

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 2

Article 6

10-1-1992

Helping College Students Make Moral Decisions: Thesis Two: The possibility for mature moral reflection in many young adults is compromised by their problematic life histories and impaired family backgrounds

Charles M. Shelton, S.J.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Shelton, S.J., Charles M. (1992) "Helping College Students Make Moral Decisions: Thesis Two: The possibility for mature moral reflection in many young adults is compromised by their problematic life histories and impaired family backgrounds," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol2/iss1/6>

sons students relate sexually, (e.g., affection, self-discovery), as a clinician I suspect sexual expression increasingly reflects (1) a craving for the attachment that has been denied them in their own upbringing, (2) an attempt to reduce their own anxieties, and (3) an easy method to escape “the burden of selfhood.”²¹

In sum, the “moral mission” of higher education is a noble goal; but, in view of the cultural impairment that exists today, it is more and more a mission facing imposing if not insurmountable odds as we face the full brunt of culture’s dominating influence.

SECOND THESIS

The possibility for mature moral reflection in many young adults is compromised by their problematic life histories and impaired family backgrounds.

As a clinician I am growing increasingly concerned about the destabilizing effect that dysfunctional backgrounds are having on healthy young-adult development.²² Increasingly students who attend our schools come from backgrounds that, with many exceptions, are more and more psychologically tenuous.²³ Divorce, family conflict, addiction, and lack of attachment or healthy role models are increasingly part of many students’ life histories. Accumulating evidence shows that such backgrounds are taking their toll. One recent survey noted that “although still a minority, the proportion of new students who smoke, who feel depressed, and who feel overwhelmed has risen in recent years. In addition, the proportion who consider themselves ‘above average’ in emotional health has slipped.”²⁴ For example, how many readers of this article know students still struggling with residual feelings after the divorce of their parents?²⁵ For such students commitment is sometimes difficult. For many there is a continual struggle with anger and the negative feelings that surround self-image problems. Trust, too, is often an issue. Yet how does the moral life develop, much less flourish, when the self is so preoccupied with hurt and mistrust? The lingering effects of difficult family backgrounds—psychic pain, abnormal degrees of loneliness, and poor self-esteem—cannot help but adversely influence how young adults make moral decisions. Self-knowledge, a coherent value system, moral reflection, and compassion may *never* be fully developed in students from dysfunctional families, who may tend to assuage their hurt through self-destructive, escapist, and immature behaviors. The mental-health problems of today’s young adults, of course, raise an interesting question regarding the mission of the Jesuit college or university. Most certainly a hallmark of Jesuit education is “care for students.” However, is it the college’s

or the university’s mission to be a “quasi-therapeutic community”? In other words, how much time and resources can we adults put into such care, particularly when faced with limited budgets, the need to uphold basic rules and regulations, and the obligation to pursue professional and scholarly interests? I have heard from colleagues at several schools that at times they don’t know if they are professional educators or care givers.²⁶

The consumerist culture spoken of above as well as the shaky psychological development of many young people today might well explain the observations of the cultural historian Christopher Lasch. Lasch notes that “Americans have no compelling incentive to postpone gratification, because they no longer believe in the future.”²⁷ Though youth are often friendly, this “cheerfulness,” says Lasch, masks a deep-seated hopelessness. “I believe,” he says,

that young people in our society are living in a state of almost unbearable, though mostly inarticulate, agony. They experience the world only as a source of pleasure and pain. The culture at their disposal provides so little help in ordering the world that experience comes to them in the form merely of direct stimulation or deprivation, without much symbolic mediation.²⁸

*Most certainly
a hallmark of Jesuit
education is “care for
students.” However, is it
the college’s or the
university’s mission to be
a “quasi-therapeutic
community”?*
