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### Some Suggestions for Aiding Students' Moral Growth

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high school, so this new termination reopens old wounds. Unable to accept the loss of this relationship, Jim retreats into himself, his feelings wounded and his ability to reach out to others lessened. This passive psychological state is only one of several defensive strategies he could employ. Some young adults become hostile and verbally lash out at well-intentioned friends. Others blindly invest themselves in new projects or relationships in order to ease their hurt. Still others simply deny the whole experience and attempt to act as if life were as usual. Yet interpersonal concerns are central for young-adult development, and these issues are threaded with feelings. Jim's reaction to the termination of his relationship is replete with moral concerns. How he treats others, his anger, his ability to be honest yet forgiving—all are vital factors in Jim's moral growth.

The moral life is fashioned over the long term within an evolving life history. A "moral vision" provides an individual with increasing meaning and purpose, a sense of ideals, and a future yet to be. Within the context of one's life history, then, one is always in the process of considering the questions: "Who am I becoming?" "What do I desire?" "What are my hopes and dreams?" "What is my responsibility to others?" Such questions are rich with a sense of developing moral vision, and we must do everything possible to help young adults to be attentive to their personal visions and to evaluate their present actions in light of such visions. "The actions we take, and the moral significance which they should be accorded, will depend upon our moral vision."<sup>44</sup> As adults we must pose challenging questions that help young people reflect on how their present life actions sculpt their future course, particularly at the level of value.

### *The Young-Adult Conscience*

One cannot speak long about moral development without mentioning the word *conscience*. This construct has had a rich history, both in philosophy and theology.<sup>45</sup> In seventeenth-century England, Archbishop Laud wisely noted "no laws can be binding if there be no conscience to obey them."<sup>46</sup> On the recent Congressional vote to support the President's position on the Gulf War and the Clarence Thomas nomination, legislators were urged to "vote their conscience." In matters of import, conscience is often appealed to. It is not surprising that notions of conscience are central to the moral life, for conscience is intimately tied to moral choice and the entire spectrum of life decisions. When young adults leave our campuses, the one mechanism they may have for evaluating and acting morally is conscience. As adults involved in Jesuit

higher education, there are probably few things we would more desire for our students to carry with them when they leave our campuses than well-informed and well-functioning consciences.

One way in which conscience can be defined is the "oughtness" we bring to our decisions. The best approach to understanding conscience is holistic—evolving within one's life history. From developmental research we know that even very young children are capable of "prosocial" or caring behavior.<sup>47</sup> We must encourage this expression in young adults and nurture decision making that increasingly and significantly incorporates sensitivity toward others, proclaims other-centered values, and considers personal and life decisions within the context of the needs of the wider human community.<sup>48</sup>

Because the development of conscience is subject to the human limitations and personal shortcomings that accompany all growth and development, conscience is a frail reality, influenced (at times adversely) by the developmental needs young adults experience. Thus, identity and intimacy needs and the pain and searching so characteristic of young-adult experience are bound to cloud moral vision and decision making, thereby leading to morally questionable behaviors.

### *Some Suggestions*

How can we as educators and concerned adults who work at Jesuit schools encourage young adults to examine their lives and to behave ethically? First of all, we must be realistic about what actually can be accomplished. No doubt every year we graduate some ideal students—those graduates who possess a healthy sense of self-identity, are reflective and utilize mature conscience functioning, and consistently evidence in their daily lives compassion and a desire to be of service to others. On the other hand, a good number of students will have fallen through the cracks; these students are often psychologically hurting and self-absorbed; some are interested simply in their own material well-being and ignorant of or, quite frankly, unconcerned, unimpressed, or hostile to the value mission of our schools. Most students, I think, are situated between these two poles. For this vast majority we can hopefully predict that some class lectures and discussions, some contact with an interested faculty member or other staff person, and/or some structured experience within the wider college or university community (for example, liturgy, dormitory environment, service projects) have contributed both to on-going and healthy identity consolidation, a maturing conscience, and to some degree a more compassionate life stance. In other words, their

time at a Jesuit institution of higher education has been a positive experience. But, again, let us be *realistic* about the challenge and realities before us.

Let us now consider three approaches for aiding students' moral growth: these are termed the communal, the formal, and the interpersonal approaches. What about our mission as a distinctive *community* of value-centered higher education? The philosopher Isaiah Berlin has written that

the goals and motives that guide human action must be looked at in the light of all that we know and understand; their roots and growth, their essence, and above all their validity, must be critically examined with every intellectual resource that we have. This urgent need, apart from the intrinsic value of the discovery of truth about human relationship, makes ethics a field of primary importance. Only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where they are, where they appear to be going, whether they wish to go there, and if so, why, and if not, why not.<sup>49</sup>

Given the current state of affairs in our society, "critically examined" becomes the key issue. Realistically, Jesuit colleges and universities encompass within their communities a vast diversity of opinion and belief (which of course is a hallmark of the higher-education community as well as vital for academic freedom). Perhaps the essence of being Jesuit and Catholic is not that we have agreement on the "right" answers, but that we offer an environment for on-going dialogue where the "right" questions can be asked, questions which invite the "critical examination" that Berlin speaks of. From this dialogical encounter among ourselves, done within an atmosphere of good-will and openness, value statements do surface and can be embraced. What is crucial is that our college and university communities which incorporate diverse and vast constituencies (for example, faculty, departments, Jesuit community, staffs, administration) engage in continual dialogue in order to ensure on-going *value-consciousness* raising among these various groups. (I offer at the end of this paper some questions which might help stimulate discussions at Jesuit college or university communities.) Such discussion takes time and energy, and will no doubt give rise to disagreement and perhaps argument and misunderstanding. Yet moral growth is not just a private or interpersonal experience; it involves a community that is value evoking, continuously reminding students of its moral mission (and value searching), and offering a "holding environment" where vital personal and critical social issues can be explored critically.

On a *formal* level we must take seriously the teaching of moral education at both the undergraduate and gradu-

ate levels throughout the curriculum. "Dramatic and extensive changes occur in young adulthood (the 20s and 30s) in the basic problem solving strategies used by the person in dealing with ethical issues."<sup>50</sup> Further, there exists more extensive research on the effectiveness of moral-education courses than there does on most liberal-arts courses. "To assume that any 20-year-old of good general character can function ethically in professional situations is no more warranted than assuming that any logical 20-year-old can function as a lawyer without special education."<sup>51</sup>

Intellectual knowledge that lacks an ethical perspective is flawed. "A higher education, no matter how intellectually demanding, is incomplete unless it explores both ethical and social dimensions."<sup>52</sup> Cornell University provost Robert Barker reminds us of the Will Rogers quip how a "simple" person might steal a freight car, but give the same person a college degree and he or she might steal the entire railroad!<sup>53</sup> This insight is crucial. Ethical reasoning and knowledge are vital for intellectual functioning. The chemistry student must be challenged to realize the ecological and health consequences of chemical usage. The accounting major must be provided with opportunities to reflect and probe situations he or she will no doubt encounter where honesty is called for and integrity threatened. In the classroom our faculty must raise value-related issues and ethical implications tied to the content studied. At a Jesuit school should not faculty hiring, tenure decisions, and promotion be in part based on the teacher's classroom ability to elicit in students such moral self-awareness? Above all, we must eschew the misguided notion that a department's commitment to values is satisfied with the department's mandated ethics course. On the contrary, it is the responsibility of all department faculty through their teaching to commit themselves to such moral-consciousness raising.<sup>54</sup>

On the *interpersonal* level we must each examine how our own lives can intersect with those of students as they form their moral identities. Throughout the ages students have needed adult teachers and professionals as mentors. Today, however, this relationship takes on added significance. I believe what might be termed a "paradigm shift" in youth's thinking has occurred. The essentialist and deductive world of moral truth that was so much a part of our own growing up does not speak to youth today. Rather,

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what forms their thinking above all else is their personal *experience* and their *relational* encounters. Young adults evaluate their well-being and the meaning of their lives more than ever before by the quality of their relationships. Given the difficult family backgrounds and lack of healthy attachments in many student lives, these adult-student

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relationships take on even more significance. As such, our relationships with students provide pivotal self-referencing for them as they pursue their future moral quests. Within this relationship we must offer, more than anything else, an atmosphere that enables students to ask the right questions. In addition, through contact with them, we must support their quests for identity through patient yet challenging dialogue, so that they more consciously reflect upon their values, de-

velop their life projects, and fashion a consciousness that embraces compassion, moral vision, and service to others. To accomplish this end, reflecting on life-story issues, focusing on decision making, and inquiring about values are necessary. The following suggestions may prove helpful in accomplishing these ends.

**1. Listen to Student Experience.** One of the most difficult challenges for adults is to remain focused on the young adult's subjective experience. Let them tell their stories. This requires having a sensitivity for the underlying fears, doubts, and joys which preoccupy youth. Further, such listening allows to surface an awareness of what really matters for the student. We must always remember that we filter student reactions through the eyes of our own adulthood, and perhaps at times unintentionally downplay what is meaningful to them. The best check on such insensitivity is for us to reflect periodically on our own experiences as young persons—recalling the doubts, concerns, and fears we had, as well as the positive feelings a caring and trusting adult's presence engendered. We must be attending to what really matters to undergraduates and reflect with them on the self-discovery their experiences elicit.

**2. Be Role Models.** This might strike the reader as old-fashioned, but it is good psychology and good common sense. Being a role model involves everything from being faithful to office hours and respecting students' opinions

to being available to students and making efforts to ensure one's personal life mirrors the values one holds dear. A vital question here is, How well do I live out fidelity and commitment in my own life? Moreover, role modeling is not only a personal but also an institutional challenge. Increasingly, colleges and universities are being challenged to examine their own moral responsibilities.<sup>55</sup> Derek Bok has said it best: "Nothing is so likely to produce cynicism, especially among those taking courses in practical ethics, as a realization that the very institution that offers such classes shows little concern for living up to its own moral obligations."<sup>56</sup> For a Jesuit school this is not always easy. How do we negotiate among different constituencies within the school that might have differing moral visions? Indeed, on what issues can we speak with "one voice" regarding our "moral obligations"? For example, when considering whether to recognize a gay-student organization on campus, what is the moral reference point for making such a decision? The legitimate needs of students? the discerning judgment of administrators? the doctrine of the institutional church? the impassioned views of other groups that make up the college or university community (for instance, the alumni)?

**3. Make Value Judgments.** In the classroom let students know where you stand. Although professional responsibilities mandate the need to present fairly and cite impartially all pertinent evidence regarding any issue, students need to hear how we adults have come to our moral positions and struggled to discern values in complex human dilemmas. Such conversation can be of great help to young adults as they continue to develop ethical frameworks for their behavior.

**4. Advocate Books.** In conversations with students take the time to ask, "What books have you read recently?" Ask them, "What have you learned from your reading?" Find out why they liked a particular novel and what they have learned about themselves and life from their reading. Suggest other books to them and let them know why you liked them and how they influenced you. Literature is valued because it conveys the perennial questions and dramatizes the struggles requisite for moral life.<sup>57</sup> "Again and again, instructed by novelists, students remind themselves of life's contingencies; and in so doing, they take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done."<sup>58</sup> Echoing this view, Robert Bellah notes:

We must recover an enlarged paradigm of knowledge, which recognizes the value of science but acknowledges that other ways of knowing have equal dignity. Practical reason, in its classical sense of

moral reason, must regain its importance in our educational life. We must give more than a token bow to art and literature as mere vessels of expressive values, for they can often give us deep moral insight.<sup>59</sup>

**5. Ask Good Questions.** The art of listening means, above all, being attentive to where a person is. For young adults this means helping them with *self-discovery*. Converse with students about what they are learning about themselves as human beings. How are they different? What experiences mean the most to them so far? Why? Such self-reflection fosters value awareness and value choice.

**6. Make Referrals.** Though concerned adults on campus can act as mentors and offer support, many students' dysfunctional behaviors require professional intervention. Oftentimes well-meaning faculty, administrators, and ministry personnel are unaware of underlying issues in the young adult's life. As we noted above, moral growth can be sidetracked by psychic pain and unrequited needs. If a student's problem "feels out of synch" when compared to the normal developmental issues that students experience, encourage the student to visit the campus counseling center or to consult a trained professional.

**7. Stimulate the Imagination.** Moral growth includes discovering new ways of seeing and understanding—asking new questions and more fully recognizing related issues. In short, imagination allows discovery of the network of relationships and issues involved in decision making as well as what future possibilities might be. In conversations with students I have often inquired as to how they now view something differently, based on their experience, and ask what values these new insights best reflect. Also, I discuss with students their hopes and dreams, what such aspirations say about them now, and how their present goals and behaviors help to realize their future desires.<sup>60</sup>

**8. Talk About Life Themes.** Research indicates that students often have difficulty articulating goals that provide their lives with meaning and purpose. One way to help students talk about goals is to encourage them to view their lives as stories. The psychologist Dan McAdams in his studies on young adulthood has argued that the identity quest itself is a life story.<sup>61</sup> People have a natural tendency to tell stories and view their lives in narrative ways that incorporate important people (characters), plots, significant moments, and enduring themes. "One may view narratives as the laboratory of moral life."<sup>62</sup> I often ask students to talk about the main characters and important

themes in their lives. Profitable time can be spent exploring how they will "write their future story": Some helpful questions might be: What are three events or people that have shaped your life? What are the life projects you hope to take on? What do you desire to convey to others through your future life actions? What values does your future life project reflect?

**9. Encourage Involvement.** Learning is more than the classroom. Jesuit schools have made concerted efforts through ministry and outreach projects to serve both the campus and the wider neighborhood and civic communities. Encourage student involvement. Service projects equip the student with a broadened horizon, self-knowledge, and heightened feelings of empathy—a vital experience for compassionate responding.<sup>63</sup> I am continually struck at how often service projects and internship experiences stimulate and even alter the young adult's perspective. The key here, I think, is empathy arousal which allows for a "new way of seeing." We must not underestimate the power of affective knowledge to shape students' moral visions.

**10. Ask About Communities.** Self-identity is in large part discovered through a state of being in relationship. Young adults are tied to numerous communities: family of origin, friendship groups, dormitory floor, club membership, fraternity or sorority, sports team, and the like. Fruitful time can be spent exploring with students what each of these communities represents to them, how they have been influenced by them, and what values these various group relationships convey.

**11. Stress Responsibility.** Certainly one goal of education is the formation of personal integrity. This integrity includes personal responsibility and the freedom to choose behaviors which address one's fidelity to one's core values. Students are often psychically disjunctive when evaluating their own responsibilities. They are often prone to judge the shortcomings of others (especially adults), yet fail to examine adequately their own motives and behaviors. Likewise, the acutely felt nature of much of their experience predisposes them to become self-absorbed, thereby preventing sufficient reflection regarding (a) what in their own life has led up to the experience, (b) what is currently influencing their behavior, (c) how their behavior might be affecting others, and (d) how their behavior might be harming themselves personally. We need to lead students through these questions with an eye toward helping them realize how they have invested and might continue to invest themselves and what the consequences of such investments are for themselves and others.