

FOR THE BETTER

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Recently my university unveiled a new marketing slogan, “We Change Lives.” It has a nice ring to it. After all, my good friend Avis Glaze often says that the field of education “is in the people changing business.” And indeed we are. However, as well intentioned as the slogan is, it reflects, unintentionally I am sure, two chronic problems in the fields of character education and socioemotional learning: moral phobia and missing adjectives.

To situate this argument, it is necessary to provide a little context. Humans have always, or as long as we can ascertain, been concerned with the socialization of children and adolescents. That is, there has always been concern about what kinds of people the upcoming generations will be when the world is inevitably placed in their hands. Hence, some form of moral education, character education, socioemotional learning or positive youth development has been there, whether formally or informally and whether done by society (for example in schools), by religious authorities, or in the home. And it has always centered on human goodness, however that is defined in a particular place and at a particular time in history. The nature of the desired person, the

means of shaping development, and the labels we use to describe all this vary widely, but the bottom line is that we are trying to help youth to be the best people they can be, both for their own sake and for the people and world around them.

At the core of this is morality, human goodness, ethics, justice and compassion, et cetera. After all, if we want to live in a more just, equitable, and compassionate world, we need just, compassionate and ethical people. If we want people to authentically care about us, treat us with respect and fairness, and to be generally concerned about our best interests, then we need people who understand that, care about that, and have the capacity to act in that way.

Interestingly, at least in most western societies, while the general populace has no hesitation to voice such concerns and use such terms, those who are in charge of education (and other public enterprises) seem to be allergic to talking about goodness, morality, and virtue. They avoid the vocabulary of morality and goodness as if it were poisonous. This is what I mean by moral phobia. As I go from meeting to meeting, and conference to conference, experts and other leaders in the field turn them-

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selves into semantic pretzels trying to avoid being associated with moral terminology. The National School Climate Center was focused on climate because it was a more neutral term that was felt to have the potential as a rallying point for the disparate “factions” (it failed to do that). Socioemotional learning (SEL), a cumbersome and somewhat opaque term, has had great traction, with over 30 states adopting SEL standards, in part because it is more palatable than moral or character or virtues education. Some of my colleagues expended a lot of time and energy trying to find a common denominator term (prosocial education) and edited a fine two-volume collection of papers with the hope that it would break the terminological logjam and become embraced widely. It wasn’t.

Years ago, when a local St. Louis school district enacted an enlightened and protracted communitywide process to craft a new mission statement, I chided them for eventually avoiding any ethical language. They were going to educate “capable, curious, and confident learners.” I pointed out that effective terrorists had the same characteristics. To their impressive credit, they went back and added “caring” as an adjective to their mission statement. More recently, I chided the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative for the same problem. There was no moral language in their mission and vision. They could as well be preparing antisocial predators, who were well equipped to excel at their chosen antisocial purposes. And they are not alone in this regard in the philanthropic sphere. A colleague in Europe reported a recent conversation with a large philanthropy that funds work in this sphere. They doggedly refused to fund anything that used specifically moral or ethical language as it was seen to be politically imprudent to do so.

As we look around the world, and in particular at western democracies, we see great unrest and dissatisfaction with civic leaders. In the United States in particular, especially in the build up to the 2016 presidential election, the two candidates, Trump and Clinton, were utterly polarizing, with each side seeming to

despise the other side’s candidate. What I did not hear throughout the contentious campaigns were complaints about the candidates’ socioemotional competencies, or their lack of grit, or limited future-mindedness, or short supply of optimism. Rather I heard lamentations about their moral character. Because we know that is what is most important both for individuals and for humanity. And in the more recent presidential election, I again did not hear ringing endorsements or critiques of the socioemotional competencies of any of the candidates. But I heard plenty about their moral character.

If your child were to bring home a new prospective life partner, I doubt that your foremost concern would be that person’s socioemotional learning and competency or her grit. Certainly those matter. But what would be most important to you would be their moral fiber. Their goodness.

Yet, legislators and educators and other policy makers run from such terminology. But this is not merely a matter of terminology and semantics. This matters. My colleagues Tom Lickona and Matt Davidson, leaders in the field of character education, introduced two sides of character, moral and performance. The former has to do with matters of human relationships, justice, welfare and compassion. The latter has to do with excellent performance. I long argued with them that morality had to take precedence, but they saw them as two sides of a single outcome. To his credit, in his 45 year retrospective on his career, Lickona opined that he had to “eat humble pie” in not realizing that all too often the performance interest of educators, scholars and policy makers trumped a focus on human goodness. Teddy Roosevelt once said, “to educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.” We cannot afford to educate a generation with great grit and other performance characteristics but with no moral GPS to direct those performance skills toward an ethical purpose.

The media lament the perceived decline in morality. The populace laments the perceived immorality of its leaders (in government, reli-

gion, politics, media, and sports). Yet the field of education, which has the responsibility for a large part of the grand and eternal project of socializing youth, cowardly hides from saying the same thing. So we create curricula to promote optimism, and to foster grit, and to enhance future-mindedness, and to teach the intra- and interpersonal competencies of socio-emotional learning. And we push morality to a corner or fully ignore justice and compassion and integrity ... and do so at our peril. This is not to suggest that grit, and future-mindedness and interpersonal skill are not good things to pursue. It is just to suggest, again following Teddy Roosevelt, that without a moral GPS to guide them, they are as prone to immorality as to amorality or morality. Thus they are potentially dangerous.

It is time to have the courage, no to have the *moral* courage, to transparently identify the central goal of youth socialization as moral formation. If we do, then we can look at the methods that actually support the development of moral character, of integrity and justice and compassion. Otherwise, we will be educating, as C.S. Lewis described it, “more clever devils.” Or as one former U.S. Secretary of Education once said, “we are competing for the hearts and minds of our youth, and we are

not the only ones.” It is a competition we cannot afford to lose.

There is an old Native American tale about a boy and his grandfather. The grandfather tells the boy that inside him is a good wolf and a bad wolf and they are battling for control of him. Frightened by the prospect of two wolves battling within him, the boy asks his grandfather, “Grandfather, which one will win?” To which the grandfather answered, “the one you feed.”

To feed the good wolf, we need to name it as moral. We cannot avoid saying that we are most concerned about human goodness, far beyond human competence. And to name it as such we have to start courageously using the adjectives of ethics. We don’t just want to educate for character, but want to prioritize moral character. And when people say, this is not the role of public institutions, like schools, we can point out that there is no off switch to moral character formation. This is age old wisdom. Aristotle said, over 2 millennia ago, that “every adult who is around children impacts their character, whether they intend to or not.”

It is time to get past our moral phobia, to have the moral courage to use the adjectives of goodness ... for goodness sake.

