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LOVE, PAIN, SHAME, COMPASSION, THE INGREDIENTS OF MORAL FORMATION

Today the President addressed the families & friends of policemen slaughtered this past year in line of duty by citizens whose moral formation was inadequate. Bush proposed the building of $1 billion in additional prisons, + executing more of these unformed citizens than we have been. Two good ideas, but of little longrun value unless combined with **improving the moral formation of our children.**

1. Well, how? But this Thinksheet is concerned with the prior question, *What are the ingredients of moral formation, character education?*....**Love**, with all its positive reinforcements. But millions of children are love-deprived at home, in school, everywhere. It's a good thing that love is not essential to the moral formation of the citizen, though it is of the human being. Looking at this cartoon, let's talk about the public school, which is set not to the moral formation of the human being (for that is the task of the whole human community) but only to that of the citizen. The reality is that we can't count on your run-of-the-mill school personnel, teaching & administrative, to be loving....Physical **pain** is a second ingredient. The fear of it, say some ideologs, is unnecessary & should be forbidden; others say it's ideally unnecessary but should not be forbidden, for some teachers & administrators may need it; & some say it's needed with some pupils but not all. The PS has moved so far away from physical punishment that, as the cartoon shows, fear has been transferred from pupil to principal! When brats rule at home or school, moral formation is out of reach, & $1 billion may not be enough for additional prisons....The third ingredient, **shame** vis-a-vis elders, does not exist in an ambiance lacking love or at least respect (& respect, I would argue, does not exist where there is no fear). Children disciplined by physical pain & shame, as I was, differ as to which they fear more. I, shame. I might be paddled if sent to the principal's office; but that wasn't as painful as facing the teacher & my classmates when I returned--& even that was not as painful as facing my disappointed parents, with the possibility of facing further physical pain. I had loving parents & teachers, but they could not have kept me in line without the two fears. As I write, the Los Angeles publicschool teachers are on strike for (yes, better pay, but also) greater freedom to discipline pupils. If the teachers fail as disciplinarians, society's next line of defense is the police, who sometimes need the help of the military. But can society afford sufficient police--eg, for N.Y.'s Central Park? But even if society could afford sufficient police (as in some societies I've seen them literally on every streetcorner), what of the quality of life in a society whose citizens have not internalized **the sociomoral code** enough to make such a high degree of social control necessary? (NB: Pluralism is no excuse to deny the existence, in our society, of a sociomoral code, which timidity & excessive respect for differences keep communities from spelling out.)....A final ingredient in moral formation is **compassion**, the eagerness to help victims & penitent victimizers....NB: **religiomoral formation** differs from moral formation in grounding all four ingredients in the sacred, in God.

2. Let's now put all this in the contexts of the **5 Rs** (relating, reading, 'riting, 'rithmatic, & religion) & the **3 Vs** (veneration, values, & virtues). [The 5 this & 3 that, I'm sounding Chinese! I devised these two clusters as an assonant way of displaying how truncated & impoverished is the education of most of America's children.] The 5 Rs are obvious. Here are

the 3 Vs:

Veneration, the profound feeling of being in the presence of the More Than We Are, the Exalted, the Transcendent--whoever/whatever/however-conceived. God, a pop star, the Oscars razzle-dazzle, you name it (for indeed each venerator, each human being, does in some sense name it). Sad irony: Our public schools give no education in veneration of the One at the center of our civilization's veneration. The children are left to wander among the idols. Religious education is verboten.

Values, the goal of ethical education, the engendering of what a society approves over against "vices," the realm of the disapproved, have--like religion--become privatized. Along with whatever else the child totes to school come the values, which the school helps the children to display (as the characters in "Peanuts" show each other the contents of their lunchboxers). This process, which is little more than values sharing, is overnamed "values education," which properly is imposing a society's values on its young, as "religious education" is imposing its religion. But in the current permissive atmosphere, imposing anything falls into the category of child abuse. (Imposing nothing & so producing psychosociopaths is child abuse.)

Virtues, the goal of moral education, are "habits of the heart" derivative from and expressing "the nature of things," and operating under the monitor called "conscience," which is consciousness in moral action. When you first read this Thinksheet's title, what connotata did "moral formation" have for you? For most Roman Catholics it would be identical to "religiomoral formation." Most secularists would be wary of it, smelling old lace or worse.

3. We've arrived at a conundrum: Is moral formation possible without veneration formation (in a common religion or at least religious heritage) & values formation (the yes/no confirguration peculiar to the particular society--eg, ancient Sparta's yes to warlikeness & no to peaceableness)? (Cp. the three groundings in my #1910: the providential, corresponding here to veneration; the moral, here virtues; & the empirical, here values.) Think of the games our society is now playing with this issue! In deference to pluralism, virtues are cannibalized into values under the illusion that the latter are more "objective" (whereas they're actually more subjective in the sense of peculiar to the society). A pathetic effort to cannibalize veneration into values confuses both, so of course also the children. There are, I believe, hopeful ways to go; but not without clarity & honesty vis-a-vis veneration/values/virtues.

4. Now let's make a stab at relating all this to social functionaries apropos a GD/HM (**grand design & higher meaning**). The philosopher tries to grasp it (discover it?) in concepts; the poet, in nets of images (create it?). The theologian uses both images & ideas to shape veneration toward a vision the preacher proclaims in the interest of piety & benevolence. The orator endeavors to move society toward specific objectives. And the teacher? Something of all of the others? To tradition the heritage & enhance it vis-a-vis the other heritage & the human creative potential. The heart of any heritage is its classics--in our case, supremely the Bible. Then Homer, Dante, Milton, our Founding Documents,....Minor strands in the heritage--Amerind, African, Asian--deserve some, not much, attention in the formation of our U.S. citizenry. For all this, "pluralism" (as excuse, not as reality) is the enemy. Pluralism & hostility toward the white male, the primary shaper of our heritage.

5. Nihilists point to the negatives in our heritage & threatens us both with overbelief (in Nietzsche's Superman, Hitler's Master Race) & with underbelief (cosmic & historical plotlessness & therefore anomie, its human reflection--religious chaos, ethical relativity, moral confusion). Our society is **cynical** about overbelief & **beguiled** by underbelief. To see this, & confess it, may be the beginning of hope.

6. What **pathologies** ensue when one or more of the ingredients of moral formation are weak or absent? I need only mention, as a category, the horrors of love deprivation, esp. in very young children but also at every stage of life. As for PET (Parent Effectiveness Training) & similar philosophies & programs, I agree with their positives but not their negatives (eg, no disciplinary use of physical pain & of shame)....In my four ingredients, where are veneration, the values, the virtues? With the exception of "compassion," all under "love." A rich conception of love as the primary channel of the 3 Vs as well as of the 5 Rs! But without the **2 Fs**, the fear of physical pain & of shame, love is overburdened, being asked to do more than it can (with the possible exception of through saints & the love gifted, of whom few surface in our society if indeed more than a few are present). I see a wry parallel here: love thus overburdened in moral formation, the public school overburdened in citizen formation. But what happens when the first three ingredients are weak or absent? This:

7. **Compassion** emerges as the supreme virtue & value, the **summum bonum**; & people become intolerant of anyone they view as compassion deficient, as one guilty of the **summum malum**, the supreme evil: the fear of being accused of being "insensitive" becomes the most powerful negative sanction. This pathology of "conspicuous compassion" (A.Bloom's felicitous phrase), & its attendant pathological fear, are now epidemic, polluting the moral-ethical air. Antichoice preachers accuse us prochoice preachers of being "insensitive" not just to the fetus but to "human life" itself. And being for capital punishment* is, in some quarters, barbarianly "insensitive to human worth & dignity." And hasn't Ollie North suffered enough? (He used the Eichmann defense, hiding behind superiors, on all twelve charges; but the wise jury nailed him on the three where he clearly had only himself to blame.) In a sentimental, supercompassionate, **antiblaming** society, it was such a relief that the jury blamed him for something, against the French maxim "To know all is to forgive all." The public becomes esp. cynical when big fish--Reagan? Bush? Wright?--escape the nets of blaming, of judgment. (*Supercompassion hates not only "capital punishment" but "punishment" itself: miscreants, in school & society, are to be "corrected," "reeducated," "rehabilitated," but never "punished," a word deliberately tarnished with "vengeance," a word deliberated connotated as "vicious." Under this torturing of language, the anti-execution argument that "capital punishment does not deter" seems strong, but its strength depends on a condition contrary to fact, viz, that the populace would disapprove of executions if they were thought of primarily for punishment rather than for deterrence.)

8. Poor formation--spiritual-religious, ethical, moral--does brutalize society, & our news is full of the horrendous consequences of **uncaring**, subcompassion--to which supercompassion is a reaction. From deficit to surfeit, as in ancient gnosticism from asceticism to antinomianism.

9. **Indiscriminate compassion** is unbiblical, for God structures & rules the world in holy (not "unconditional"!) love. "Tragedy," which assumes a moral architecture in cosmos & history, is diminished when used to obscure "a right judgment in (anything or) all things," such as the **distinction** between victim & victimizer. MY gore rises when I'm asked to be evenhandedly compassionate toward a rapist who didn't have all the advantages in growing up, & his victim, who did. Or when a Cardinal (O'Connor), explaining why he visited both the Central Park gang-rape victim & the gang (in jail), said "I didn't want to be seeming to single anyone out." Or when a psychiatrist in court said of a man who without provocation attacked a woman & left her for dead, the victimizer "reacted in a way in which any man would perhaps react under similar circumstances" (the defendant having told the court, I "just blew my cool for a second")--& of the case, a congressman (Steny Hoyer) saying "There was a tragedy on both sides" of the Mack case, now background for the Speaker Wright case. Geo.Will: from "intellectual incoherence" to "moral anarchy."