

A Personal Commentary on GOALS FOR THE CHAPPAQUA SCHOOLS (hereover)

Willis Elliott

This assumes familiarity with my letter today, 31 Oct 77, to Mr. Thomas Land

1. Such a credo is a rhetorical document, an act of intercourse with the public-- as well as, if at all, a setting forth of guidelines for public-school direction. Seeing this document through both these eyes, I observe that the credo's center is not God or humanity or America or the humane heritage or the American heritage, but the child. Pedocentricity is of course "in," but is it good for children? The credo is child-centered two-thirds of the way through, at which point this ideological commitment even deforms the statement on traditioning the heritage: instead of saying that, e.g., society needs citizens who are aware of and respect the society's roots, the statement avers that "Children...need to become aware of their democratic heritage"! This perversion (for in light of social psychology that's what it is) bogs one down into sentimental nonsense about how to treat a child the school hasn't convinced of this "need" and romantic motivational theories deformed by various behaviorisms...What the child, through all this pedocentricity, is actually learning is egocentricity, self-importance, the habit of viewing the world as a consumer thereof. Such a narcissistic creature goes through life looking for persons-institutions-processes-religions bent on meeting his/her needs-- e.g., going to church "to get something out of it," instead of to put something in and through. It's a scholagenic [school-caused] disease which our N.England Founding Fathers would have called "sin" and our MidAtlantic Founding Fathers, "folly."
2. The Dionysiac, anti-Apollonian current movement called "human potential" or "humanistic psychology" gets its first lick in with the last word of the first sentence: the child's "potential" is front and center. Left unmodified, this substantial use of the adjective has a religious aura, and undermines the biblical centering in the *divine* potential. Jewish and Christian scripture opposes the humanistic notion that human beings "have" potential, such as is implied in the credo's "his or her." Whoever imagines this statement to be hairsplitting is ignorant of America's religious heritage or of the power of language or both.
3. The credo's "religion of selfism," as NYU psychologist Paul Vitz calls it (e.g., his just-published PSYCHOLOGY AS RELIGION), appears again in the credo's dogma that "Self-respect must precede respect for others"--a statement suffering both from pathology of attention and from moral incurvature. One is not surprised that this sentence concludes with typical behavioristic jargon: the schools should aim not to help the child to an authentic self-image, but to "a positive self-image."
4. I note the coppout on religious heritage: the public school is obligated to passing on only the political [here, "democratic"] heritage. And why the propaganda: why not include the undemocratic heritage? Or is the adjective here only rhetorically, rather than also educationally, serious: am I being engaged, or only put on?
5. The public-school-jargon sanitized codeword for religious commitment is "values," and appears in the credo in the current smooth-coin phrase "to develop their own set of personal values." But if one translates this jargon into traditional terms, the credo is taking on responsibility for at least helping in the child's spiritual formation--and doing so without taking religion, and the religious forces of the taxed community, into relationship! Clergy do not criticize the public schools for nonteaching of religion, but for (1) largely unconsciously (2) teaching a religion alien to the biblical (Jewish-and-Christian) faith on which our nation was founded. My tax money is being used to teach a religion I believe to be both alien and sick, and public-school structures make no provision for religion debate, by which children could be delivered from the dogma of the self-sealing system of the present Public School Establishment.
6. The final sentence helps explain the shouldering out of the community's religious institutions: "mental and physical health" are conceived as a product of dialog between school and home, with the home in the inferior or "support" position. Such arrogance and blindness!

GOALS FOR THE CHAPPAQUA SCHOOLS

The educational program of the Chappaqua schools should, ~~in partnership with the community~~, enable each child to develop his or her full individual potential. At the same time it should foster within each child a respect for and an acceptance of human differences. Self-respect must precede respect for others, thus the development of a positive self-image is of vital concern. This in no way contradicts the need to provide each child with those basic skills, including the ability to think critically and creatively, necessary to cope with an everchanging world. Children also need to become aware of their democratic heritage, to respect their natural environment, and to develop their own set of personal values. Through a flexible and cost-effective educational program, Chappaqua schools can, with ~~support from the home~~, help lay the foundation for a lifetime of mental and physical health and a love of learning.

Handwritten annotations:

- Large handwritten 'X' over the first two lines of the text.
- Question marks and lines pointing to various parts of the text, including "democratic heritage", "set of personal values", and "support from the home".
- Handwritten note: "central commitment" with a line pointing to "set of personal values".
- Handwritten note: "cl.?" with a line pointing to "set of personal values".

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Mr. Thomas Land, chair EPIC Chapp. Bd. of Ed.
 Millwood Rd., Mt. Kisco 10549

31 Oct 77

Dear Mr. Land--

As a Chappaqua resident, I am grateful to you for your dedication toward improving public education in New Castle. This letter is a strong three cheers for the board and your committee, though it can be only two cheers for page two of the 24 Oct 77 "Dear School District Resident" letter.

The one cheer I must omit, I must express by letter: I teach in the city all of the nights you are having public meetings on educational goals. I hope you can find a way of apprizing your committee of my reservations and suggestions.

1. I care about education, and have earned doctorates in several fields--am accredited to teach in five departments of a NYC university, and have freedom to experiment toward improved education at all levels from storefront churches in ghettos to postdoctoral programs. Sixteen years ago we moved to Chappaqua because of a church that was eager for experiment (First Congregational, a TIME writeup of which we happened to catch) and because of the public school system's good reputation--though we found the schools less experimental, more typical high-drive suburban, than we had hoped. Fourteen years ago I began adult education courses in religion in Chappaqua, and out of this grew the Chappaqua Interfaith Council, whose original funds were entirely the proceeds from my courses. Next, I innovated religion courses in Chappaqua Adult Education, and found your directors of CAE consistently cool to religion courses, which are continuing but not under the umbrella of CAE. [The idea that "separation of church of state" prevents cooperation in this matter is absurd: in the U. of Hawaii, e.g., under public expense, I was as free to teach religion as I am in the ecumenical theological school which now employs me--and I taught nothing but religion.]

2. Through the years in Chappaqua I've had discussions with numerous public-school administrators about how best to expose children to the religious root of civilization, humanity, the historic cultural streams (especially Western Civilization), and America (especially the two religious streams converging in the Constitutional Convention (N.English Puritanism and MidAtlantic Enlightenment). In a meeting with Ken Dunn and Ed Hart in Ken's office, we dreamed toward a specific experiment in the last year of highschool--but for various reasons it didn't come off. On that and other occasions, Ed has given me the impression that religion is at least slightly distasteful to him; and while he said that he'd respond last summer to a further plea of mine that we have another look at the problem, he did not do so. I have no harsh feeling about Ed: I speak frankly only to give you a bit of the history of my unsuccessful efforts to raise the question in the Chappaqua public school system.

3. I have a recently published volume detailing the Supreme Court's history on the problem. Far from forbidding religion studies in public schools, the Court has encouraged religion studies: the First Amendment has to do not with the separation of religion from education [the Founding Fathers would have found our present situation absurd and even pernicious], but only with the separation of church and state.

Land from Elliott: open letter, to be used by either party without restriction
31 Oct 77

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7. Why do I myself not write a substitute credo? (1) Because I want what I have written in this letter and my enclosed commentary, to be heard, not skipped over to get to my substitution; (2) Because I do not wish to substitute my view as one citizen for the view of the educationists put forth in the credo [whether or not noneducationists participated in the wording, I know not]; and (3) Because I pray and hope for an emergent process in which the community sets the goals.

4. The Chappaqua school system's record of working cooperatively with religious organizations--including the Chappqua Interfaith Council, which is inclusive of all the religious congregations of the area--is poor. It has been not a healthy relationship among equals, but a powerful tax-base institution treating religion as inferior to education. While it may not yet have reached your ears, the religion forces of Chappaqua are outraged by the public-school use of Sunday mornings for school activities--behavior that makes hypocritical the usual reason given by public schools for their neglect of religion, viz. that religious institutions should educate the community's children in religion. The following facts reveal how hollow is that argument: (1) Most of the community's children never come under any process that could seriously be called "education in religion"; (2) Those who do--of their number, very few have any such exposure beyond 7th grade; (3) The "American way" of public education never was to leave religious education to religious institutions, and only historical ignorance could claim that it was: until very recently, the teaching and practice of religion occurred in the public schools all over America, and the reasons for dropping it are another story unnecessary to tell here in order to make my point that the public schools have stopped providing specific education in religion; and (4) Given the Moloch-like demands of the public schools on children's time, and the very low financial resources of religious institutions [in that they can't, and shouldn't, get their noses into the tax feedbag], it's impractical to imagine that any institution(s) other than the public school is (are) going to take over the now neglected task of acting to overcome children's ignorance and the culture's amnesia (with horrendous cultural and moral consequences, and ominous political prognosis).

5. Given the present ignorance, what can happen is illustrated in the use of tax money to promote, in many states, a particular religion, viz. Hinduism. I was one of the two expert witnesses on Hinduism in the federal court case won two weeks ago in N.J. against this practice. But while knocking TM out of the public schools makes me feel good, all we've accomplished in this is to restore the vacuum: we've still the problem of what positive action we can take to address the problem. And it would be stupid of me to be hopeful: in public schools, here and elsewhere, I've found enough arrogance to prevent the question from becoming real. I accuse public schools of expending energy, in this matter, only to eliminate the irritation from the question's being raised, by brushing off the question as though it were a fly. And it's an inauthentic ploy to ask me, or "the churches," what might be done; it's our question as a total community, living on this bit of geography called politically New Castle. Such behavior is one factor in the public's deepening disenchantment with, alienation from, and rage at the public schools. And serious addressing of the religion-in-public-education problem would be one way toward restoring amity between school and community.

6. "Goals for the Chappaqua Schools," in the document referred to above, is a trendy, almost kitschy, credo defective in its assumptions, its inclusions, and its omissions. As a professional working with clergy, I can assure you that members of that profession read such a credo with snorts, humor--and despair. Maybe also a bit of envy: why should the Educational Establishment get to use tax money for pushing its fundamentalistic "in" product, when other professionals, trained in education and living in the same tax-area, cannot? But now there is some hope: your committee is inviting public participation in goals-shaping, and it's time for the public to overcome its despair and cynicism over the stranglehold that educationistic fundamentalism has had on our schools.

encl: "Commentary on...Goals..."

Will Elliott