MORAL LITERACY:
THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH, JUSTICE, GOODNESS, AND INTERDEPENDENCE

by

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My subject is moral literacy. My one big idea is that there is a body of moral knowledge with which everyone should be acquainted if we are to live meaningfully and to participate in authentic community often referred to as civil society. Further, as leaders of independent schools, I submit that each of you has a role to play in disseminating this grammar of moral existence that is so essential to the future of our democracy. Our focus, then, is upon knowledge and the dissemination of that knowledge.

My approach to this large and intimidating subject is informed by a debate that raged a few years ago. Perhaps one of the early shots fired in the culture war, E.D. Hirsch, Harold Bloom, and Mortimer Adler argued for “cultural literacy” as a acquaintance with a discrete body of cultural knowledge. They went further to suggest that there is a canon of such ideas and texts and that educators would be well served by inculcating the contents of this list or canon of great cultural facts.
Other educators responded that the point of education is not to teach people what to think, but how to think, and that the “facts” that comprise education are of secondary importance. Still others argued that the assertion of a single canon was an act of cultural imperialism that showed evidence of racism, sexism, class bias, and other forms of exclusion. I opt for the notion of an open, dynamic canon that is constantly being revised. Inclusion is judged by the capacity of the text or cultural fact to convey in an exceptional manner the truths we hold to be most dear.

Many people attribute the rising acceptance of deviance in our society to the culturally disruptive and dynamic period of the 1960s. It is not my purpose to examine that history here. It has been brilliantly interpreted already by observers such as Christopher Lasch, Robert N. Bellah, Cornel West, Steven Tipton, and Jean Bethke Ehlstain. I am more concerned about the cultural and moral consequences that radiate from that explosive era. I would like to characterize the period since the sixties as a time of eroding moral literacy. The importance of certain moral visions, virtues and values was radically challenged. As the earlier moral codes were challenged, baby boomers experimented with alternative codes and cultures of behavior and many critiqued the notion of morality altogether.

Whose morality was this after all? Soon, popular approaches to parenting and early childhood education sought to be nonjudgmental and, often, non-directive. This movement had parallels in the therapeutic community where counseling and psychotherapy reflected an emerging set of cultural values that were morally relativistic, situational, existential, and utilitarian.¹
The erosion or decline of moral literacy is responsible, in part, for much bad behavior in public and private life. This decline is pervasive in our culture. Wherever you look you see evidence of this crisis of literacy and commitment. Whether in boardrooms or boxing rings, in the comfortable suburban schools or the streets of the inner city, from military prisons to elite business schools where a majority of students polled indicated a willingness to lie or cheat to increase profits. A 1994 *Newsweek* magazine poll asked: “Do you think the United States is in a moral and spiritual decline?” 76% said yes, 20% said no.\(^{\text{ii}}\)

This discussion occurs against the background of a larger societal concern with eroding literacy. For instance, according to Literacy Action, Inc., a thirty year old, Atlanta-based organization committed to teaching adults the “basic skills needed to reach their full potential as individuals and citizens”

- the U.S. has the lowest literacy rate among industrialized nations;
- more than 20% of adults read at or below a fifth-grade level;
- the U.S. spends $1.5 billion annually on corrections to house 600,000 illiterate inmates;
- 85% of juvenile offenders are disabled readers;
- children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores and are less likely to drop out of school; and,
- 43% of adults with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty, and 70% have no job or a part-time job.

Despite significant progress in our societal literacy rates as compared with the beginning of this century, these are sobering statistics.
In most theological seminaries, we worry a great deal about what we regard as the growing phenomenon of biblical illiteracy evident among incoming students. Most of them possess little familiarity with sacred scripture. Consequently, graduate level courses on the Bible often resort to lay the foundation that in earlier times would have been accomplished in Sunday School. I cannot resist quoting H.L. Mencken’s observation that “a Sunday School is a prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents.” In light of Mencken, perhaps we should say that these non-Sunday schooled seminarians are byproducts of the period when moral knowledge was contested and moral commitment waned.

Literacy matters. Anyone concerned about the quality of life should be concerned with the state of our personal and collective literacy in all of its dimensions: mathematical literacy, computer literacy, cultural literacy, scientific literacy, and, I would add, moral literacy.

MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMITMENT

What is the body of knowledge that we should desire that all citizens possess as moral agents? What does it mean to be morally literate? I would like to suggest that it includes familiarity with the stories, traditions, texts, practices, and people who define our cherished moral ideals. Despite the wondrous diversity and cultural pluralism in this nation, there are certain moral facts that all rational people can and should admire. We affirm the tradition of young people respecting their elders. I suspect that most of us think that everyone would be better off if they adhered to the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. We prefer that all people possess certain basic social graces or manners. And, we admire morally exemplary people such as
Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela. On occasion, we may even be inspired enough to imitate their behavior.

The subtitle of my lecture is “The knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, and interdependence.” In contemporary scholarly circles, producing prescriptive lists of character virtues is the intellectual equivalent of picking a fight. After all, what makes this list better than any other? ‘Who determines which virtues are essential and desirable?’ I would argue that any list of virtues betrays an underlying, or better, an overarching vision of the good person. The essential virtues provide the outline of a portrait that is necessarily incomplete and requires elaboration through dialogue in particular communities located in particular contexts. Still, the essential desirable components of good character are constant.

Here I would like to cite the work of David Tracy, a theologian at the University of Chicago who reflects upon the nature of cultural classics, a subject that seems to preoccupy Chicago scholars. He suggests that a classic is a text, story, work of art, individual life, or event that emerges out of a particular time and culture but possesses an “excess and permanence of meaning”, (invoking the philosopher Martin Heidegger) that renders it accessible to all rational people.

Hence, one need not be Russian to appreciate the genius of Dostoyevsky, or Irish to apprehend the power of James Joyce, or African American to be riveted by the insight of W.E.B. Du Bois. Rather, their works touch us, or to use Paul Tillich’s wonderful metaphor, they grasp us and do not let us go. In contrast to “period pieces” that depend upon a particular time and place for their resonance, the classic is timeless and it is, as Mortimer Adler helpfully adds, re-readable. It has no shelf life. Each subsequent revisit
is a fresh visit. We can re-view the classic film, or re-read the poem, or re-examine an exemplary life, over and over, and each time we will find something that was not available before. As the church historian Martin Marty would say, you don’t read the classic, it reads you.

Moral knowledge of the sort that I am suggesting is required for a civil society is classic in nature. It is not limited to a closed or fixed canon. The canon is open, dynamic, and revisable.

I am suggesting four grand virtues that mark the good life: truth, justice, goodness and interdependence. Again, it is my incomplete outline and vision of the good person. Of course, the categories of the good person and the just society date back to the earliest evidence of human reflection about the well-lived life.

Recognizing the importance of schools as participants in the process of nurturing virtuous people years ago, the Georgia Department of Education has generated a list of 34 values that can focus school discussions of character education. Aristotle suggested that there were four basic virtues (temperance, prudence, fortitude, and courage); the Apostle Paul argued for the privileged position of three virtues (faith, hope and love); Jesus asserted one supreme virtue…love, of God, others and self. What’s going on here? Is it that the smarter you are the shorter your list? Just kidding.

All of these great moral philosophers are working on the same project, the transformation and elevation of human existence through, in part, the elaboration of virtue. For religious philosophers this is more than an educational project, it may also involve inner conversion and re-orienting one’s deepest motivations in life. But, I will say more of this later. Suffice it to say that virtue is an essential category for organizing
our thoughts about the good life, and that conversation does not require a religious or theological analysis in order to produce significant clarity and progress on the subject.

“Virtue is a quality of character by which individuals habitually recognize and do the right thing.” Those who work from an orientation known as the “ethics of virtue” argue that “some personal choices and categories are morally superior to others.”

Truth is better than falsehood. Justice is superior to unfairness. Goodness is queen over meanness and selfishness. And, beauty, whether intrinsic or in the eye of the beholder is preferable to its opposite.

Truth is the currency that makes all communication trustworthy and worth the effort. According to the German social thinker, Jurgen Habermas, truthful communication helps to underwrite democracy as it is the bond of trust and faith between people of equal dignity. Totalitarian societies are built upon lies, or one big lie, that only a few privileged people should participate in the public conversation, and all other people are simply means to the end of gratifying the few. Lies destabilize the social order, especially those that are detected and unpunished.

But, Martin Luther King, Jr. was fond of declaring that truth crushed to the ground will rise again. Truth conspires toward our freedom. For if the truth does set us free, then any lie or social arrangement built upon falsehood will forever feel the earth tremble as truth like a repressed force of nature seeks to find the crack through which its volcanic energy may burst. One of the great challenges of the work we do is to convey to faculty, staff, and students, the importance of telling the truth, and of speaking the truth in humility.
Justice is the discernment of the proper ordering of relationships. It consists of the capacity to treat like cases in a similar manner. It is even-handedness and the Solomonic apprehension of the means by which life’s inevitable disorder can find mitigation and relief. Under normal circumstances, it operates in accord with formal, procedural principles and rules of distribution. But, under unusual circumstances, it recognizes when compassion and casuistry may achieve the just ends toward which formal procedures aim but are not be adequately and precisely calibrated.

Well-ordered individuals require well-ordered communities and states to support a good life. Hence, the virtue of justice in an individual is not sufficient for a good life. There must be social justice as well. And, the just woman or man must work to establish a just social order. That is why we cannot be indifferent to the state of our courts of law, legislatures, tax codes, or criminal justice system. All of them play a role in establishing the boundaries within which just people may flourish.

Here again, Dr. King’s wisdom and voice echo, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.” Societies, not simply individuals, reap what they sow. King offered not merely an historical claim or a transendant hope but a theological and philosophical statement about the very structure of reality, an ontological claim. The universe is so constructed as to abhor injustice and disorder. Its corrections may be slow but they are inevitable and even destined.

Goodness is a way of naming an ensemble of virtues that pertain to a loving regard for others, including a willingness to place oneself in the shoes of the other. Goodness includes a generosity of spirit that includes others, that is impatient with circles and rules that exclude. It is manifest in a magnanimity that aspires to the noble, high-
minded resolution of conflict. It refuses to drift downward into an ethic of revenge and self-centeredness. We all know how refreshing it is to find, students in our schools and faculty and staff who are solidly good people.

Interdependence is an awareness that we are inescapably connected to other people and we have certain responsibilities for the common good.

An internet exercise titled, “Something to think about” asks the reader to shrink the earth’s entire population to 100 people, with all the existing human ratios remaining the same. This is not what we might look like or could look like but what there actually would be:

57 Asians
21 Europeans
14 from North and South America
8 Africans
52 would be female
48 would be male
70 would be darker skinned people, 30 white people
70 would be from a religious tradition other than Christianity
30 would be Christian
89 would be heterosexual
11 would be homosexual
59% of the entire world's wealth would belong to only 6 people and all 6 would be citizens of the United States
80 would live in substandard housing
70 would be unable to read
50 would suffer from malnutrition
1 would be near death
1 would be near birth
Only 1 would have a college education
99 of them would not see this message,
Because only 1 would have a computer.

and then it ends:

When one considers our world from such a compressed perspective, the need for both acceptance and understanding becomes glaringly apparent
This picture suggests that in order to make the best of our new world situation, we nurture and prepare students who are capable of engaging in conversation with a diverse global community of others.

This is not a new assignment. In his 1968 book, titled, “Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community?”, Dr. King was trying to point us into the future. The chapter is titled, “The World House.”

Dr. King opens with the story of how a novelist died and among his papers were suggestions for future stories. One of the most prominently highlighted suggestions was the following, “a widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.” King says,

This is the great new problem of humankind. We have inherited a large house, a great world house in which we have to live together__black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu__a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. (195)

Then in my favorite quote he says,

All people are interdependent...(W)hether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally “in the red”. We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half of the world… All life is interrelated. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. (211)

The knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, and interdependence should be accompanied by a commitment to practicing and embracing these virtues on a daily basis. It is not enough to know the good or to will the good. We must do good, or at least be found trying. I hope that this doesn’t sound too much like the bumper sticker that reads,
“Jesus is coming soon, look busy.” It is noble to be found trying to do the right thing. G.K. Chesterton would probably agree with this since he once observed that “the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”

The pursuit of the good life is, as many Greeks philosophers regard it, an “agon”, a “struggle, a contest, a race to be run.” It is not automatic, not easy, and always involves sacrifice and strife. According to Wayne Meeks, of Yale University, the choice between the easy life of vice and the difficult “life of virtue is an exceedingly lonely one.” And, the proper choice required a particular kind of education, or “paideia.” In ancient schools of philosophy, it was widely believed that “philosophical conversion and the virtuous life to which it leads are attainable only by an elite.” Meeks also notes that some Greeks believed that what commonly passed for a good education was not truly so, but only a “pseudopaideia.”

Education matters. Literacy depends upon it. But how do we come by the knowledge of truth, justice, goodness, interdependence, and the other virtues that you have, no doubt, added mentally to this list?

We learn these essential and precious lessons most profoundly by hearing stories and provocative words and by seeing those words enfleshed. That is, we learn moral knowledge and we commit ourselves to it by being grasped by, and entangled in, a web of narratives and exemplary lives that make morality come alive. It is not a passive process. It is a relational, interactive process. The classic reads us. It stakes its claim upon our minds and souls. Thereby, moral literacy becomes a way of life.
At the end of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah, Steven Tipton and fellow authors cite Helen Vendler’s 1980 presidential address to the Modern Language Association. She used as her text a passage from the end of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*:

“What we have loved, Others will love, and we will teach them how.”

She says:

“It is not within our power to reform the primary and secondary schools, even if we have a sense of how that reform might begin. We do have it within our power, I believe, to reform ourselves, to make it our own first task to give, especially to our beginning students, that rich web of associations, lodged in the tales of majority and minority cultures alike, by which they could begin to understand themselves as individuals and as social beings…All freshman English courses, to my mind, should devote at least half their time to the reading of myth, legend and parable; and beginning language courses should do the same…We owe it to ourselves to show our students, when they first meet us, what we are: we owe their dormant appetites, thwarted for so long in their previous schooling, that deep sustenance that will make them realize that they too, having been taught, love what we love.”

Expanding on Vendler’s challenge to teachers, I would argue that each of us has an opportunity and an obligation to teach others to love what we have loved; to cherish what we have cherished; and to know the best that we have known.

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7. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 294.