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**ETHICS, VALUES AND THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE
CONTEXT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION**

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I get enormous pleasure from attending conferences where, for once one does not have to perform. Where I can sit back and listen to the ‘experts’ and let their lofty tomes waft over me. It is a luxury in our busy lives, particularly for those who have the responsibility of some sort of leadership. For once we can put down the weight of that responsibility.

Well this session about ethics and the life of the spirit, spirituality, I am afraid is not one of those times! While there are some who might have pretences to some expertise because we spend our lives speaking about spirituality or ethics or both, there is something intrinsic to both of these subjects that situates it firmly in the lives and experience of every one of us. Every life that is lived must come to terms with both at some level or other. We might use different language but they cannot be avoided. They are the stuff of our human condition.

For those who want answers, I cannot give them to you. I have some insights, yes, gleaned from my own experience, but yours may be different. Your language, your images that you use to express the often inexpressible may not be the same. You must find your own answers. This is the world of paradox and of mystery where we taste the truth of what John Paul Sartre said that we are “condemned to be free”. We are all responsible.

If you think that this is unsatisfactory, you are right. Why else has Western society increasingly chosen to avoid the questions that go to the heart of our humanness: “Who are we?” and “What is the meaning of our lives...if anything?”. “What is good and right and true?” These are the questions that define both ethics and the life of the spirit?

We like to believe that we have a measure of control over our world and a workable understanding of how life ought to be lived. We have science to tell us about truth, we like solutions, not mystery and certainly answers rather than

questions. In every aspect of life there are experts who can give us some measure of security. But life is telling us otherwise. All around us we are surrounded by uncertainty. In my more imaginative moments, I sometimes get the sense of a cosmic conspiracy that is forcing us to stop and rethink.

Look at some of the issues: the questions facing bioethics- cloning and genetic manipulation, stem cell research and new techniques in reproduction. At what point does human life begin? How do we balance the needs of the disabled and those suffering from disease with the rights of the unborn 'child'?

Then, September 11th and its aftermath of allegations and confusion in which we are confronted again with the fact that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. We are seeing the U.S.A., which has always stood for law and order and due process, throw those very processes out in its dealing with anyone even suspected of involvement with the Taliban. We are seeing now the consequences of political decisions made decades before in the form of arms trades and deals done with regimes fundamentally different to our own.

Every day we are seeing the further breakdown of trust though out the corporate world, and the moral failures of our business and political leaders, the increasing marginalisation, even demonising, of the weak and the vulnerable in our society contrary to the most basic tenets of care in a civilised society. I wonder what it will take before we actually do stop and rethink: Who are we? What really matters here...?

There comes a time in all of our lives, if we dare to admit it, that we begin to realize that the so-called experts know no more than we...in some things at least. This is a fairly frightening prospect, for me at least that I might be as good as it gets! That the buck might stop here with me, with us for better or worse! Let us not shrink from this realisation today at least. Let us take this opportunity to stay with the discomfort that it causes and see where that might take us.... For the paradox is, that it is in our weakness, our vulnerability and uncertainty, that we are best able to grasp spiritual truth. How opposite is this to our normal ways of being?

We are a society very focussed on the 'knowing' but it is in the 'not knowing' that the answers lie. Like the fourteenth century mystics, caught in the midst of a time in transition as we most certainly are, we must "pierce the cloud of unknowing". We must go beneath the turmoil to the still places that, as human beings, we all share, whatever our colour, race, background and beliefs. We, in modern Western society, do not appreciate the need for stillness, for quiet. We do not make time for the slow stuff of reflection that allows ideas to germinate and grow. We are a 'solutions based' people intent on speed and action.

We are a society intent on avoiding hardship, suffering and failure...and who of us would not? But as we attempt to eliminate them, we have also lost sight of their hidden treasures, the new life that comes only through experiencing the pangs of birth. All of the major spiritual traditions throughout the ages have recognised that

there is meaning in suffering, that we need to go there, and that we need to accompany others there.

But we are a society that prefers to turn away, that likes to think that it is master of itself, in control, and self-sufficient. Who here, however, would disagree that life inevitably confronts us all with experiences that teach us otherwise. Whether it just be the daily stresses and little failures, or the extremities of suffering, we will, at times, be confronted with our helplessness, our smallness in the face of the enormity of life ...and we will ask why? And if we are still, our hearts might sense a reply: without the bad we cannot know the good. Without despair we cannot know hope, without sadness, true happiness. These are the raw ingredients of human existence and nothing is without meaning. The best that is human is forged through the everyday stuff of our lives; little steps taken in ordinary ways.

Generations turn and we now have adults who live with no reason why they should not do exactly as they please, who have no concept of the presence of any greater reality than themselves and their own self-interest. We are raised to believe that the gaps in our lives, the deep longing that infects us, will be filled ...all we need is more, more things, more knowledge, more money, and we will achieve success. The more we get the more we seem to want and still contentment eludes us. Yet the illusion lives!

It was St Augustine who said:

“Late have I loved you beauty so old and so new, late have I loved you. And see, you were within me and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you...”¹

Augustine would assert that we are built for relationship, real relationship, with God and with each other. And that through this relationship we are able to access the divine, the ‘at-one-ment’ that was the experience of the mystics: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee”

Even in a secular society we intuit that there must be more. We seek something but do not know what. There is a human longing for intimacy. This was shown vividly by Carl Jung in his work with the depressed and mentally ill who, with his help, were able to overcome the darkness that had engulfed them by grasping a sense of their spiritual nature. This alone gave them the tools to understand their pain as ‘journey’, like the mythological conquering hero, and find the will to

¹St Augustine, *The Confessions*, Ch.10 V xxvii

follow its path to new beginnings. Victor Frankl witnessed a similar phenomenon in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany where he concluded that some sense of meaning gave people the necessary stuff to survive the horrors they were enduring: "If you give people a 'why' they can endure any 'how' "²

At this level of existence we are all explorers treading through the everyday stuff of our lives. Trying to make some sense of it. Bit by bit claiming parts of ourselves that we do not know and might not want to know, bringing the mixture of strengths and weaknesses into wholeness. We will each have a story with its own lessons, triumphs and failures. Are we conscious of this story as a process of individuation, life as a journey into the centre of ourselves, becoming what we have it in us to become? Or are we a meaningless manifestation of life on this planet, an accident of evolution unconscious of any deeper process at work? Is man the measure of all things, of all goodness or is there more?

This question is not just an academic interest. It goes to the heart of what we believe is right and good, that is what we call 'morality' and this in turn informs what it is that believe we ought do, that is the central issue of 'ethics'. The words are used interchangeably these days but I still prefer to distinguish ethics as referring to the very practical matter of the choices that determine our actions every day in even the smallest ways; through which our sense of morality and our values are evident. Even when all choice seems to be taken from us, Viktor Frankl said we are still able to choose our attitude to our circumstances!

Morality is acquired from family friends, the community and through our education and can appear as deeply held assumptions about the way things just are. 'Conscience' is the physical symptom of those beliefs that can manifest itself as a powerful force in our minds and the pit of our stomachs.

Ethics arises in the context of society, when we are forced to balance our own wants and needs with those of another. It is not just about fraud or behaviour that falls short of generally accepted standards. It is also about developing good judgement skills and awareness of the needs of those around us. It comes from our freedom to choose.

Often these days law is viewed as the only thing that sets a limit to one's actions. How often do we hear someone say that it was legal so they thought it was ok? The law can be viewed as a subset of the moral and ethical world where society has deemed it appropriate that sanctions be imposed. It is a relatively black and white area compared to the inherent uncertainty of the ethical world and yet we who work in law know that this too is far less certain than sometimes thought. The law, as well, must attempt to negotiate the realities of the world of human relationships, commercial and otherwise.

² Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* Beacon Press NY 2000

But how do we determine what is moral, ethical or otherwise? It was Aristotle who noted that the answer to the questions: "What is right?" and "What is good?" has to do with purpose, the goal or aim of one's action. A good 'tool' is one that adequately accomplishes the task at hand. In moral terms, what we regard as 'good' similarly depends on what we are setting out to achieve...that is what we believe we are here for.

What constitutes an authentic life? Is it the highest aspiration of life to be able to take one's place as part of the means of production? Or is it more? What of lives that will never be productive in the sense that an economic rationalist might understand: the disabled, the unemployed, a mother working at home? It is not hard already to see how 'economics' thinking has infiltrated our value systems!

If life has spiritual significance for us we will make choices that are different to someone for whom life is just a means to an end, economic or otherwise; someone for whom life is cheap and without meaning. But what are we if not the sum total of the choices we have made? Aristotle said that we actually build our character through our habits. The good harp player will become so through practice...Likewise, a person will become ethical only through developing ethical habits. Jean Paul Sartre spoke of 'choosing ourselves' through our choices. How many times do we walk away from a challenge before we should call ourselves a coward? How many lies do we tell before we no longer notice that we are doing it?

Like a muscle, ethical capacity must be developed through practise. The more practise one has the more issues become visible. They may be no less difficult to resolve but the terrain will be clearer and the potential pitfalls well known. These include reputation, personal integrity, and trust...not small things for creatures built for community.

Ethical capacity involves thinking well, having the empathetic intelligence and plain old imagination to think about who else may be affected and what the consequences might be. It requires some well-developed self-knowledge so that one can see when one is being driven by emotional patterns that defy reason; the application of well thought through values and well-examined moral principles, and the ability to appreciate how those values and moral assumptions affect one's understanding of a situation. In a multicultural context it is always important to have regard to cultural differences in perception of the facts that might apply. These may be national or religious but also might just arise from people's different backgrounds such as the lawyer and the artist, country as apposed to city, or the teacher and the parent! The, of course, ethical capacity depends on the development of the emotional intelligence including the relational skills, to be able to handle differences and disagreement appropriately and positively.

Ethical capacity requires an awareness of how we balance the personal and the professional in the roles that we take up in our work and how we are affected by groups of differing sizes with different combinations of personalities. This is a major issue for boards of directors and management teams everywhere. Groups of people inevitably develop an operating 'personality' that might silence dissent or critique, thus undermining their very reason for being! Ethics requires the ability to think more long term and to stand back to see the bigger picture. John Ralston Saul has identified the problem of the current climate of expertise that demands that people work across narrower and narrower areas in order to achieve sufficient depth in a world characterised by an explosion of information. He says that we do so at the expense of a broader outlook that can maintain connection with the real world context and real world values.

Ethical capacity will require an attitude of self-examination, willingness to subject ones beliefs, assumptions and attitudes to critique and the courage to stand up for them with others sometimes at significant personal cost. It is never easy to stand apart from the group. For most of us I suspect it involves considerable pain.

We have reached a watershed in Western society. In the midst of unprecedented advances in science and technology we are realising that there has been no similar advances in moral sensibility. We are facing a crisis of trust in our institutions, our leaders, business and the professions. There is much talk of ethics and governance but still very little understanding of what it is in the legal and commercial world in which I work. Many people do not even see ethical issues let alone have the skills to work them through to some satisfactory resolution. More often than not, people simply do not see that their moral views (if they have any!) have anything to do with what they do on a day to day basis. There are many indications, increasingly, that we are living in a moral vacuum. How did this happen?

Some would claim that it is a failure of authority and discipline; that there needs to be more control, more rules, regulations and law. But in a world characterised by uncertainty, except for the assured presence of continuing change, law has its limits. Even the cleverest draftsman cannot create something that effectively legislates for good judgement or for human virtues such as trust and compassion!

Likewise, authority in terms of a hierarchy of control cannot work in a world where one's employees are on the other side of the country or coping with the complexity of a vastly different culture. I keep thinking of the poem by Yates:

Turning and turning in a widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart the centre cannot hold;
Mere chaos is loosed upon the world...³

Or is it?

³ William Butler Yates, "The Second Coming"

Perhaps we have needed to leave the fold of 'certain truths', to 'wander in the wilderness' to discover our fullest freedom and its consequences. It may be that humanity must go through this process, like a child growing through adolescence into moral adulthood. Not, as we know, without its pain and mistakes! But they too are an important part of the process.

The issues for education are very large indeed.

There is no such thing as a 'values free' anything and certainly no such thing as a values free education! To attempt to create one is a values stance in itself. Our values are evident in everything that we do and how we do it. If one ignores the subject in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of relativity of values, or of running the risk of imposing one's own values on another, then they will surface anyway and probably in the form of behaviours that we would not choose.

We have no alternative really. For those of us who hold to some higher ideals about the goals and purpose of human life, it seems obvious that we must come to grips with the difficult questions surrounding the issue of values education, with all of the difficult moral and ethical issues, because it is a good thing to do. But even for the more utilitarian among us, and those who might see society as nothing more than an economy that we exist to serve, present indications are that they too are beginning to see the merits of those values that reinforce trust such as honesty, loyalty, individual integrity and courage, as essential underpinnings of the commercial world.

As the business community reels on a daily basis with more and more exposes of ethical indifference and ignorance, no longer will there be any argument about the relevance of values education to the good of our society. The next question becomes, which values and how do we teach them?

What is good or right depends on our purpose so why are we educating? A very basic question. In fact so basic I wonder whether we forget to ask it of ourselves...and the answer determines so much. If we take the life of the spirit seriously, the spiritual nature of every child, we will have a different response than if we are simply seeking to meet the practical needs of each person taking his or her place in the workforce and the daily life of our community.

What would education look like if we truly believed that every child is from God, that every child has a place to take and something to contribute to the beauty of the whole?

Winifred West, the founder of Frensham at Mittagong in NSW in her *Addresses and Talks*⁴ said that life is like a mosaic.

A mosaic is made up of insignificant pieces of coloured marble or stone, not strikingly beautiful in themselves, but so arranged that a wonderful pattern may result. The complete beauty of the whole depends on the perfection of each part and its relation to the other parts. Each piece needs the surrounding pieces to show its full beauty. The part and the whole are

⁴ Winifred West *Addresses and Talks* Fine Arts Press, Sydney:1992 (available from Frensham, Mittagong)

interdependent.....We may be needed for the background of life's mosaic only, but we are necessary, and if we refuse to take our place, not only will the pattern be imperfect, but we ourselves lose in power and in strength...The more perfect our individual lives, the more beautiful and richer the whole.⁵

I find this fascinating for it reflects something that Hildegard of Bingen spoke about in the twelfth century in suggesting that God has used a pattern for his work just as any artist might do. That this pattern is repeated in the macrocosm as well as the microcosm of each one of us; she saw the human body and the human psyche as creation in miniature so that we are interdependent with all of creation...and "it is from this law of interdependence that truly wise living will be learned and practised."⁶

If we really believed this were so, what would it mean for what we teach, and also how we should teach it?

We are probably already beyond a belief in silent children as the passive receivers of endless information dished out by their teachers...in theory at least! But the mosaic implies teaching to draw out the individuality, the pattern of God's creation, in each child. It implies a belief in the necessity of difference and diversity. What use a mosaic of uniform colour and shapes?

Education must be completely child centred, teachers versatile in their ability to meet an individual's needs, particular gifts and aptitudes. All children would be valued, not just those who accorded with societies' shifting notions of value such as achievement of the highest examination marks. Education would be broader and would come to terms with the opportunities inherent in pain, failures and mistakes as well as the importance of beauty and of joy. Who of us does not respond to beautiful surroundings and learn better if having fun! Emotional and moral intelligence would truly take their place in a society's list of skills essential for a life to be lived well. There would be time built in for reflection upon issues of meaning that provide the foundations for resilience in the face of the hard times that life inevitably presents.

The need to control is an interesting subject for most of us. It must be remembered that to develop ethical capacity in our children, we need to appreciate the place of individual autonomy and independent thinking skills to build good judgement skills. There is a paradox present in our attempts to build an ethical society through rules, laws and regulations. The more we rely upon rules, so that people are operating according to external compulsion, the more we actually diminish their capacity to think for themselves. What does this mean for schools that take development of ethical capacity seriously? How do we balance appropriate the need for order with enough freedom to learn how to use it with responsibility?

⁵ Ibid at p.14

⁶ Matthew Fox *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*, Bear and Company: Santa Fe, 1985

In schools as in all organizations, systems and processes need to be looked at to see where they contradict the messages you want to give. How is power used? What models of leadership operate? Who is rewarded or held in high esteem and what for? Remember, what we really value becomes visible in every thing we do and how we do it!

In research for the St James Ethics Centre project: Educating for a Good Society, that I led throughout 1999 until 2001, the student focus groups said they want the opportunity to discuss all values and to choose and prioritise them for themselves. This presents a wonderful solution to the danger of imposing values on children. Just allow the subject to hang in the air in your schools with opportunities for examination and discussion built in when ever possible. One doesn't need to decide which values at all, they will choose themselves as the conversation progresses! How better to develop ethical awareness and capacity than to build the conversation into the fabric of your schools. Students ...and teachers....then live with the values question, the complexities of clashes of values, and the need to prioritise and to a translate their values into behaviour, every day of their school lives? This inevitable begins to affect relationships in school and outside.

Research done in the United States as part of the Centre for Fourth and Fifth Rs has seen schools achieve drastic culture changes and academic achievement levels through the adoption and implementation of codes of ethics particularly around respect and responsibility. However, it isn't easy. Inherent in the human condition is the gap between what we say we believe in and what we actually do. It takes courage and a willingness to confront the bits of ourselves and our worlds that we would rather ignore, to challenge group behaviour and thinking that may leave us isolated. Habits, customs AND traditions need to be examined to see if they still serve our needs, if they still reinforce the values we say we have. Schools, particularly with strong traditions of hierarchy, entrenched behaviour patterns around privileges, school elites and power bases that remain unquestioned, are the breeding ground for many behaviours that we see translated into boardrooms in the commercial world. Think carefully about your own school and whether it places a high value on conforming and belonging that may ultimately undermine an individual's ability to challenge injustice or unethical behaviour by others when needed. We have seen this translated into the police force, the armed services, and even that bastion of 'goodness', the church, in countless examples in recent days. We all need approval, we all need to be loved we just need to be aware of what it will drive us to do!

Both the life of spirit and the ethical life have much in common. They are both bent on integrity and authenticity. Self-awareness in both is everything. How many of us have the courage to put aside the masks that we have used to keep us safe, the armour of our roles in life, to truly engage with the world of valuesspiritual or otherwise? To do so demands that we also develop another great virtue, humility!

A life devoted to spiritual authenticity is meaningless unless it involves dedication as well to making spirit visible in our daily lives through our ethical personalities. There is a saying that Allah has no hands. We must be those hands if God is to be fully present in his creation. From the school yard and classroom through to the boardrooms and political party rooms of this country....it is up to us.