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Some Thoughts on World-Views and Education

One of the basic problems underlying the discussion of values and the future of education is the confusion caused by coexisting but divergent world-views. We could better appreciate the values perpetuated through the educational process if we come to terms with the world-views underlying what we value, how we value, and the manner in which we understand the very discussion of values. Everyone has a world-view or perspective on life. Not everyone, however, is aware of what this *Weltanschauung* is. As a result, we often send out conflicting signals about our own lives and are unable to understand the values of others who live in other countries, the house next door, or even in our own home. Only in the context of self and mutual understanding can communication about values become intelligible.

There are at least three world-views underpinning communication today, views differing from each other in such a way that it is almost impossible for a person operating from within one world-view to appreciate and even, in some cases, to remain unthreatened by the behavior of someone operating from within a different one. Nevertheless, while people tend to live by a dominant world-view, most of us incorporate into our persons some combination of all three. The recognition and appreciation of the world-view(s) most operative in our lives and in the lives of others could facilitate the process of education today and develop respect for the diversity of education which seems inevitable tomorrow.

classical world-view

The "classical" world-view is one familiar to most of us. It is a

product of Western civilization inherited from the ancient Greeks and is present in the thought patterns and value constructs of contemporary North American society. Characteristic of the classical view is the perception of the “world” as having *a priori* meaning and an objective order and design. The “self” has a dichotomous relation of spirit/body, and the meaning of a person’s life comes from finding one’s place in a carefully ordered vertical hierarchy of being somewhere between pure mineral and pure spirit.

Every life — no matter within which world-view — begins with a set of “givens,” and develops as the person chooses to “take up” or not take up these givens. For the classicalist, the “givens” are unquestioned, as are the ways in which they may be taken up. From within a classical world-view, everyone knows what s/he is expected to do and how s/he is expected to take up these givens. For example, men become engineers and lawyers; women become nurses and secretaries; men become chefs in restaurants while women monopolize domestic cooking; businessmen are expected to dress in grey flannel suits, while the mini, midi, maxi and pant-suits could never coexist as acceptable feminine fashions. The man is seen as the breadwinner, the woman is the one who stays home and raises the family. They may not always do so in the expected manner, but they “know” the way it “should be” done. Each person’s life has meaning insofar as the self is integrated into this universal order and external design by properly assuming the “roles” of husband, wife, father, mother, and so on. Not to “fit into” this design is to not find one’s proper “place;” not to stay within the expected norms is to risk being labelled “non-conformist,” or “odd,” or “abnormal.”

From within this classical world-view, unity is experienced through uniformity, stability through sameness. The emphases, goals and priorities characteristic of this classical world-view are those which facilitate a person’s opportunities to conform to and develop patterns of sameness. Tradition becomes the sacred canon which legitimizes every facet of life.

Teveye, of “Fiddler on the Roof” fame, is a cogent example of a person who, at a time when certain values seemed in conflict with his tradition, found himself shifting world-views. This happened as a result of his love for his daughters which was expressed through his yearning for their happiness. At the beginning of the play, Teveye lived consistently from within the world-view of his village of Anatevka — a view which assured him of passing on the tradition as he had received it. By the play’s end, however, he was struggling with a world-view which allowed him to question the very “givens”

of his tradition. It was “unthinkable” that his eldest daughter, Tzeitel, should choose her husband rather than marry the one chosen by her Papa, even though she did not love her Papa’s choice! Though Tevye tried to appreciate Tzeitel’s request, he was threatened by her desire to take up the givens of the tradition in a different way. Something was happening which could eventually disrupt his whole world:

“One little time you pull out a prop, and where does it stop, where does it stop?”

relational world-view

A second world-view, one which is becoming almost as familiar to us as the first, could be called “relational.” Signs of the presence of this world-view are that people seem to be (1) developing new types of relationships, (2) creating different kinds of values, and (3) seeing horizons not visible from within a classical world-view.

Characteristic of the relational world-view is human perception of the “world” as incomplete and therefore capable of development, and of the “self” as “person-in-relation-with-the-world.” Unlike the description of self from a classical perspective in which man is defined with reference to self, relational man describes self in reference to the world. In fact, one does not conceive of self except in relationship with the world, and one does not conceive of world except in relation to self. There is no dichotomous relationship between man and his world. There is, instead, a rhythm of inter-subjectivity in which all that had been seen in a classical view as external and with *a priori* meaning is now perceived as interrelated with the person and dependent on him as co-constitutor of whatever meaning it may have.

People living within a relational world-view share at least one thing in common with classicalists: they do not question the givens of their society. For example, both would consider as “givens” certain institutions of society: school, family, church, government. The person who has moved away from a classical world-view, however, and is operating from a more relational one does question how to take up these givens, e.g., what kind of education should be sought? when should s/he marry? should they have children? if so, how many and when? should s/he belong to the church inherited by birth? should s/he embrace the existing form of government or strive to change its structure?

Since answers to these questions rest on personal choices rather than on fitting into socially-acceptable patterns, appreciation of

diversity becomes a central concern, so central in fact that unity is possible only through the experience of diversity, and stability is possible only through the experience of change with continuity. The emphases, goals and priorities of the relational world-view, therefore, are those which facilitate opportunities to develop diverse relationships with the world and alternate responses to consequent social issues.

Tevye's response to his second daughter's request for his blessing on her marriage was typical of someone operating, momentarily at least, from within a relational world-view. Hodel chose to marry Perchik and asked her Papa, not for his permission, but simply his blessing!

Tevye: "They're not even asking permission from the Papa. What's happening to the tradition? One little time I pulled out a thread and where has it led? Where has it led?"

The relational world-view perceives tradition and the world as in process and, therefore, one has every reason to believe that there are numerous ways in which tradition will be passed on as well as taken up — each way relative to the individual and culture. What is most fundamental to tradition is assured of remaining fresh and credible to the extent that it is taken up uniquely by each person, and placed in a context of personal meaning. Thus hope for the future is intrinsic to the "passing on" of it.

newly emerging world-view

The third world-view is still in an embryonic stage. Unlike the classical and relational world-views, it can be appreciated more for what it seems to suggest than for what it clearly delineates. This newly emerging world-view distinguishes itself not only by the ways in which a person describes self and world, but also by the fact that man is in a position to question not just the way in which s/he takes up the givens, but the givens themselves.

Phenomena which have been considered for generations as unchangeable foundation stones, e.g., marriage, birth by right, death without choice, are now questioned. No longer is a person seen as a dichotomously related spirit/body, or as a person-in-relation-with-the-world, but as straining toward a new consciousness of qualifying identities such as "Indian," "black," "woman," "Latin-American," and so on. These new and yet unfinished attempts to further appreciate the uniqueness of personal identities are honed from former cultural

patterns and human responses to that culture. Thus, a person operating from within this third world-view questions the givens of what it means to be “Canadian,” “white,” “male,” “North American,” and all the rest. Exactly where this questioning of age-old givens will lead is still unclear but greater diversity seems certain to emerge. At the same time, in the face of such diversity, there is the temptation to reduce all real differences down to their least common denominator and to become what Herbert Marcuse describes as the “one-dimensional man.”

Within this newly emerging world-view, unity is experienced through a diversity that is not limited by mere coexistence. It is necessary therefore for those within this perspective to come to terms with the way in which relationships are to be lived out with others who have totally different givens or who are taking them up in radically different ways.

The marriage of Tevye’s third daughter, Chava, to Fyedka, a gentile, is a dramatic example of what is involved in appreciating another’s decision when it questions the basic assumptions of one’s own life. Tevye’s painful response is typical of a person challenged to risk acceptance of another world-view. The struggle urged him to attempt a reconciliation between what he considered essential to his tradition with the profound human value of his daughter’s love for Fyedka. Tevye was forced to face the excruciating dilemma of questioning his givens.

Chava: “Papa, I beg you to accept us.”

Tevye: “How can I accept . . . ? Can I deny everything I believe in? On the other hand, can I deny my own child? On the other hand, how can I turn my back on my faith, my people? If I try to bend that far, I will break. On the other hand . . . there is no other hand. No, Chava. No-no-no!”

some implications for education

Like Tevye, most educators probably harbor a combination of the “classical,” “relational” and “emerging” world-views, although one is usually dominant. The nub of the problem of shifting or maintaining world-views seems to rest here: is it possible not to betray one’s self and one’s people and at the same time to encourage others who see life differently, to live out their convictions even if in the process they risk modifying the prevalent tradition?

Since education is at the cross-roads of several world-views, there is a danger that we will settle — consciously or unconsciously — for educating for only one of these views to the exclusion of the

others. For example, those who see the world from within a “classical” perspective, would see the purpose of education as fostering respect for the tradition of the past by helping students to “fit” responsibly into society. Their loyalty would be tested in terms of how well they preserved the tradition as received, questioning neither the givens nor how to take them up.

Educators functioning from within a “relational” world-view would feel irresponsible if they did not educate in a way that radically questions how to take up life’s givens differently. To this end, they would develop curricula, design pedagogy and plan social action that would facilitate the students’ fitting into society’s institutions in ways different from the traditional patterns.

For those educators who are contributing to the “newly emerging” view, education’s future depends on how well they can promote a radical questioning of life’s givens. Curriculum design, therefore, would encourage questioning the givens of current political and economic systems, government, family, church/synagogue, and all the rest. Any education that did not raise such questions would be perceived as doing its students a disservice.

The first step in the process of educating for an appreciation of diverse world-views is for educators to personally come to terms with which world-views are most operative in their own lives. Awareness of one’s own world-view and an appreciation of the perspectives of others implies a readiness to surrender the false security of private Anatevkas and, like Tevye, a willingness to “always wear our hats” as a sign that we *can* move on because of our hope in the future.