

MORAL INTELLIGENCE

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*"Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay."*

"The Deserted Village"

Oliver Goldsmith

My grandmother was well educated for her day, having graduated from the now nonexistent, St. Frances Academy in Morganfield, Union Co., KY. She was from a some more wealthy and higher class family than my grandfather. My grandfather was from a comfortable but not wealthy farm family in Crider, Caldwell Co., KY. To some degree his life was cut short by his father's premature death from typhoid fever in 1885 when my grandfather was six years old. Because he was the oldest of six children he never got any formal education and could barely read and write. He went to work to help his mother rear his brothers and sisters. As an adult he fired the boilers that powered the coal mines in Webster and Hopkins counties, Kentucky.

My father was the oldest of eleven children. He too went to work early, starting in high school in Clay, KY to help an uncle in his plumbing and electrical wiring business. At Georgetown College he did plumbing and electrical work, worked as a night watchman and in a residence hall to pay his way through college, his parents not being able to financially assist him at all. He continued to work all his life.

As a high school student he became interested and joined the Clay, KY Missionary Baptist Church and was later ordained and licensed to preach by that church. He was president of The B.Y.P.U. and preached at every opportunity he got to preach. He was, as described in the Broadway play, "The Rainmaker," "a by God spellbinder" preacher. He was intelligent but conservative and rather narrow minded. One sermon he preached was entitled, "What's Wrong with Bobbed Hair?" Years later my brothers and I found a copy of this sermon in his files and we unmercifully teased him over it.

From 1924-26 he taught at Fordsville High School, Fordsville, KY where he met but DID NOT date his future wife, my mother, who was a student there. He attended Bethel College for Men at Russellville, KY in 1926-27. He transferred to Georgetown College, Georgetown, KY graduating there in the height of the Great Depression in 1930.

The editor of the Georgetown College annual said of Albert Herschel Freer (my father), "Herschel is a real man with all that is implied by that term. His qualities of leadership, dependability and earnestness promise much in his life of service for the Master."

In 1930 he eloped to marry his high school sweetheart and they moved to Hazard, KY for him to become Prof. Freer at Hazard Bible Institute. It was the height of the Great Depression and they could not pay him a regular salary and they lived on donated chicken, eggs and other foods. My father resented what he saw as having to live on “handouts” and having to “beg” for his sustenance. He then left the ordained ministry never to return (frankly, a great loss to the ministry and the Southern {Missionary} Baptist Church).

After he left the ministry he returned to education. Education for my father was never just about learning facts and mere head knowledge. For my father being an educator meant teaching his students about life and living as well as facts. Educating was about character and conduct; about values; about being good and honorable; about “Living Four Square (a poem he liked that came from the Ralston Purina people in St. Louis, MO.)

He was a “Moral Educator” as well as an educator. As is the author of the book that served as the inspiration of this evenings talk, “*The Moral Intelligence of Children (How to Raise a Moral Child)*.” My father strongly believed that “Character was caught and not taught.” (I don’t know who first said this). This, along with Oliver Goldsmith’s quote with which I began this paper, were favorite quotes of his.

He also had a number of “visual aid” presentations that he could do to catch a person’s attention and make a point; teach a “lesson.” I can’t remember any of these but this one, in which he’d take a clean, white sheet of paper and put a black dot on it and hold it up and ask, “What do you see?” Invariably the response would be, “I see a black dot on a white sheet of paper.” To which my father would point out the all too human tendency to see the small black dot and ignore the much larger white area. He would then admonish the person(s) to not focus on the bad or negative in life or another person’s life and miss the larger good about that person’s or their own life.

*“Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.”*

As a child I hated my father. He never had any time for me or for my other five brothers, he was always working; always busy, busy. It was only in later life that my father and I got to spend some time together and got to know each other.

Edgar A. Guest was my father’s favorite poet. One of his poems, “*When You Get to Know a Fellow*,” says:

(READ)

“When you get to know a fellow, know his joys
and know his cares,

When you come to understand him and the
burdens that he bears,

When you’ve learned the fight he’s making and
the troubles in his way,

Then you find that he is different than you

thought him yesterday.

...

When you get to know a fellow, know his every mood and whim.

You begin to see find the texture of the splendid side of him:

You begin to understand him, and you cease to Scoff and sneer.

For with understanding always prejudices disappear.”

As I have grown older my father has become a hero of mine and I appreciate him and the imprint he left on my life more as time goes by.

A more recent hero of mine is Robert Coles, MD who insists on being called, “Bob” to distinguish him from a son, Robert.

Dr. Coles was born and bred in Massachusetts. He attended the prestigious, former Puritan, Harvard College for his undergraduate degree and Columbia University for his Doctor of Medicine degree. He returned to Harvard and Massachusetts General Hospital for his Psychiatry Residency training. He spent his service time in the Air Force in 1950 in New Orleans where he met and got to know Ruby Bridges, the Afro-American girl who integrated the New Orleans schools. He returned to Harvard and has remained there doing research, study and teaching.

Dr. Coles is one of Harvard’s most respected and revered teachers and is one of if not the preeminent Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist living today. He has written more than sixty books including the 1973 Pulitzer Prize winner, “*Children in Crisis*.”

Dr. Coles’ usual style has been to go live with a child and his family for three to six months and immerse himself in the child’s life and environment and then to tell the child’s story- a deceptively simple, yet profound technique.

While I was at Menninger’s in the 1970’s Dr. Coles was in the southwest living with an Hispanic child and his family. He later published a book with this child’s “Story” in the book.

Dr. Coles was a great admirer of the Menninger’s, his mother having read to him and his brother from Karl Menninger’s best selling book, “*The Human Mind*.”

I met Dr. Coles two or three times, over the course of a year, in the late 1970’s while I was in my Psychiatry Residency training at The Menninger School of Psychiatry, formerly of Topeka, KS and now of Houston, TX.

I also had the pleasure of being in two or three small discussion groups with him.

At the time, I was impressed with his humanness and compassion, but not unduly so. It was only last year after picking up Dr. Coles book, "*The Moral Intelligence of Children (How to Raise a Moral Child)*" that he became a hero, yeah, a "super hero" of mine. His book has been quietly changing my life in ways that I do not yet appreciate or comprehend.

Dr. Coles has graciously talked with me two or three times since December 2003 and even obliged my pressing him about his own Faith and Faith development, which was very important for me to know given the intensely moral and spiritual nature of most of his work and writing.

Dr. Coles has been greatly influenced by his mother and father, by his Massachusetts and Boston environs, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Harvard.

Robert Coles first heard the term, "moral intelligence" from a distinguished Harvard pediatrician, Rustin McIntosh with whom he studied while in Medical School at Harvard. When Dr. McIntosh was asked to more specifically define moral intelligence, "...he did not respond with an elegantly precise definition (of moral intelligence). Rather, he told us about boys and girls he'd known and treated who had it-who were "good," who were kind, who thought about others, who were 'smart that way.' Some children even at six or seven had an evident desire to be tactful, courteous, generous in their willingness to see the world as others saw it, to experience the world through someone else's eyes and to act on that knowledge with kindness."

Dr. Coles defines moral intelligence a little, though not a lot, more specifically than Dr. McIntosh did. He says moral intelligence is a gradually developing capacity to reflect upon what is right and wrong with all the emotional and intellectual resources of the human mind.

He talks of moral intelligence using such old fashioned words as: character and conduct; values and purpose and conscience. He also talks of, God forbid, the spiritual life, saying: "The spiritual life is a part of our psychological lives. The issue is not a particular religion or type of spirituality but how we are with each other.

First and last with all of us is the inevitable affair with the Almighty.

Children-and all of us need not only to have our psychological needs to be filled, but hunger for purpose in life. The hunger we have is to become something larger than ourselves, to affirm something larger than ourselves."

David Gergen in an interview with Robert Coles says, "...you spoke frequently in your book about the moral loneliness of children; they sometimes feel morally abandoned; that they really do need moral guidance. You said children very much need a sense of purpose and direction in life, a set of values grounded in moral introspection. A spiritual life that is given sanction by their parents and others in the adult world. They are born with this."

Dr. Coles replies, "I think so. We're the creature of awareness, we're the creature of language, and we're the only creature on the planet, maybe in the whole universe, who asks why, who wonders, who knows life is limited, and that we will someday die, and this awareness is a fundamental I think moral aspect of ourselves."

In the frontispiece of Dr. Coles book it says, "In the tradition of such best sellers as *Cultural Literacy* and *Emotional Intelligence*, this book distinguishes how moral intelligence is different from-but as important to success as-other kinds of human development, as significant as emotional or psychological growth, as IQ or intellectual development. Coles shows how children can be taught to become "smart" in this inner spiritual realm-to learn empathy, respect for themselves and others, and how to live the Golden Rule---through witnessing the conduct and caring of others and through moral conversations."

He says, "Here I am addressing how we adults, as mother or father and school teacher and friend, give shape to the values of children as expressed in their behaviors, their conduct; how we encourage and instruct them to uphold in daily life one or another set of beliefs."

What is a good child; a good person? Good children are boys and girls who in the first place have learned to take seriously the very notion, the desirability, of goodness---a living up to the Golden Rule, a respect for others, a commitment of mind, heart, soul to one's family, neighborhood, nation-and having also learned that the issue of goodness is not an abstract one, but rather a concrete, expressive one: how to turn the rhetoric of goodness into action, moments that affirm the presence of goodness in a particular lived life."

What is a not-so-good person? The test for each of us is to not only learn and know what good behavior is but to know what not-so-good and even bad behavior is.

Not-so-good children and persons are impulsive, demanding, insensitive, wrapped up in themselves to the point that others mean very little.

They have what George Elliott in "*Middlemarch*" called "the unreflecting egoism."

What characterizes a not-so-good person is a heightened, destructive self absorption wherein we lose sight of our obligations to others indeed, lose sight of those others, some of us unfortunately fall utterly victim to a moral undertow, lose our bearings, get entirely swept into a life that responds to the mind's wishes and moods, with scant attention to the rights of others, not to mention one's own ethical obligations within a family, a classroom, or a community."

"Character is caught and not taught."

This was another of my father's favorite quotes and is the essence of how Robert Coles says children learn good moral behavior, character, how to be "good" call it what you will.

Dr. Coles says, "The aim of this book is to emphasize and document the moral seriousness, the moral curiosity of children and therefore the importance of moral education. It is something for which the young hunger and thirst and seek hard to find on their own, as well as with the aid of adults.

This book also aims to emphasize that the most persuasive moral teaching we adults do is by example: the witness of our lives, our way of being with others and speaking to them and getting on with them—all of that taken in slowly, cumulatively, by our sons and daughters, our students. To be sure, other sources can count a great deal: formal lectures or explicit talks, reading and more reading and discussions of what has been read, reprimands and reminders with punishment of various kinds, churchgoing or synagogue attendance, the experience of hearing sermons and being told about the biblical messages, and the moral lessons and the wisdom of our secular novelist, poets, and playwrights—all of that can count a great deal. But in the long run of a child's life, the unself-conscious moments that are what we think of simply as the unfolding events of the day and the week turn out to be the really powerful and persuasive times, morally."

Further he says. "A reflecting and self-reflecting mind at some point gives way to a "performing self" the moral imagination affirmed, realized, developed, trained to grow stronger by daily decisions, small and large, deeds enacted, then considered and reconsidered. Character is ultimately who we are expressed in action, in how we live, in what we do, and so the children around us know: they absorb and take stock of what they observe, namely us—we adults living and doing things in a certain spirit, getting on with one another in our various ways. Our children add up, imitate, file away that they've observed and so very often later fall in line with the particular moral counsel we wittingly or quite unself-consciously have offered them."

Dr. Coles asks, "What ought to be, might be done on their behalf?"

He responds, "I'm all in favor of trying to be of emotional help, cognitive help: let us try to teach our children right and wrong in schools, through reading: and let's try to help those children who have been psychologically wounded in one way or another to be healed. But after the courses are over, and the therapeutic sessions end, there are endless hours that await our children—and their questions ought to be ours: Where are the grown-ups in our life upon whom we can really rely, whom we can trust, whose values are believable, desirable, because they have been given us out of the shared experience, moment to moment, of a life together?

The conscience does not descend upon us from on high. We learn a convincing sense of right and wrong from parents who are themselves convinced as to what ought to be said and done and under what circumstances, as to what is intolerable, not at all permissible; parents who are more convinced, actually—parents who are persuasively at the ready to impart to their children through words and daily example what they hope to hand on to them; mothers and fathers who eagerly embrace such a duty. Without such parents, a conscience is not likely to grow up strong and certain. When parents indicate to children their own feeble, contradictory, compromised moral life, no wonder their children find

their own often truculent way to follow suit. I say “truculent” because a child can be quite angry at being denied the protection of a strong guiding conscience, at being left morally rudderless.”

William J. Bennett writing in the introduction of his book, *“The Moral Compass”* says, “A basic assumption of his book is that life is a moral and spiritual journey. It makes no sense to send young people forth on their life’s journey with only some timid, vacillating opinion or options about conduct. We must give our children better equipment than this. We must raise them as moral and spiritual beings by offering them unequivocal, reliable standards of right and wrong, noble and base, just and unjust.”

John Locke reminds us “ ’Tis virtue...which is the hard and valuable part to be aimed at in education.”

In William J. Bennett’s first book, *“The Book of Virtues”* he says, “The vast majority of our ancestors shares a respect for certain fundamental traits of character, honesty, compassion, courage and perseverance. These are virtues. But because children are not born with this knowledge, they need to learn what virtues are. We can help them gain a grasp and appreciation of these traits...”

We help them learn and know the virtues by reading good books; watching good television shows and movies but mainly we inculcate these virtues by our lived out example before our children and other people. Remember, “Character is caught and not taught.”

Henry James’s nephew, the son of William James, once asked the great and thoughtful novelist what he ought to do with his life, how he ought live it. The nephew received this advice: “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind!”

In the early 1960’s I taught chemistry at Seneca High School in Louisville, Jefferson Co., Kentucky. At the end of each school year I had a celebration with refreshments, entertainment and awards. I closed each class with this admonition of St. Paul:

“And now, brothers, as I close this letter let me say this one more thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about. Keep putting into practice all you learned from me and saw me doing and the God of peace will be with you. ”

Philippians 4:8-9
Living Bible