, highly conscious persons? Does he really mean it when he talks of valuing autonomy and the ability to think? Can he present and defend his own preferences without making absolute claims? At a time when fundamental commitments are being challenged by the young—noisily, arbitrarily, sometimes viciously—this is not easy for any teacher, especially the one who delights in form and the life of the mind. But if he is concerned about his students, if he can somehow learn to cherish them even in their defiance, he may be able to help them act upon the freedom they claim; he may be able to enlarge their opportunities for choosing what is worthwhile.

Where moral decision is concerned, the individual must take responsibility. If the teacher attempts to impose his own preferences, to tell his student what to choose, he is preventing the young person from developing as a moral being. Principles, of course, should be discussed and criticized; rules should be made clear.

But the student must be given the opportunity to decide whether or not he can appropriate a given moral principle, whether it makes sense to him to act according to particular norms or rules.

There are principles of loyalty and fairness, for example, which are relevant to the communities young people have begun to share. Most often, they are inarticulate, if they are considered at all. The individual may have a feeling about the kind of comradeship he desires. He may vaguely expect his companions to play fair with him, to stand with him if he is busted for smoking "pot," to resist non-violently along with him if a decision has been made to do so during a sit-in. He may, just as vaguely, expect a girl to share his ideas of sexual freedom, to defy what he calls "hypocrisy" or "prudery," to value candor and spontaneity, to reject social "games." We are suggesting that there are ways of being moral in the domain—and ways of being immoral. To make a moral choice of non-violent resistance, for instance, is to choose such action seriously, freely, with an awareness of alternatives and consequences, with sensitivity to as many aspects of the impinging situation as possible. To make an immoral choice of non-violent resistance is to follow others without thinking about it, to take the stance because there are no alternatives,—or simply not to care one way or another. We are suggesting, in fact, that indifference or abstraction is the opposite of being moral. To teach people to be moral is, in many respects, to teach them to be aware, to teach them to care about what they are doing, and to teach them to know why.

Sartre has said that man has two alternatives: to acquiesce and to rebel. Strangely enough, the dissident student who simply goes along with the current "life style" of the rebellious is acquiescent, not rebellious. To rebel, he must be awake and fully conscious. He must be able to think what he is doing and, as a free, autonomous person, to take responsibility for his actions. When he says something "ought" or "ought not" to be, he ought to be encouraged to give a reason, hopefully a good reason, a reason that makes logical sense.

It is not the obligation of the teacher to propose authoritative guidelines for objectively existent rules. It is his obligation to talk of the nature of principle and the range of existing principles, as it is to help his students clarify their feelings and desires and to learn how to achieve what they want. Of course he will want them to want "better" things; he will strive to move them to enlarge the range of their desires, so that they include more than protest and communion, more than "turning on." His first job, nevertheless, is to try to stir them to somewhat more rationality, somewhat more consciousness and care. If he does this, he is at least beginning their moral education. The rest—in truth—must be left to them.

Quite naturally there are no guarantees; but there is a terrible necessity confronting us, visible wherever we move. A hard-won human order is being challenged on all sides: hijackers, kidnappers, terrorists are eroding the role of law. At once, what we perceive as "order" is being calcified in many ways, used illegitimately and repressively, made resistant to criticism and

reform. There are no simple "goods" and "bads" any longer; there are ambiguities and puzzlements throughout the world. Biafra, Ulster, Prague, the Suez Peninsula—nowhere are norms clearly defined. Looked at in one dimension, the modern world is "wasteland"; looked at in another dimension, it is all possibility.

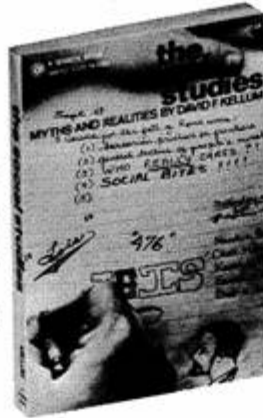
Surely teachers have to work with possibility, where young people are concerned. Bob Dylan, one of their folk heroes, has written:

i know no answers an no truth
for absolutely no soul alive
i will listen to no one
who tells me morals
there are no morals
an i dream alot.5

We cannot tell anyone "morals"; we can only liberate our young, to the degree we can, to be moral and to learn how to realize their dream.

MG

**"Recommended
and worthy
of attention"**
— *Library Journal*



THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Myths and Realities


by David F. Kellum

*Professor of Secondary Education,
University of Alberta*

Thoroughly familiar with U.S. school systems, Dr. Kellum presents a fighting book about the right and wrong ways of teaching history and the social sciences and, consequently, about how to prepare teachers.

"One of the most significant books on teaching the social studies to appear in a long time. . . . It is tightly packed with fresh and discerning suggestions for actual classroom teaching."—ALICE L. FOLEY, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Rochester, N.Y.

"A teacher cannot read this book without asking himself uncomfortable questions."—MAURICE F. REIDY, S.J., Holy Cross College

 A SEARCH Paperback, \$2.45
Library Edition, \$5.00
At your bookstore

Published by **SHEED & WARD**
64 University Place, N.Y., N.Y. 10003

**from
JOHN HOLT**

3 In Paperback. . .

1. How Children Learn

" . . . a real goldmine of sensible comment about school children and the ways they learn." — Louise Bates Ames, *Gesell Institute of Child Development*

189 pages \$2.25 (Clothbound \$4.95)

2. How Children Fail

" . . . in the genre and the tradition of Rousseau's *Emile*, Pestalozzi's *Evening Hour of a Hermit*, Dewey's *My Pedagogic Creed*, and Neil's *Summerhill*. . . "

— *Harvard Educational Review*

201 pages \$4.50

NEW. . .

3. The Underachieving School

"This book may stir up almost as much debate as John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Along with that masterpiece, it should be required reading in all educational theory classes." — *Christian Science Monitor*

209 pages \$4.95

 **PITMAN PUBLISHING
CORPORATION**
6 EAST 43 STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017

2 John Wilson, Norman Williams, Barry Sugarman. *An Introduction to Moral Education*. Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, Inc., 1967, p. 168.

3 See, e.g., Bruno Bettelheim, "Obsolete Youth," *Encounter*, September 1969.

4 "American Youth on Tour," *The New York Times*, September 5, 1969, p. 39.

5 Ralph J. Gleason, "The Children's Crusade," *Ramparts*, March 1966.