

The Value of Values and Justice

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The timeliness of this conference, Educating for Justice, cannot be overstated. In the shadows of September 11, 2001 and with the drums of war beating ever more loudly and dissonantly, justice and values are at the center of discourse in Washington and around the world. What ought we to do as educators to increase students' understanding of the importance of values-based decision-making and right action? There is evidence of significant public debate both inside and outside of higher education about right action and whose values determine the criteria. Last week, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, reported that on college campuses around the country, presidents, faculty and students debated the morality of pre-emptive strikes as they reflected on the responsibility of educators in a time of war. At the January 18th peace rally in Washington, DC and elsewhere, there was also evidence of conflicting values and concepts of justice. Both anti-war protesters and supporters of an invasion of Iraq marched exercising their right to disagree.

Strong passions are generated by issues that touch on people's deeply held beliefs and values. Recently, President Bush declared that "we are a nation of values." No doubt he is right. We are indeed a nation of values—of many different values informed by a wide range of religious, personal and political convictions. As we witness the gradual erosion of our civil rights in this current climate of fear, it is vital that we keep in focus the pluralism that defines the very nature of our country. People of all races, ages, cultures, genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious traditions, economic status and political persuasions with myriad beliefs and opinions live side by side—though not always in harmony. When the President speaks of family values, patriotism, pre-emptive strikes, the environment, capital punishment, gun control, women's health, equal access to education, stem-cell research and social justice, he speaks for those who share his values. However, he does not speak for all Americans.

Others, whether they are liberals, peace marchers, environmentalists, women's rights advocates or supporters of affirmative action, believe just as fervently and with the same degree of certitude that their opposing views on the same issues are true and right. Even within the oppositional groups, there is a wide range of opinions and attitudes on specific issues. The privilege of holding diverse points of view differentiates this country from dictatorships. A reminder that dissent is a value that sustains democracy—as well as a signifier of patriotism—was in evidence in the two-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on January 27th where hundreds of opponents of unilateral pre-emptive strikes proclaimed: "Not in our name!"

These recent public manifestations of conflicting values suggest that the time is right for those of us in higher education to educate for justice and to develop just members of society as students confront the moral dilemmas in a time of war. As tempting as it is to say yes to such a well-intentioned proposition, I am compelled to say no. To my mind, it is not the responsibility of higher education to educate for justice and to teach values. Values and justice are very vexed issues perched precariously on a slippery intellectual and emotional slope. We have all witnessed situations where reasonable, well-meaning and earnest people take radically opposing views on issues such as abortion, capital punishment, gun control, affirmative action, gay/lesbian rights and environmental protection all in the name of values and justice—all believing that if not God than at least good is on their side.

Furthermore, the United States takes great pride in its democratic values, its power and extraordinary wealth, yet social injustice continues to plague our communities where poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, hunger, lack of adequate healthcare and quality education prevail. All too often, resources are allocated to sustain the privilege and power of the few rather than attend to the promise of equal access life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all Americans. As Kevin Phillips suggests in his book *Wealth and Democracy*, plutocracy is rapidly gaining a foothold as our national values and priorities shift from creating greater opportunities for working people to sustaining the extravagant (some would argue obscene) privileges for captains of industry who have seemingly unfettered access to the global corridors of power, not to mention the White House and the Congress. Were we in higher education to take on the responsibility for teaching values and educating for justice, whose values and whose notion of justice would we teach?

If our national values agenda is not complex enough, the exploration of values and justice from a global perspective is considerably more challenging. Informed by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, for example, Osama Bin Laden orchestrated a terrorist attack on the United States in the name of justice. Upholding family values, an Islamic court in Nigeria ruled that a young woman accused of adultery should be stoned to death as a deterrent for other women. Deeply held values and an uncompromising sense of justice define the terms of the Israeli Palestinian war. Similarly, the belief in absolutes define the conflicts in Northern Ireland, Serbia, Bosnia and Sri Lanka, to name but a few countries where violence and terror masquerade as religious values. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry reminds us that the dead on the battlefield are either enemy combatants or heroes, depending on one's point of view. One side's martyrs are the other side's terrorists. The seemingly unanswerable questions remain: whose values, whose justice? How do we arrive at the good? How can we argue compellingly that peace is better than war, that human life has value, that mutual respect and understanding are better than hatred? How do we create a convincing case supported by evidence, a case that can change minds and hearts, that some values have more value than others, that some notions of justice are more just than others?

Our role as educators is not to teach values and educate for justice, per se, but to teach critical thinking as we introduce students to history, philosophy, world religions, art, literatures, the sciences and other disciplines. It is incumbent on us to offer students the kind of education that best prepares them to lead wisely for a world lived in common. A quality education invites students to explore their relationship to the past and imagine their responsibility for the future. Students need the opportunity to develop a critical civic intelligence, the powers of discernment and an understanding that judgments require compelling evidence. Relying in simplistic dualisms that posit good against evil is not an adequate response to human complexity. Insofar as today's students are tomorrow's leaders, we need to provide equal access to a high quality liberal education. After all, thoughtful future leaders who mirror America's diversity and are capable of responding to ambiguous political situations with wisdom and equanimity are essential to the survival any democratic society.

As we consider models for liberal learning and the importance of critical thinking, it may be useful to recall R.W. Emerson's 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard entitled "The American Scholar," in which he distinguished between "Man Thinking" and being a mere thinker.(223-240) For Emerson, a scholar who is a mere thinker is a "victim of society" and "a parrot of other men's thinking," whereas Man Thinking is graced with a creative mind and a spirit of autonomy. In an impassioned plea that has a curious resonance with our current state of affairs, Emerson writes:

The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is not work for any but the decorous and the complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find earth below not in unison with these,--but hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspires, and turn drudges, or die of disgust,--some of them suicides. What is the remedy (239)?

The remedy he proposes is instructive. In essence, Emerson's advice is to avoid the herd mentality and to become a true scholar, Man Thinking who celebrates nature, engages in self-reflection, re-interprets the past and, thereby, creates the future. By marrying thinking, creativity and action as the core values of the scholar, Emerson makes the case that it is incumbent on Man Thinking to act out his convictions and to live the values he embraces.

Among the merits of Emerson's position is the unequivocal support for critical thinking, discernment and action. Yet, he is vague when it comes to elucidating the criteria by which an action is right and tends toward the good. To provide students with a conceptual framework for thinking about issues of right or just action, we can look toward John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* which, on elementary level, can be understood as a restatement

of the “do unto others...” golden rule. Rawls argues that one person’s liberty cannot overstep the boundaries of another’s. Liberty is, therefore, constrained by the real and appropriate expectations that persons have that others respect the boundaries of their freedom. His theory supports equal access to social and economic power, thereby, giving everyone the same advantages and freedoms. On the issue of right action, he asks individuals to allow for what he describes as a “veil of ignorance,” a state of unknowing that masks individuals’ different social and economic positions. “Moral conclusions can be reached,” Rawls writes, “without abandoning the prudential standpoint and positing a moral outlook merely by pursuing one’s own prudential reasoning under certain procedural bargaining and knowledge constraints.” In other words, if our actions toward others were determined by how we would like to be treated and the advantages we accrue for ourselves, we would choose to act ethically.¹

Another ethicist worth considering as we invite students to explore critically the complexities and ambiguities embedded in notions of values and justice is Iris Murdoch. In *The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts* (77-104), Murdoch argues that human beings are complicated and enigmatic creatures susceptible to ignorance, fear, selfishness and wishful thinking “that makes us feel that moral choice is something arbitrary, a matter of personal will rather than for attentive study (91).” Her concept of the Good takes Plato’s as an intellectual marker and explores its relationship to virtuous action. When we are confronted with a moral dilemma, we get easily distracted by our selfish desires and do not keep our attention fixed on the reality of the situation. Virtue, Murdoch writes, “is good habit and dutiful action ... but the background condition of such habit and such action in human beings, is a just mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness. It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is (91).”

In other words, the just mode of vision, what Murdoch, following Simone Weil, calls attention, is the virtue of seeing the world not through a self-interested perspective but as it is reflected in the experience of others. In “piercing the veil of selfish consciousness (93)”, we allow ourselves to reflect on the Good as a dimension of the human condition. “Good” Murdoch writes, “is the magnetic center toward which love naturally moves (102).” Although the Good, per se, remains beyond our reach owing to our own frailty, we see it reflected in the beauty of artworks and in the actions of humble people who serve others (99). For Murdoch, it is the humility which ultimately serves as the criteria for right action. “Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of anxious avaricious tentacles of the self (103).” If there is one thing that we can teach our students, perhaps it is humility—the capacity to see beyond mere ego toward the Good.

In the end, on the issue of educating for justice and developing just members of society, what can we hope for, what can we reasonably expect from our students. I suggest that we can expect from them only what we ourselves are willing to give and to do. How do

we model the behaviors, right-actions, ethical choices and values-based decision-making that we expect from them? How are the values embedded in our institutional missions transformed into practice with regard to our admissions and financial aid policies, for example; or our honor and social codes; or in our hiring and firing practices; or in our choices of honorary degree recipients or even board members, not to mention our institutional investments? I suspect that amongst those of us gathered at this conference, a significant range of opinions and perspectives, passions and commitments to very different ideas of what is right and just are represented. The same can be said of the diversity of viewpoints and values among students, faculty and administrators on our campuses. What can we do to foster respectful and open debate on culturally divisive issues? What assurances can we give to dissenters and radicals that they too have the right to their values and to speak their mind? It is a useful exercise to recall how often in history the voice of dissenters and radicals overtime becomes the mainstream position. With the war on Iraq daily becoming more and more of a certainty, how can we help students to learn from the lessons of the past and to move beyond simplistic slogans toward a more sophisticated and critical analysis of what is globally at stake?

We teach by example. Students will emulate us when they see that we think critically, have a clear understanding of the criteria that informs our decisions and make judgments based on evidence. They may not agree with us, but we will have demonstrated how to live in a democracy as engaged and committed citizens who understand the value of values and the privilege of living in a just society.

Works Cited

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¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).