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POINT OF VIEW

Putting Head and Heart on the Line

By Robert Coles

During the summer I had the privilege of meeting with several groups of college students who had committed themselves to work with inner-city children living in public-housing projects. The students lived there, too, in apartments made available to them by the Boston Housing Authority. They could have traveled abroad or obtained high-paying jobs in banks, law offices, or businesses. Instead, they made do with just enough to keep themselves fed and supplied with modest pocket money -- so that they could tutor the children, run summer camps for them, take them on day trips, and, in general, become part of their needy, vulnerable communities.

At weekly meetings with some of these students, I listened as they tried to make sense of what they were seeing and hearing about: family troubles, joblessness, sickness, drug abuse, violence, early pregnancies. I listened as they tried to figure out what, if anything, they were accomplishing during their long days of work, weekends included. Some grew so discouraged that they were tempted not so much to quit as to give up in another, more devastating way: to surrender to a sense of hopelessness.

As one young woman said about her work with the children: "I wonder whether it makes any difference -- what we're doing, that we're here. The more I hear about their lives, the more I question the value of this."

Inevitably, such thoughts prompted not only intellectual anxiety but also its emotional equivalent, despair.

"I just can't believe a lot of what I'm told; I feel overwhelmed and sad -- sad, sad," she said.

Soon, maybe to save herself from slipping into a deeper, more tenacious melancholy, she became angry and wondered why she had not realized before how some of her fellow Americans lived. She wondered, too, what might happen if more of the wealth of this wealthiest of nations were available for the educational and medical projects that she saw were needed.

Ironically she was caught between feeling that little or nothing could be done for the children with whom she was working -- because so much harm had already been done to them -- and, on the other hand, arguing for much more intervention in their neighborhoods (by government and by social agencies) than was possible either now or in the foreseeable future.

As the weeks passed, that student began to see that she could make a difference in the lives of certain children. A word from her, even a nod or a shake of the head, had a decided effect on boys and girls hungry not only for food but also for moral direction. She and the other students then faced a different dilemma: how best to prepare themselves (intellectually, psychologically, through moral introspection) for the responsibilities that go with being a personal example to others, a guide or mentor.

"More and more, the kids ask me about right and wrong," noted the young woman. "Or they don't ask, they do something, and I get upset, and they notice, and they're upset. And soon I'm telling them what I think, and they're asking me questions -- why, why, why? And it becomes a 'moral reasoning' class, only I'm not a professor, and the subject under discussion isn't abstract, it's about something that's happened. I'm a judge besides being a big sister, and I have to come up with answers for the kid and for myself, too. If I can't convince myself, I've begun to realize, I won't be able to convince the children, because they're very quick, they're so smart at figuring out what you really mean, and what you're just saying.

"'Do you really *mean* it?'--they ask me that all the time. If I hesitate, if I'm not sure whether I do mean it or if I'm talking big ('high and mighty,' some of the folks around here say) but I'm having my secret doubts, then I'll be called to account. Then I've got to come up with a better answer, a convincing one."

The student was becoming a moral figure in the lives of the children, which forced her to explore moral issues and to ask herself those rock-bottom "existentialist" questions that children ask: What am I supposed to do in life? What is it like to live someplace else? If I had been born someplace else, would I be different? Here were children dying to know about a world beyond their own -- life and behavior outside ghettos and slums and "culturally disadvantaged" neighborhoods. These youngsters also wondered about themselves -- why they were fated to live where and as they did; why others had better luck.

"It's hard, it's eerie, sometimes," the young woman said. "I'm just here for the summer, and I'm on the line like I never imagined I'd be. It's as if I'm standing in for the whole world out there, which these kids don't know anything about, except for what they see on television.

"I was telling them the other day about Columbus and the discovery of America. I was reading about it, actually, from a school book. One boy asked me where Spain is. There wasn't a map around, so I drew a picture of Europe (a pretty rough one!) and the Atlantic Ocean and the North American coast. I wanted to show the kids the big distance between Spain and the Caribbean islands, where Columbus landed, and you know what? That boy asked me where Cambridge is. At first I thought he was being a wise guy. He *is* a wise guy! He gives me plenty of trouble! But I looked at his face, and I saw curiosity on it, not insolence.

"So, I pointed out where Cambridge would be on my map. Then he asked me where `we' are. I don't think I'll ever forget that. It seemed so absurd for me to try to find a place on the map for us -- this map of half the world. `We' are only a few miles from Cambridge, and my map, its scale -- well, it was a map meant to show thousands of miles, not three or four."

Our group was silent, as we all contemplated not a cartographer's ocean but an ocean in the minds of certain children. How could we cross such waters successfully, how could we be heard and understood and, most of all, heeded -- the hope of teachers over the generations? Gradually during the summer, many of the college students put another question to themselves: How could they educate *themselves* to listen better, comprehend a given world (its people, their assumptions, worries, fears, hopes), and thereby become more alert to various teaching possibilities, moments of opportunity on the playground, in the classroom?

With that hope in mind, we discussed in detail a day's or a week's events (some of them unnerving, even harrowing). Often the students wanted me to provide what I regarded as "technical" help -- advice from a doctor trained to work with children. They asked others -- lawyers, educators -- for similar assistance. That was all to the good, but I often felt that what they most needed, what all of us need who are trying to engage many of our country's pressing and vexing social problems, was the wider perspective that literature can provide.

Thus we read Tillie Olsen's stories in *Tell Me a Riddle*, some of Raymond Carver's stories, and William Carlos Williams's poems and a few of his stories. We read Langston Hughes's poems and James Baldwin's essays, and, for its wonderfully telling breadth and depth of vision, Ralph Ellison's look at America's social, cultural, racial life in *Going to the Territory*. Ralph Ellison and Tillie Olsen offer a crucial perspective as they address our very humanity with subtlety -- conveying the willingness to do justice to our variousness and to the complexities, ironies, and ambiguities that shape our lives.

Such reading prompted us to move from the particulars of often-exhausting, frustrating daily experience to see it in a broader context, a perspective that can be so easily overlooked at the end of the day or at the end of a summer's work, when one crosses that "ocean" for the other side, the welcoming shore of a college campus. Such readings reminded us of the particular humanity of the children -- enabled us to think not only of abstractions (race, class, gender, ethnic background) but also of the problems each of us has as we grow up and try to figure out where we want to go in life, and why.

Our colleges and universities could be of great help to students engaged in community service if they tried more consistently and diligently to help students connect their experiences in such work with their academic courses. Students need more opportunity for moral and social reflection on the problems that they have seen at first hand, and such intellectual work would surely strengthen both their academic lives and their lives as volunteers. Students need the chance to directly connect books to experience, ideas and introspection to continuing activity -- through discussion groups in which the thought and

ideas that are so suggestively conveyed in fiction and in essays are brought to bear on the particular individuals who inhabit a world of hardship and pain.

During my last meeting with one group of students before they returned to college, several of the youngsters with whom they had worked showed up -- ostensibly to ask questions about a proposed final outing the next day but in fact as testimony to the obvious bond of affection that had been forged. As we broke for a cold drink, I chatted with a boy of 9, hoping to find out what the summer with the college students had meant to him.

When I asked how the program had gone, he replied, "O.K."

When I asked if he'd be there again next summer, he replied, casually but tersely, "Sure."

When I asked whether we might do things better, he said "Nope."

I was ready to give up, drink my Coke, and turn to a college student for a more satisfying exchange of views. One more try, though. I asked the boy more directly what his counselor had meant to him, done for him -- and heard this:

"He's a good dude." The youngster paused, then added: "He inspires you."

At that, I got excited. My research instincts were aroused. I wanted to sit with this lad and ask him what he meant, how he had been "inspired." But we had more to talk about, the students and I -- more discussions about specific children, their personal problems or difficulties in school. Besides, it was obvious what had taken place: Head and heart put on the line by a cadre of relatively privileged students; head and heart, in turn, moved in children who are vulnerable, yes, but also eagerly anxious to be reached, touched, and inspired, even as our students crave a similar inspiration.

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