

HOW CAN SCHOOLS INSPIRE A NEW GENERATION TO LIVE ACCORDING TO THE HIGHEST HUMAN VALUES?

How might ‘values’ realistically enlighten and guide the quality of life of the next generation as it emerges into adulthood to play its part in an increasingly complex world?

To answer this essential question we will look at what the term ‘values’ really means in an educational context and what the necessary elements are that need to be present in schools in order for them to predominate in an authentic manner.

In a society which is extremely concerned about the emotional and social well-being of its young people yet intensely sceptical of religion and anything so-called ‘spiritual’, it is not surprising that the term ‘values’ has become increasingly popular in various domains and especially in education. Whereas historically, the English educational system relied upon its Christian faith to deliver spiritual and pastoral nourishment, the majority of our schools – which are of course non-denominational – have been in search of a solution to the huge vacuum which has been left. Mindfulness, ‘happiness programmes’ and now ‘values’ education have emerged in the noble attempt to solve the plight of young people who are increasingly ‘at sea’.

But what do we really mean by ‘values’? What is it that lies behind the dedication demonstrated by individuals and organisations to this very subject? I would suggest that in order to avoid the tendency for something profound to be lost in superficial terminology and ‘thin’ ideas which mean many things to different people, it is useful to draw back and consider the essence of what we have mutually glimpsed. Indeed, if we do not do so, the power of such work, especially in schools, is likely to be dissipated through lack of real understanding.

And so, we must begin at the beginning, the first and most powerful principle of all. As human beings, we have a natural capacity to see the absolute beauty in the soul of another. This beauty lies at the very essence of every heart; it is our human spirit. It is virtually impossible to describe this essence adequately except to say that we know it is radiantly beautiful and unconditionally lovable.

As the book of Genesis describes, ‘...Man is made in the image of God.’ Seeing this ‘image’ is love itself. That beauty is perfect; it lacks nothing. Our particular individual human natures, which, as it were, are formed *around* this essence, consist of inherited tendencies, are moulded by circumstances and, in many respects remain in a state of continual flux. Nevertheless, the true lover of a soul sees the essential perfection, which does not change, as the reality of the person and therefore loves him or her unconditionally. A parent, teacher, friend, lover, husband or wife, seeing in this way, responds to the fluctuating presentations of nature *in light* of the absolute beauty which is ever-present. This true ‘seeing’ is the fertile ground for all human development and welfare. Real teachers come into the profession because they see this self-same beauty of the human spirit. They might not choose to formulate it as such, but it is what moves them.

It is a strange feature of human existence that we rarely see this beauty in ourselves. The natural love which resides in our hearts readily sees it in the so-called other but we are rather dependent on life’s activities and relationships to become acquainted with this beauty in ourselves. In this respect, the parenting we experience and the quality of our schooling – in particular the quality of our teachers – are crucial. How many times have we heard of an adult reminiscing on how, invariably against all the odds, he or she was able to succeed at something in life by virtue of the intervention of one particular teacher? This truth is held in the words, ‘I suppose it was just that he believed in me’. That teacher saw beyond the superficial presentations of nature and let the child know that there was something unlimited, valuable and loveable which could emerge and flourish. This is the art of the true teacher; it is the power of love.

There is an excerpt of a poem by an American poet called Galway Kinnell which describes this perfectly. The poem is entitled, *St Francis and the Sow*¹:

*The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don’t flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary*

¹ Galway Kinnell, ‘*Saint Francis and the Sow*’ from *Three Books*, p.81.

*to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing; ...*

(Galway Kinnell 1927-2014)

And further to this, Victor Frankl describes this ‘seeing’ in a slightly different way in his famous book *Man’s Search for Meaning*:

“Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true.”²

What has this to do with ‘values’? I would suggest that those qualities which we so cherish as expressions of our very humanity are indeed expressions of that absolute perfection, the beauty, the fullness of love, which is the human spirit itself. Our very humanity expresses itself as the powers of magnanimity, sacrifice, forgiveness, compassion, harmlessness, truth, justice, mercy, courage, fortitude, wisdom, patience and grace – to name just a few. These qualities are inherent; they are expressions of our hearts but they need to be drawn out and cultivated. This is the work of good parenting and teaching.

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that within human nature there are also the complementary ‘destructive’ tendencies which are the opposite of the qualities just mentioned. Forces of greed, selfishness, pride, hatred, prejudice and so on, recede as the positive qualities expand and find expression. For the

² Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, p.116.

developing individual, all of this needs to be taught, demonstrated, understood and evaluated through personal experience. Good education presents the ideals, inspires enthusiasm for them and enables their realisation in practice.

What does education really mean? The word itself has two Latin roots: *educare* means to ‘bring up, to train and to teach’, and *educere* means to ‘lead and draw out that which lies within’. The first meaning is easily accomplished but the second requires a more subtle insight as just described. *Educere* necessitates quite a different approach. I will return shortly to consider some of the principles involved and how such principles might be practised.

It is worth mentioning at this stage that the present tendency in education is to focus almost exclusively on the business of the acquisition of skills, information, knowledge, outcomes and qualifications. All of this is necessary but there is a vital balance to be struck between the outer and inner aspects of education in order to discover what it really means to provide the circumstances in which human development may truly flourish.

It is symptomatic of this loss of holistic balance in the lives of our young people that one in ten children will develop a mental health problem before the age of 16. Sincere efforts are being made in the attempt to tackle this at all levels of society. One million pounds of funding has just been pledged to the NHS to provide greater support for mental health and schools are under increasing pressure to respond to a severe escalation of issues in this area. As with all public health issues, prevention is better than cure and our education system could be at the heart of that.

The psychologist John Welwood describes mental illnesses as ‘all the wretched ways people feel and behave when they do not know themselves to be loved.’³ This may sound extremely simplistic and of course there are a plethora of complex mental health conditions which can manifest, but experience has demonstrated that the simple need to know that one is *unconditionally* loved is a fundamental and crucial need which lies at the very heart of our human nature.

In this respect, it is no surprise to find that a body of research undertaken by Desforges in 2003 for the Department for Education and Skills demonstrated that, in the primary years especially, the impact of the family is six times more significant than that of the school in relation to all aspects of educational

³ John Welwood, ‘*Perfect love, imperfect relations,*’ p.255

achievement. The foundation of love which a stable family life can offer provides the underlying basis for all positive development. Upon this emotional security, a child's sense of self-worth, aspiration, confidence and ability to form positive relationships utterly depends. In many respects, the mental health of our young people today has been significantly compromised by the various forces which have accrued over time to undermine the simplicity of the family unit. The issues which have contributed to the demise of the family are extremely complex and sensitive; however, it is feasible that schools could offer some wise and intelligent guidance to emerging adults to help them find a better way to avoid the painful confusion that surrounds them. Sex and relationship guidance as it is presently taught fails to present young people with an inspiring vision of what it really means to love another, to commit to their welfare, to understand what ingredients might contribute to a successful marriage, to appreciate the responsibility of parenthood and, finally, to recognise the importance of a harmonious family life.

Now to return to the principle of *educere*: how can schools 'draw or lead out' the beauty within? The virtues or 'values' which emanate from the human spirit need to be taught in a manner which awakens the innate knowledge of their truth within the pupils' hearts. They also need to be demonstrated by those closest to children, their parents and teachers. I will deal firstly with some suggestions as to how values might be taught in a school.

Values are universal and profound qualities. What is really meant by forgiveness; compassion; fortitude; truth and so on? What do these virtues mean in practice? In order to gain something of the depth and breadth of meaning inherent in these time-honoured qualities, we must turn to the insights of the wise. In my view, it is not sufficient to depend upon the individual class teacher or head teacher to deliver their opinion on the meaning of such large concepts. Their personal insights and experience will of course be helpful but firstly pupils should receive the benefit of hearing what our wisdom traditions – religious and philosophical - have taught on these matters. A necessary principle of good education is to offer our young the best of what has been written and thought throughout the ages and across the world. Such stories, sayings and teachings need to be carefully considered, reflected upon, deeply digested, and then verified through practical experience.

The best practice in schools is where a period a week is devoted to values education. In these lessons, one value might be adopted as the theme for a half-

term duration, first having been presented by the head in a school assembly. Once pupils have understood something of the real meaning of such texts, they are invited to test the value in the practice of their daily lives, sharing their findings with each other. These honest and penetrating conversations which take place in a class of children are transformative. They equip pupils with the ability to formulate their speech carefully, to listen to each other attentively in a non-judgemental manner, and of course, to be enlightened by each other's experience.

This approach has two key benefits. First and foremost, as pupils practise the virtues in their everyday lives their conduct begins to be transformed accordingly; secondly, by drawing on a variety of traditions, pupils who are from a cross section of religious traditions and none get a sense of a common thread running through the teachings of the various great spiritual traditions. This naturally enhances respect and understanding for each other's wisdom traditions whilst also emphasising the unity of the human spirit. In this way, the tendency to assume that religious identity must create separation is meaningfully diminished. In a world which is riven with religious hostility, this message is of huge importance when offered to an emerging generation in this manner.

It goes without saying that if the importance of values is to become central to the lives of pupils, they will need to be at the heart of school life as a whole. This is where we must turn to the quality of leadership of a school. Unless the leader of a school understands the principles which have been set out, it will not be possible to infuse a school community with an authentic flourishing of values in the lives of its pupils.

So, firstly, governors will need to make this a priority in the appointment of a head. Does the headteacher have depth of vision and the understanding which flows from it? Does she or he demonstrate these values in the way she lives and behaves? Example is the greatest teacher: does the headteacher 'walk the talk'? Does he or she have the insight and courage to establish simple disciplines of conduct in the school which serve to enhance the flourishing of the values espoused? Discipline which is based upon the greatest human virtues is the foundation of a harmonious and strong school community.

Secondly, the head will need to inspire and train the teachers in how to teach the importance and understanding of values to the pupils. She or he will also have

to reach out to the parent body in order to guide and encourage them to work hand in hand with the school in the importance of the practice of values at home.

One may be fortunate enough to find the occasional headteacher for whom all of this comes naturally. However, this would be quite unusual. In general, experience suggests that it is invaluable to provide a head with a mentor or coach who has the experience and wisdom to support the head's development in such an enterprise. The personal challenges this work presents are demanding and the ability to self-examine, reflect upon experience and develop one's practice accordingly is enhanced by someone who can support the head on this journey.

The next principle which emerges quite naturally in considering how to create an authentic values-based school is the importance of regular access to silence, to contemplative or meditative quiet time. This may seem surprising but meditative silence has a wide range of benefits which work at a deeper level to facilitate transformation in human conduct. There are two main features which I will attempt to describe.

First, meditation enhances the power of concentration. Attention refines through meditation and this increases the capacity to be aware of what is going on – within oneself and in the world about us. The effect of this is twofold: a person who has the ability to observe what is taking place in his mind or emotions becomes more self-reflective; this then enables him or her to measure out responses in a manner which is conducive to his own and others' wellbeing. It is a well-known feature of people who meditate that their capacity for empathy and compassion increases significantly. This is obviously desirable for people in all walks of life but it is crucial for those who are charged with responsibility for children's development. A sensitive and observant teacher is one who will be able to respond to the needs of his or her pupils in a far more insightful and effective manner. His own capacity to self-reflect will serve to enhance the development of his teaching practice as he proceeds in his career.

There is, therefore, a direct relationship between the strengthening of virtues or values and meditative practice. Meditation 'germinates' and strengthens the expression of the 'virtues'. Father Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk who

leads the World Community for Christian Meditation, explained this in his recent book entitled *First Sight* :

“Meditation is personal, even solitary but it is not a privatized activity. Indeed it transforms us from isolated individuals into relational persons. ... virtues are, as the word itself means, ‘strengths’ of the soul. We are designed to develop them. Meditation germinates the seeds of these inherent virtues and thus strengthens us to resist the false voices of their opposing vices.”⁴

The second dimension which opens up through meditative practice is the potential for direct spiritual experience. For those whose spiritual life is dear to them, meditation may open the door to that indescribable domain which lies beyond thought, belief, concepts, or ‘knowing’.

For young people of secondary school age, meditation offers the same benefits as have just been described. It also gives them the sense of a much larger perspective on life than the everyday impact of sensory impressions, thoughts or feelings. It can acquaint them with a far deeper realm of experience which is unconfined, unchanging and truly peaceful. This provides real strength to the young person as they learn to navigate their way through life.

The importance of attention in human welfare and in the welfare of a school as a whole is huge. A values-led school cannot exist without understanding this principle. It is obvious that everything thrives or deteriorates according to the quality of attention it is given. This applies to our physical environment, our intellectual capacity, our acquisition of skills and our powers of creativity. It also applies to the quality of our relationships. The quality of attention given at all levels of a school community, determines the quality of the school.

I would now like to turn to the importance of true communication. This principle follows naturally from the first two principles of regular access to silence and the power of attention. Education in its fullest sense, and the human flourishing which should flow from it, relies upon the art of communication. Communication depends upon the quality of attention given. The precondition for attentive communication is a quiet mind. If heart is to speak to heart, or soul to soul, there must first be attentive listening. If we import the clutter of our preconceptions, assumed knowledge, past understanding or desires to the

⁴ Laurence Freeman, ‘*First Sight, the Experience of Faith,*’ p.124.

moment of communication they will act as ‘blockers’. The French philosopher and essayist Simone Weil describes this beautifully:

“Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. ... Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.

...The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.⁵”

Teachers who are trained to approach their pupils in this way are the real teachers. The present moment is the only moment of potential; if a teacher learns to meet his or her pupils in this ‘unknowing’ then the information received about the needs of the pupil will be fully propitious for its development. In this open and ‘empty’ condition, the quality of listening refines considerably. If we wish to meet the needs of our fellow human beings in a manner which provides for their true wellbeing, we need to learn how to enter the simplicity of the ‘unknowing’. It is undoubtedly the case that if the eye of the teacher is focussed upon the beauty which lies at the very core of the soul, the pupil will flourish. In this way, the qualities which we cherish as being the essence of our humanity will expand and find full expression as he or she develops.

Whilst the digital age has brought huge benefits, there is a serious malaise which exists in the wake of its tsunami-like effect upon our human condition. Loneliness, isolation and loss of ‘meaningful connection’ have become huge problems in society. In this respect what has just been said about communication and the power of attention are key. In a recent article, Father Laurence Freeman wrote on this very subject:

“...When we have lost the experience of being truly connected meaning dissolves. The phenomenon of loneliness and its relation to the terror of

⁵ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, p.72

meaninglessness confronts every part of our developed world ... Today our culture distances us from others even as it seems to bring us closer. An overwhelming characteristic of our modern culture is a loneliness that purports to bring us closer together through social media and entertainment... As our attention span shrinks and approaches that of a goldfish, the degree of existential alienation intensifies; and the point at which we will not even be aware of what we have lost in terms of basic human interaction rushes monstrously towards us....⁶”

The final and overarching principle which is fundamental to human happiness is the principle of service – giving. It seems to be a law of our natures as human beings that the door to our liberation and ultimate fulfilment is opened through the flow of our service. This may be reflective of a much more universal perspective that our creation is, in essence, an expression of ‘gift’; all forms are intermingling in an act of mutual gifting, one to another. Through giving everything prospers. The highest qualities of our human natures flow fully and naturally the more our hearts open in service. The opposite is also true; a selfish life which is focussed on ‘me and mine’ is a prison whose only cell-mates are suffering, misery and isolation.

In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes:

“...being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or to another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.⁷”

The emotional and psychological burdens which our young people are currently experiencing are, in no small measure, exacerbated by the tendency to have their attention focussed primarily on themselves and the tiny worlds which the obsessive ‘me-culture’ inhabits: my appearance; my popularity; my achievements. If schools would place a principle of service to others at the very heart of all that takes place within them, young people would be inspired to

⁶ Meditatio Newsletter Vol 40 No 2; July 2016

⁷ Victor Frankl, ‘*Man’s Search for Meaning*,’ p.115

work hard to develop their talents – whatever they are – for the sake of others. In this way, the motivating force comes from within them as love. This is a very different situation than that which commonly prevails where pupils are driven by fear of failure. This has at its core a trembling, vulnerable ‘me’ whose recurring nightmare is loss of self-worth. If we go deeper still, the ultimate horror is the fear of being unlovable.

To conclude, the highest human values are innate. However, it falls to the guardians of the next generation, its parents and teachers, to provide the circumstances in which such universally cherished qualities may prevail. With inspired leadership schools can become living, breathing examples of the finest human values. However, if future generations are to have within them a real vision and understanding of the greatness of human potential they will need to have received the best fruits of previous generations of poets, philosophers, musicians, artists, playwrights and scientists to inspire them with a vision of the greatest human ideals, knowledge and understanding. If these golden seeds are planted in the hearts and minds of our children they will be inspired to discover yet more of what it really means to be human. The present Head Master of Westminster School touched on this central principle in a recent article which he wrote for the journal *Prospect*:

“As an historian I turn for inspiration ... to one of my great heroes, W.E.Gladstone... four times Liberal Prime Minister and ...Chancellor who delivered twelve budgets, ... Gladstone knew that decisions made in politics, and indeed in what were known as the “liberal professions,” had to be based on a rich intellectual and cultural hinterland, for him grounded in Christian tradition, in the Classics, in Dante and in world literature. How many of today’s politicians and leading professionals can measure up in terms of their hinterland?...

At Westminster School, as at Gladstone’s Library, we espouse liberal educational values. I believe that a technologically savvy generation of pupils needs a more balanced and a more humane education than is generally available today. What will I say to my own school at the final Assembly of this school year? I could do worse than quote Gladstone, who wrote: “Be inspired with the belief that life is a great and noble calling, not a mean and grovelling

thing that we are to shuffle through as best we can, but an elevated and lofty destiny.”⁸

If schools were to adopt some of the simple principles and values which are intrinsic to this flourishing, we could witness young people emerging who have within themselves the capacity to act as a real leaven to the welfare of society as a whole. Nothing I have been talking about is new; it has simply been forgotten. With courage and clarity of vision, I have every confidence that resurgence is possible.

⁸Patrick Derham, ‘*Lessons from William Gladstone*’, Prospect Magazine June 23rd 2016