

## **Schools of Conscience:**

### **Education's highest aim is to create moral and civic habits of the heart.**

*Charles C. Haynes, May 2009*

At a time when the United States faces unprecedented challenges at home and abroad, public schools must do far more to prepare young people to be engaged, ethical advocates of "liberty and justice for all." Yes, reading and math are important. But what matters most is what kinds of human beings are reading the books and doing the math.

After all, the character of a nation is determined by the character of its people. "Is there no virtue among us?" asked James Madison. "If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. ... To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea" (Padover, 1953, p. 48).

That's why, as a lifelong advocate of social justice and First Amendment rights, I vigorously support character education and civic learning as high priorities in public education.

A story I heard during a trip to Israel in August 2008 gave me a deeper appreciation for how much is at stake. I was standing in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. Our guide was relating stories of the Righteous—non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews—as we looked at the trees planted in their honor. During a pause in the narrative, one of our group, Richard Foltin of the American Jewish Committee, said almost inaudibly, "Not all of them are named." I turned and asked what he meant. He replied, "I am standing here now because of a man whose name I do not know." When pressed to explain, he told this story:

My parents are Holocaust survivors. When my father arrived at Auschwitz, they were separating those who would be killed immediately from those who would be put to work. A guard called out, "Is anyone here a welder?" and my father shouted, "I am," although he actually knew nothing about welding.

They sent my father and a few others to the welding shop and told them to make a sample of their work for inspection. My father stood there looking at the equipment, despairing over what to do. Then, almost imperceptibly, the German foreman in charge of the shop slipped a finished piece of work in front of my father. My father picked it up and took it to the guards, and he passed inspection.

Throughout the rest of his time in the camp, the foreman continued to secretly help my father—to cover for him when necessary. And my father survived. They didn't speak. We don't even know his name.

When Richard ended his story, I could not help but wonder, why did that nameless German risk his life for a Jew he did not know? More broadly, why did any of the thousands now called the Righteous respond with compassion and courage when so many others were either complicit or indifferent?

#### *Civic Habits of the Heart*

As I contemplated this question, I could not think of anything that the rescuers during the Holocaust had in common. Some were religious; others were not. Some were wealthy; others were poor. Some were highly educated; others were barely literate.

Then it struck me. We may never explain fully what combination of family, faith, education, or grace inspired them to risk everything, and in many cases to lose everything, for people they didn't know. But there's one thing most of them had in

common: They did not stop to think about what they did; they simply acted. At the core of story after story we witness spontaneous courage, goodness, and compassion.

But people don't acquire these attributes suddenly when faced with suffering and evil. Rather, courage, goodness, and compassion are habits of the heart—shaped over a lifetime—which define individual conscience and determine how a person will respond when fellow human beings are hurt, attacked, or victimized.

John Weidner, a rescuer who organized a network in France that helped about 800 Jews escape the Nazis, explained,

During our lives, each of us faces a choice: to think only about yourself, to get as much as you can for yourself, or to think about others, to serve, to be helpful to those who are in need. I believe that it is very important to develop your ... heart, to have a heart open to the suffering of others. (Ritter & Myers, 1986, p. 65)

Developing students' hearts, I believe, is what educators are called to do. Each and every small act of honesty, service, responsibility, and compassion that teachers and administrators encourage daily in their students—and model consistently in their own lives—helps create moral and civic habits of the heart that instill in students the courage to care.

### Defining Conscience

Because *conscience* is a word that has sadly fallen into disuse in a culture preoccupied with self-interest and material gain, let me be clear what I mean by the term. Conscience is the faculty within each of us with which we search for life's ultimate meaning and distinguish right from wrong, good from evil. Conscience is informed by many sources: families and friends, communities of faith, and of course schools. Conscience inspires us to act for a higher purpose, to do what we *must* do because we believe it's right.

The freedom to follow what the framers of the U.S. Constitution described as "the dictates of conscience" is a precious, fundamental right founded on the inviolable dignity of the individual. That's why liberty of conscience is often called our "first freedom."

In recent decades, our national conscience appears to have fallen asleep. Consider that in fall 2008, when credit dried up and the stock market fell, the government declared an emergency and provided billions of dollars to rescue Wall Street. But when millions of people go to bed hungry, lack health care or employment, and live in poverty and despair, there is no declaration of national emergency, no bailout, no rescue plan, and no special session of Congress.

We must never forget the lesson taught at Yad Vashem: No matter how highly educated or sophisticated, a nation without a critical mass of citizens of conscience may become indifferent to suffering and fall prey to tyranny and intolerance.

### Students of Conscience

Young people have often been the ones who renewed the conscience of the nation. Remember Barbara Johns? Only 16 years old in 1951, she understood the injustice of the terrible conditions in the segregated school she attended in Farmville, Virginia. If you attended the white school down the road, you actually got new textbooks and ceilings that didn't leak. So she took over the school assembly and led a student strike that changed America. She and her classmates suffered threats and intimidation; many were unable to finish their education. But their acts of conscience led to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that ended legal school segregation.

Our history is replete with such stories. Consider Billy Gobitis, the Jehovah's Witness 5th grader whose refusal to salute the flag on grounds of religious conscience in 1935 eventually led to a Supreme Court decision expanding liberty of conscience and free

speech for all. Or Mary Beth Tinker, the high school student whose decision to wear a black armband protesting the Vietnam War in 1965 led to the landmark Supreme Court decision protecting students' right of expression in public schools. The list goes on (Haynes, Chaltain, & Glisson, 2006).

Far from being a nuisance that we need to control, students of conscience who dare to stand up for justice and freedom have always been our best hope for changing what is wrong and unjust in our society and in societies around the world. What Martin Luther King Jr. said about the students who sat in at lunch counters in 1960, helping pave the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, could also be said about Barbara, Billy, Mary Beth, and the many other young people who have had the courage to act on their convictions:

I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream. They were taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. (King, 1968)

### The Problem of Moral Illiteracy

Here is our challenge: At a time when we most need to graduate people of conscience, many of our schools are prohibiting students from practicing civic habits of the heart and exercising their freedom of conscience. Growing numbers of schools are shutting down student voice, closing student newspapers, avoiding discussion of ethical issues, violating the First Amendment rights of students, excluding students and faculty from decision making, and sending dissent underground or onto the Internet (Hudson, 2003, 2005).

Even in those schools committed to developing character and conscience, much of the curriculum continues to undermine the ethical message the schools say they wish to convey. Because we are in the worst economic crisis in more than 70 years (a crisis rooted in greed and exacerbated by unethical behavior), let me single out economics education for special concern.

As Warren Nord and I (1998) have pointed out, the national content standards in economics—and most texts—never make moral judgments or discuss morality. They make no reference to the environment, materialism, poverty, justice, rights, codes of ethics, or the dignity of human beings. Why? Because the disciplinary framework that shapes the standards and the textbooks is neoclassical economic theory, according to which people are essentially self-interested utility maximizers and values are personal preferences. Economics, in other words, has nothing to do with ethics.

Shouldn't we also expose economics students to the humane, religious, and ethical ways of thinking about economics? The standards and texts ignore poverty as a moral issue, are silent about economic and social justice, fail to even mention charitable giving, say nothing about work as a calling, and avoid any mention of the effects of economic growth on the environment (Nord & Haynes, 1998).

Given this morally impoverished view of the human enterprise, why are we surprised at the widespread corruption, greed, and just plain selfishness that contributed to the current economic crisis? Growing numbers of business schools, including George Washington University's, are now dramatically reframing their curriculums to focus on ethics. It's about time. And it's also about time to do the same at every level, in every school.

### Molding Civic Conscience

Instead of presenting barriers to shaping people of conscience, schools should be the laboratories for acts of conscience. We want to inspire students to follow their conscience not *in spite* of what we teach and do in our schools, but *because* of what we teach and do.

Recently, at a superintendents' conference in Michigan, I watched as high school students participating in the Kids Against Hunger initiative stood at tables outside meeting rooms busily preparing nutritionally balanced food packages for people who are hungry. The idea was to inspire the superintendents going in and out of sessions to focus not just on budgets and test scores but also on creating school climates of compassion and service.

The students involved in this initiative do more than measure rice and fill boxes. They also learn in class why 18,000 children die every day from hunger and 850 million people go to bed every night with empty stomachs. Most important, they investigate long-term solutions to one of the world's most devastating problems.

World hunger and the other human tragedies—poverty, disease, tyranny, and war itself—offend a conscience shaped by concern for others. Meeting these challenges requires more than politics and money; it requires people of conscience who are compelled to act.

#### Freedom of Conscience in Action

To prepare students to be ethical, engaged citizens, we must give them (and all members of the school community) meaningful opportunities to practice freedom responsibly in a school culture that encourages shared decision making, service learning, peer mediation, ethical use of the Internet, and a free student press. In short, we need schools that actually practice what their civics classes are supposed to teach: freedom and democracy, not censorship and repression.

Schools of conscience are committed to supporting students in their personal search for meaning and truth while simultaneously teaching them the civic principles and virtues necessary for sustaining the common good in a democracy. Schools of conscience also allow students to exercise their right of conscience by giving them a meaningful voice in shaping the life of the school.

At the Character Education Partnership's annual forum in November 2008, it was inspiring to see how many of the award-winning best practices in character education focus on giving students a real voice. For example, at Valley Park Middle School in Missouri, one of 11 schools honored by the Partnership as a 2008 National School of Character, every class creates its own set of rules, and every student has the opportunity to speak at class meetings. The student-run Character Council suggests areas for improvement. Trained peer mediators help their fellow students resolve conflicts. Students frequently discuss ethical issues in classes across the curriculum; for example, a science class may explore the importance of honesty in research.

Valley Park has discovered not only what really matters, but also what works. Five years ago, the school had many of the same academic and discipline challenges most schools face, and students lacked a sense of belonging. Today, character education has transformed the entire school culture. Suspensions are way down, grades are up, and all members of the school community—students, staff, and parents—now feel part of a caring family. (For a full description of Valley Park and the other 2008 winners, visit [www.character.org/nsoc](http://www.character.org/nsoc).)

César Chávez Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., is another school that is making the connection between civic conscience and democratic freedom. A Mexican immigrant, Irasema Salcido, founded the school in 1998 to give students who have been neglected and left behind the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to make a difference in their community and nation. The school, now expanded to three campuses serving more than 1,200 predominantly black and Latino students in grades 6–12, integrates public policy issues and moral questions across the curriculum. Talking to a reporter about her course in world history, one student spoke for many:

I've learned a lot about the world in this course, and it has changed my sense of responsibility. I act more responsibly in my community. I live far from Rwanda and Sudan, but I know what can be done in my own neighborhood. Things can change. If you put your mind to it, it can be done. (Snow, 2004, p. DZ04)

At César Chávez, every student is actively engaged through projects and internships in issues of social justice and civic responsibility. For example, 10th grade students recently worked on issues ranging from adequate bus service in low-income areas to campaign finance reform. And in 11th grade, students complete a three-week academic fellowship at a wide variety of public policy organizations, from the Leadership Committee on Civil Rights to the Heritage Foundation. The school's work has been aptly described as "molding a civic conscience" (Snow, 2004, p. DZ04).

### The Courage to Care

Describing schools like César Chávez and Valley Park brings me full circle, back to the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. As I stood there contemplating the courage of the rescuers, I remembered with gratitude and admiration the many educators who strive each day to create schools of conscience, places committed to preparing students to stand up for liberty and justice for all. Their dedication to the cause of conscience inspires hope for the future of the American experiment in democratic freedom.

One of the rescuers honored in the garden is Magda Trocme, who with her husband Pastor Andre Trocme helped Jews hide in and around the village of Le Chambon in central France. In an interview given just before her death, she described in a few simple sentences what it means to have the courage to care:

None of us thought we were heroes. We were just people trying to do our best. ... Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances that will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision of your own, not about other people but about yourself. I would not say more. (Ritter & Myers, 1986, p. 107)

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### Source:

[http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/may09/vol66/num08/Schools\\_of\\_Conscience.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/may09/vol66/num08/Schools_of_Conscience.aspx)

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