



Taking Moral Development More Seriously: *Toward Moral Consensus and Shared Responsibility for Moral Education*¹

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In the United States of America it has become the sad lot of many children to be raised in a condition of moral confusion. The ordinary childhood ambiguities of coming to terms with the moral expectations of one's social context have been rendered exceedingly difficult by two new realities: a society wherein the moral center has become unclear and an increasing avoidance of moral issues within that society.

Without a doubt, the influence of family or the lack thereof is an important factor in the moral development of a child. The study of human society identifies parents, the extended family, and the primary community as carrying the major burdens of passing along the moral heritage. Institutions of religion and of education provide foundations which in some cases are made available to assist the family and extend the moral context of young people. The moral structure of a society can be undergirded and buttressed by government. Whether the institutions of religion, education, and government facilitate or undermine moral education is always an important question.

It is simply not enough to point fingers and place the blame. It does little good to say, "The American family has failed." In the first place, the charge is too broad; many American families still serve well the passing along of a responsible moral heritage. Second, the nature and structure of American families has always been diverse and is becoming more so. Many of the forms of parental role and familial relationship today do not serve well as the sole source of moral truth—if indeed any family ever does thus stand alone. Third, the value systems of this society are various. This nation embraces a complex mixture of traditions.

What seems troublesome today is not simply that families are so often failing as that the socio-political systems within which these families must work are themselves dysfunctional. If the family is failing it is similarly valid to assert that those who are to serve families are also failing. One must ask about government, about religious institutions, about the schools and about the economic system.

Our society is caught up in a consensus of avoidance. Beneath even the most fervent displays of social protest there is a spirit of belligerent and uncompromising arrogance that works against constructive change. Making an unanswerable claim or threat seems more laudable than making a measurable contribution toward solving a problem.

¹Ted Ward. Taking Moral Development More Seriously: Toward Moral Consensus and Shared Responsibility for Moral Education. Unpublished document, 1990s

We cannot change the situation by argument or even by legislation. A core of values adequate and appropriate for the sustaining of popular democracy is lacking. The lack of consensus on many vital issues is evident. Formally, decisions are made by tests of power more than by constructive mediation and the discovery of mutually acceptable compromise. Consensus on moral matters is inherently difficult to reach among disparate groups. As the American society has come to recognize its multi-ethnic and pluralistic structure, exploitation of differences has become more popular than the search for common ground.

Surely it is not too much to ask of national leadership that a bipartisan effort be undertaken to move the nation toward the discovery of a moral consensus, however limited its scope. Given the divisiveness of the contemporary realm of public opinion, battered and fragmented as it is by single-issue campaigns and charged as it is by emotional arguments which commonly disparage balanced debate and rigorous reasoning, such a quest for consensus is a task worthy of the best efforts of our most able leaders.

Following closely on this quest for moral consensus should be a series of clearly formed and properly promoted appeals to specific sectors of our society. Most urgent, I believe, is the challenging of the religious and the educational institutions to close ranks on matters of common concern. Granting that it is unreasonable to presume that everyone must agree on everything, it is important to get these vital engines of moral suasion working in more nearly the same direction.

What is a *moral value*? In one way or another almost all choices and decisions in life reflect values. Some matters of taste or individual preferences among matters of similar worth do not qualify as moral decisions. But when the basic welfare of one or more human beings is directly or indirectly affected, the value at stake is clearly in the moral domain.

Moral matters are not exclusively the property of religions, although every religion makes certain fundamental claims and assertions in moral matters. Human needs, ranging from basic nutrition up through appropriate nurturance and the development of a sustainable sense of self-worth and dignity, are moral matters. Whatever frustrates the fulfillment of these needs is a moral problem. Moral matters are everyone's concern, yet so few people seem able to specifically focus them and to deal with them except as matters of emotion or habit. At least part of the problem lies in the degeneration of American communities into value-denying enclaves of people at war with each other.

One valid definition of human community is a group of people who share similar values and aspirations and wherein the continuing negotiation, refinement, and fulfillment of these values and aspirations are carried out in a cooperative spirit. A parallel definition of *family* would necessarily call for boundaries based on community-sanctioned relationships, but it would center on the *quality* of those relationships as appropriate to the nurturance of the physical, moral, and spiritual needs of its members.

When the emphasis is on the needs of children, the physical and psychological support and providence needed for orderly growth is a requirement. That much is generally understood although it is something we dare not take for granted. Beyond this lie the even more widely neglected matters of moral and spiritual nurturance. These matters seem hidden in the obscurities and relative privacy of childhood, but they spring out full blown in the headlines of tragedy as teenage violence and self-destruction reveals the seeds sown during earlier years.

Children can do little other than to reflect the world around them. Their sense of right and wrong is shaped very early in life, first of all by the consequences of their own behavior and later on by the desire to be like and to please those around them. Since it is neither feasible nor morally fitting to withhold all but the “good” influences from a child, we must attend to the moral quality of the larger social environment within which the child and those who influence the child most specifically experience life. The web is indeed tangled: no one influence is completely dominant. No pattern is totally predictable. No outcomes are guaranteed; there are always exceptions—for better and for worse.

The schools of this nation absolutely must teach moral values. The assertiveness of this statement is justified in part by the oxymoron of a school that does not teach values. Such a school is inconceivable. Note well: every educational effort carries explicit and implicit values; it cannot do otherwise. The issue lies elsewhere: some people prefer to proscribe deliberate teaching of values in the fear that such values would be at odds with their own. Indeed, this is always a possibility. But it is also a clear probability in the school that is claiming *not* to be teaching values. Matters of good and evil, right and wrong, do and don't are always being taught—whether by intention, by accident or by default. How much better it would be to raise these matters to a conscious level and thus to establish an accountability for teaching them well, rather than to tolerate neglect and randomness.

To argue that such matters should be reserved to the home and to the church has little touch with reality. For a substantial number of children, the family is dysfunctional and the church is out of reach. Are such children to be taken seriously? If so, the public sector must figure importantly in whatever is done to facilitate moral education. This nation is not served well by a public education enterprise that is allowed to escape responsibility in these matters.

Religious leadership within this nation must be reenlisted in the moral campaign. Far too often the bickering over peculiarities and particular dogmas has obscured the common ground. It should be made clear that what is needed here falls far short of the ecumenical homogenization that so many fear. We are talking instead about already existing common ground of moral parallels—and surely it is there. The doctrine of separation of church and state is used conveniently by religious and non-religious forces. Far too often religious leaders have used it as the ultimate rational of avoidance—to wash their hands on the supposed high constitutional ground of being ruled out of the public matters at issue. And even more commonly the secularity of public institutions has been forced by those who use the doctrine to their own advantage.

It is time to find new ways to cooperate across the church-state line. No violence to the Constitution is necessary if we focus on the common ground of moral values. Although one can argue theologically that all moral good is defined by godly revelation, it is not necessary to argue over origins. As some of us see it, the God who created a moral universe has defined the terms of good and evil; but sure enough, the substantial base of good and evil has much in common regardless of religious tradition, and even has much in common with the sort of society that the atheists prefers to live in.

If religious people could only understand that others want a similar “good life” and if non-religious people could learn to tolerate the belief of others that there is a real God behind it all, we might find our way out of this current impasse. It will take a carefully non-polarizing sort of leadership to lead the nation toward moral consensus.

Moral consensus may sound more abstract and unachievable than it really is. If we put our hearts and minds to it, buried the hatchet for awhile, and put the well being of our youngsters and our nation ahead of partisan point-making, we could identify quite an impressive array of beliefs and values that are central to what it means to be an American. Although a patriotic loyalty to the integrity to our founding documents and ideology would be held high, a consciousness of history's judgments against our shortfalls would also need to be a part of the honest picture. A nation of honor is best served by truth, openly professed and openly examined.

It is not the purpose of this paper to create a new charter nor to paraphrase older ones, but to illustrate the sort of moral code that is possible, following are four possible common grounds:

- 1) It is wrong, very wrong, to be deceitful, dishonest and untruthful. The foundation stone of human experience, human interaction, and human quality is honesty. Without integrity of one's word there is no basis of true character.
- 2) It is wrong, very wrong, to take a human life. We believe that life is valuable and that it must be respected above all other moral issues. Thus it is wrong to jeopardize the very environment itself because it is the physical source of the requisites of life.
- 3) It is wrong, very wrong, to take unfair advantage of other people—whether by exploiting their weaknesses, ignoring them in the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, or in the establishment of rules and practices based on selfishness and greed, toward the end of excluding others from the orderly pursuit of happiness.
- 4) It is wrong, very wrong, to enter into human relationships which benefit only oneself. All of life's quality is defined in terms of balances between rights and responsibilities. Responsibility must be consciously taken and submitted to social accountability.

We have to stand for something. To whatever degree possible we need to stand together. We have seen the damage done by cynicism. We risk the more grave damage that will be done by a general loss of hope.

In some respects, the Constitution's safeguarding of liberty has been turned inside out. While its words are still in place, what it leads to seems at odds with its overall intent. The prohibition against the Congress's "establishment of religion" has been turned on itself in a long series of strokes and counter-strokes that have virtually poisoned the well of church-and-state cooperation. Further, the prohibition of Congress's "prohibiting the free exercise" of religion has been twisted into a restraint that all too often has inappropriately disqualified significant voices of moral and spiritual leadership in our society.

Sadly, one must acknowledge that ambiguity and cross-purposes have become so common that such a proposition as this one will draw mocking laughter and derisive scorn. We must be ready for that and bear it without flinching. It is at least one citizen's hope that in the wee small hours when even the most depraved exploiter tends to matters of personal conscience, the witness of the ages will become persuasive: we simply are not better off in a society that answers evil with evil, that encourages violence by blocking humane avenues of fulfillment, or that denies the right to life on whimsical and selfish grounds. In such a society there is no real possibility for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Can we not find ways to stand together in the hopes inspired by this nation's finer points?

"Better to make a little gain with righteousness than much gain with injustice" (Proverbs 16:8).