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Stirring Heart and Mind: Teaching for Biblical Values



by Harro Van Brummelen

Two years ago one of my colleagues and I researched final examinations given at my institution, Trinity Western University.¹ We asked, “Do our exams reflect our mission statement?” Now our mission statement highlights helping students become godly servant leaders with thoroughly Christian minds. So we wanted to find out whether our finals (and, therefore, at least in part our courses) contribute both to Christian thinking and to leadership development. Are we serious about our mission in *all* aspects of our learning program, exams included? Or have we created a myth about

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our mission in our chapels and in our public relations and even in the rhetoric in our classrooms? Does our mission statement serve as little more than a useful inspirational rallying point for supporters, staff and students? Or is it a day-to-day reality throughout our program that affects not only the minds but also the hearts of our students?

The results of our study were mixed—and somewhat controversial.² On the one hand, some exam questions did demand critical worldview-based answers. Some case studies required students to demonstrate, using biblically-based guidelines, how to deal with real-life situations. Other questions asked students to probe and evaluate perspectives underlying literary works and economic, political, technological or educational issues. Students examined and appraised and created and defended alternatives. Visual arts final exams required students to reflect in depth on how the form and content of their own art products and those of others reflect what’s going on in our hearts and minds, and how they affirm worldview perspectives.

But on the other hand, there was also a darker side to our study. We detected inconsistencies between course objectives and exams. Some exams consisted mainly of objective-type questions requiring factual recall—exams that contributed little to the development of Christian leadership or to biblical worldview thinking. In some classes professors mention Christian perspective in their course syllabi or may have class discussions about the uniquely Christian aspects of a course—but they fail to include any of this in their course assessments.

What are the implications of these latter exams? They implicitly leave the message with students that Trinity Western's mission is not all that important. What is *really* important is gaining conceptual knowledge necessary for "getting ahead" in the world. Such exams encourage students to learn about photosynthesis and accounting procedures and Piaget's developmental stages and the chronology of the Old Testament. Now these things are important. But unless our assessment goes beyond such conceptual knowledge, we're missing the mark. Then we're not teaching the values we ought to teach. Because then we teach students that what's most important in education is learning and relating *information*. Then we buy into the hype of the information highway, a highway that all too often transfers information from one point to another without a clear vision of its purpose, a highway that assumes that information equals knowledge, that data themselves yield wisdom and discernment.

How we assess students, like everything we do in educational institutions, affects what they learn and what they believe to be important. Assessment instills values. Yet our assessment too often eclipses the realization of our mission. Dordt College's mission of nurturing serviceable insight requires that students do more than just understand basic biblical values and their implications. They must also learn to *apply* those values—in discussions, while doing projects, and during assessment activities.

I believe that we have not worked enough with what Nick Wolterstorff wrote 15 years ago about educating for responsible action, or what Lickona and Kilpatrick and others have more recently written about character education. Perhaps our lack of action stems from a Reformed fear of moralism—looking, for instance, at the story of Jacob and Esau as one solely about the personal sin of deceit and lying rather than one of God's amazing faithfulness. Or perhaps we think of character education as something intended to produce ever-smiling and polite but illusory Barbies and Kens. Or perhaps we resist the superficiality of putting proverbial texts on our bumpers or personal cheques. Legitimately, we see the shortcomings of such approaches. But, as we resist such shallowness, have we looked at our content, our methods, our evaluation, our school structures and dynamics, to ensure that all of these nurture biblical values? Do

our schools stir not only the minds but also the hearts of our students in a biblically-formative way? Or is it a myth that we are more successful than public education in helping students become committed to biblical values?

I was first going to call this paper, "The values we say we teach; the values we teach; and the values we ought to teach." The values we say we teach. . . . Yes, we say that the Bible is our starting point. And yes, we can point to the fact that we stress personal moral values based on the Bible, values like honesty, respect for personal property, and respect for life. But in our classrooms we most often reward individual achievement on narrowly-defined intellectual tasks. Doesn't this teach students that individual self-interest and advancement is more important than a sense of Christian community where we put the interests of others before our own? We teach the bonding of hydrogen and oxygen atoms in water theoretically and abstractly rather than in the context of removing impurities from the water supply of Third World communities. Don't we thus teach the false notion of the objectivity of science instead of teaching that science is a God-given tool to be used to enhance responsible stewardship and promote compassion and justice? We thoughtlessly use intermediate math textbooks whose word problems constantly highlight material goods, entertainment events and sports. Don't we thus implicitly teach individualistic materialism rather than thankfulness for God's gifts and compassion for the poor? Are we so caught up in our technological, materialistic, egocentric way of life that we don't even realize where we fail to do justice to Biblical values?

I have serious doubts that we consider in enough depth what values we teach, day by day. Yes, we use some Christian textbooks. Some of these stress personal morals. Now personal morals are important, but not enough. The new CSI science textbooks also promote responsible stewardship. Generally our teachers, by God's grace, are worthy personal models for their students. Many spend time each summer thinking about and designing and revamping and adapting their classroom units. But, I sometimes wonder, have they been encouraged to ask what values they should emphasize in such units? And, if so, do they know how to help students develop insights, tendencies and commitments that reflect a balanced Biblical lifestyle?

All schools teach values, whether by design or by neglect. Let me give an example of a Christian school that does so very deliberately. "What makes your school unique?", I asked Doug Monsma, assistant principal of the West Edmonton Christian Junior High School. "It has to do with our basic convictions," he answered.

We constantly ask why we do things. The notion of *servanthood* is at the basis of everything that goes on. As a school community we constantly stress 'us' over 'me.' We try to build a school community that heals brokenness through frequent acts of restoration, also in our discipline.

We try to develop spirituality and involve our students in service projects. We encourage them to speak up about their faith. We set up cross-grade prayer families. Students lead our biweekly assemblies. The other day they role-played and discussed how some classmates get hurt when others form a tight-knit clique. Our students also volunteer in a thrift store and arrange food hampers for needy families. Older students help younger ones with reading or supervision. We try to foster a servant attitude that puts the needs of others first without looking for recognition.

At least once per year we also have a junior high theme week that includes all students and teachers. Here we break cross-age barriers in experiential settings. We've chosen the topics carefully to tie in with servanthood: world hunger, our environment, celebrating our creativity. We try to provide units with real life settings where learning is done as part of discipleship training. We emphasize students' responsibility to discover and share their gifts, and relate this to a Christian lifestyle.

But for any subject matter to be meaningful, it must be taught and learned in a community that is inclusive, accepting and celebrative. That's why we've made our peer support program an integral part of our curriculum. The program involves 16 girls and 5 boys this year (one out of five students). They go on a two-day team-building and training retreat. They then have weekly sessions on biblical servant leadership and community building. The students themselves decide their goals and activities each year. Last year's group set up a student-run tutoring system during lunch hours. They also became daily 'hallway walkers' who modeled and encouraged positive talk and behavior and resolved conflicts. They did so without other students realizing that this was part of the program. Finally, they were available for friendship and informal conversation about situations fellow students faced. We train them to be 'listening ears' but to refer rather

than solve problems. Significantly, theme units such as *Taking Care of God's Earth* take on additional meaning as students learn to care for each other.

This is a glimpse at how West Edmonton Christian School nurtures spirituality, service, creativity, responsibility, cooperation, and stewardship. Your school also teaches values. So does the public school down the street. Schools can't help but develop attitudes, foster the acceptance of certain values, instill dispositions and encourage commitments. Schools initiate students into a value framework long before students can reason out the con-

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sequences of certain value positions.

Kindergarten classes, for instance, cannot function without teachers initially insisting that some behavior is desirable (e.g., punctuality) and some is unacceptable (e.g., speaking out of turn). They also "indoctrinate" them by insisting that conflicts are dealt with in open, loving and peaceful ways. Their role as models and their choice of stories also teaches a value-based way of life. It is only gradually that students learn to develop full-fledged arguments for value positions they hold or reject. Clearly, teachers need to consider carefully with their parent communities which values their programs and school structure ought to foster.

I should explain what I mean by "values." Educators often use the terms "values education" and "moral education" interchangeably. Values education, however, is broader than moral education. Values education refers to everything schools do that affects students' attitudes, behaviour and commitments. Values are ideals or important guides for living. They set direction in life. They include but go beyond personal moral values such as compassion, honesty, forgiveness and humility. They also involve, for example, responsible economic stewardship and authentic and clear communication.

To make sure that teachers consider carefully which values to foster and how to foster them, I use a unit planning chart with pre- and in-service

teachers that helps them consider which values they should emphasize, both through content and pedagogy. Which ones are inherent in the content? Which ones has the teacher not emphasized as yet this year? Which ones lacking in a particular class could be nurtured through the classroom methodology? There are many types of values, of course. Not all of them come to the fore in each unit. That's why we need to make wise and balanced choices.

Let's consider some of the important biblical values. Spiritual values include the worth of life-affirming faith and commitment, as well as godliness and reverence. In our day and age one of the most important moral values is that of integrity. Important political values include public justice and fairness, respect for authority, and the importance of balancing personal and communal rights and responsibilities. Economic values focus on stewardship in managing resources. Social values that schools foster are respect for others, cooperation, trusting and unselfish relations, kindness, faithfulness and loyalty. They also value clear, eloquent and authentic communication. In the logical domain, schools uphold respect for truthful reasoning and the ability to develop lucid and convincing arguments. Aesthetic values include harmony, beauty, and expressiveness or allusiveness. Psychological values that we nurture are emotional balance, sensitivity to others, self-control, perseverance, and prudential courage. Key biological and physical values are respect for life and physical things. All these values point back to our God-given creation mandate, the Great Commandment, and Christ's Great Commission. All of these emphasize personal and communal responsibility, love and justice, and to the need for all of us and our students to have these values stir our minds, our hearts, our whole lives.

If all this is just common sense to you, let me remind you that most resources used in our schools use a very different value framework. They promote the idea that our technology and our economic system *guarantee* continued progress. They also foster the existentialist notion that being a courageous, autonomous, rational individual is the basic ingredient of success and happiness. "Everything is possible when I am me," as one reader puts it. You choose your own values, your own commitments, even your own family make-up. Values are true if they work for you at a particular time.

If you think that this does not affect our youth, think again. If I ask my mainly Christian university students whether they believe in universal, absolute values, they answer, "Yes." Then if I ask them whether marital faithfulness is such an absolute; they again answer, "Yes." But when if I ask them if they would therefore teach this principle to a class in a public school, a substantial minority hesitates. The reason for this hesitation is instructive. Many of them at that point say that while marital faithfulness is an absolute for Christians, others should be left to make up their own mind. In other words, the faith that everyone can choose their own values outweighs biblical absolutes, also for many Christian young people.

Now, teaching biblical values is not easy today. Students must become followers of Jesus while functioning in a society that adheres to few of his values. Our media generally oppose biblical values. We live in a world filled with addiction to substance abuse, to violence, to illicit and abusive sex. Our society glorifies reaching materialistic ends. In an environment that promotes individualism, aggression and consumerism, it is difficult to help students exercise their gifts as apprentices of the Christian life. But that's precisely why nurturing students in biblical values and norms is critical.

Research since the 1920s has consistently shown that *by themselves* neither teaching about values directly nor learning to reason about value questions have much lasting effect on students' value dispositions. For one, a positive school ethos and moral climate must accompany teaching values. That's why I described the West Edmonton Christian School example. Its total program approach to values is essential. Only then will more formal classroom analysis, reasoning and response contribute to biblical nurture. Most students will accept and act on Christian values only if their general environment supports such values, both inside and outside the school. That's why the values that operate in the students' home and church communities also need to be consistent with what the school teaches. If a wide gap exists, a school's explicit curriculum will have little effect on students' behavior, values and commitments.

Nevertheless, with concerted effort, schools *can* make a difference in the values children adopt for their lives.

Research suggests four characteristics of such schools. First, in such schools students experience, discuss and implement positive social strategies. For example, they build community by setting rules cooperatively. They participate in helping relationships such as cross-age tutoring. They regularly learn cooperatively in groups. Teachers foster responsible moral action and commitment. They act as caregivers and models who help students care about each other.

Second, such schools use discipline that fosters self-control. They use the three C's of classroom discipline: confront, confess, and commit. They use a school-wide discipline and conflict resolution program to habituate students to respect others and obey legitimate authority. They accompany modeling and discipline with offering and discussing reasons based on value principles. They help students apply moral absolutes to specific, real situations.

Third, teachers in such schools use children's literature deliberately to develop empathy for others and a principled way of life. Telling stories and designing units as stories to be told can teach even young children a great deal about values. William Bennett is on to something with his best-selling *Book of Virtues* even if we question his narrow categorization of selections. Children benefit from Bible stories and other carefully chosen selections. They already have a deep sense of right and wrong and therefore identify with the value questions presented. Good stories are memorable because all details contribute to the dramatic tension that usually centers on clearly defined value opposites such as love and hate or fairness and injustice. Literature raises value questions that help children consider what human life ought to be.

Fourth, schools that successfully nurture values have home programs. Parents not only understand and support the initiatives but also implement the same goals at home. Family homework, for instance, may include discussing reading selections about common family situations and family problem solving.³

I would add to that a fifth point. Our choice of content, how we teach it, and how we assess and evaluate what students learn must also cultivate the values we want to instill. You won't foster those desirable values if your content does not deal with meaningful, value-based topics, even of those

topics that cut across disciplinary boundaries. Nor will it happen if your pedagogy does not give students opportunity to respond genuinely, with their unique giftedness. And if assessment methods do not encourage and teach carefully with great patience even as you correct (II Tim. 4:2), and emphasize ranking students rather than helping them learn, they may well result in student attitudes that reject what you had hoped to foster.

In short, to be effective, schools need to plan values education comprehensively. Curriculum content by itself has little long-lasting effect. Schools are more successful when they implement

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a total program of nurture based on these five points, a program that goes beyond direct instruction of values.

In our Christian schools, our source and starting point for teaching about values is God's Word. Values are not determined by ourselves. They are not subject to pragmatic revision, even though their application to specific situations may not always be clear.

The three most inclusive values of Scripture that characterize God himself are love, justice and responsibility. The Old Testament prophets used justice to mean granting people what they deserve as images of God, stressing care for the underprivileged. In the New Testament Jesus used the word love in a similar way. Justice and love are summed up in the biblical term *shalom*, the biblical peace and justice that heals and restores broken relations. To experience *shalom*, we seek to replace oppression, including abuse and racism and sexism, with love and justice. We try to replace selfishness and faith in the autonomy of the individual with self-sacrifice, humility and servanthood. We may, for instance, choose unit themes and literature selections that encourage students to deal with *shalom*-related issues. We may use learning strategies where students learn to share each other's joys and bear each other's burdens.

In the remainder of this paper I consider some actual classroom examples. I will show how the

teachers nurture certain important biblical values.

Teachers Bruce Hildebrandt and Paul Smith plan an election simulation for their school's seven classes of fourth through seventh graders. Each class represents one riding and has candidates for three parties. Each party has pre-determined platforms on public works, the environment, curriculum content, criminal justice, arts and entertainment, social services, and taxes. The Leafy Green Party, for instance, will give all students a job to do at lunch or recess, allow them to choose their assignments, let the girls choose physical education activities for the whole class, insist on reusable lunch containers (with offenders doing several hours of public service work), have a subsidized canteen for all, and provide a free entertainment video—but also have a high tax levy on all students. The party that forms the government is to carry out the policies for one school day.

Each student writes a short essay to support the policies of one party. The teachers use the essays to select candidates for each party in each class. All students choose roles in the campaign. The roles reflect their own abilities and interests: campaign worker, debater, poster designer, maker of radio commercials, pollster, returning officer, and so on. The class discusses how to conduct a fair, ethically responsible campaign. The teachers encourage the students to foster care and concern for other candidates. That leads the students to conduct a campaign without slander or personal attacks. Supporters of one party even help others with posters and speeches.

The students compare how they conduct their campaign with the nation-wide election taking place at the same time. The students pray for God's guidance and for personal integrity, both for their own campaigns and for those taking place in the community. In the higher grade levels, they discuss how governments promote justice for all people in society. They also investigate how they can be a constructive influence in the political process.

Note how the unit helps students see and experience the importance of key value foundations in life: love and compassion for others, fairness for all, and responsibility and perseverance in doing one's task. It also fosters more specific values: spiritual (importance of prayer), ethical (integrity), political (fairness in taxation), social (helpfulness,

bearing each other's burdens), communication (authenticity and clarity), logical (validity of political claims), aesthetic (creativity in making posters and speeches), and psychic/emotional (being graceful in disappointment). These values are fostered in part because students respond personally in a totally supportive school atmosphere, with the parents also becoming involved in the debates about the issues at home. Now these values, of course, are not for Christians only. Nor does upholding them make a person a Christian. But they are values that God expects us to uphold. When our students understand and become committed to such values, they will help society function in a more human, humane, God-glorifying way.

Let me move on to a second example. Teacher Wayne Lennea teaches a grade 10 consumer education course. His textbook holds that consumers must make rational decisions based on their favored lifestyle. Students, it suggests, must choose their own values based on their experiences. They must remain flexible to explore and modify their values. They can exercise their voice in the marketplace by comparing the quality and price of various brands. They can also increase their self-esteem by how and what they buy.

Wayne does not agree with this approach. He first discusses with his class what the Bible says about wealth and financial freedom. He shares his own definition of wealth. Wealth is not what you accumulate. Rather, wealth is how your life makes a positive difference in the lives of others around you. Similarly, he asks students to react to his view that financial freedom is not the ability to purchase all kinds of things, but to be able to meet your basic needs in thankfulness to God. He discusses, for instance, how we squander resources when we live in homes much larger than needed. Students also explore what it means to use credit cards and make loans responsibly. He throws out for discussion whether prosperity is a blessing of God or the result of an unjust system where some go without basic needs. Only after setting the stage in this way does he ask the students to read and react to the textbook and its themes.

Let's focus on the economic values Wayne nurtures, some of which are controversial. If there is one sin that God condemns through His Old Testament prophets it is that of injustice and oppression: "Administer true justice; show mercy and

compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor” (Zechariah 7:9-10). God demands just economic structures. He does not expect everyone to be equally rich or equally powerful. But he does expect those who control the levers of economic power to treat everyone fairly. In the Bible, the poor were to be able to buy food at cost and borrow money without interest. Servants had to be set free every 50 years, and land they had lost was to be restored to them.

The principle God established is that society should care for its disadvantaged. It should distribute social goods to provide all persons with basics—food, clothes, shelter, health care, and education. The students in Wayne’s course not only explore how Christians can be agents of justice and compassion in concrete ways. They consider how Christians may have to make sacrifices and act responsively wherever they see injustice or need. They learn that while often they cannot correct society’s economic and social injustices, they must still promote economic shalom wherever they can.

Wayne may also discuss the underlying faith that guides much of life in our society: economic growth is an autonomous and ultimate good. That means that corporations generally strive for profitability and efficiency at all costs. That’s why they use the media to glorify materialism and self-gratification. Yet there is gross unevenness of capital distribution in the world, often caused by oppression. Even in North America there is a widening gap between rich and poor. Wayne’s students might investigate how resources could be used to sustain an economy that provides a fair living for all. They might examine how government policies could be changed to favor worker-intensive projects that would lessen unemployment.

Wayne’s course upholds the value of individual responsibility, a simple and thankful lifestyle, fair wages and working conditions, an attitude of caring and sharing for each other. Students explore an approach to economics that differs from that which characterizes our culture. Taking care of God’s garden, they come to see, means being stewards who hold economic resources in trust so that we can distribute benefits and liabilities fairly.

One final example. Teacher Derk Van Eerden admits openly that his attempts to lead students

into the truth in grade 12 biology do not always seem to have long-term effects. He wonders, in fact, whether schooling by itself can change lifestyles. He says that “planting seeds” is perhaps the most he can do. He realizes that a key to meaningful learning is good personal relationships.

Derk uses the first month of his course to set the stage for the remainder of the school year. The month has two complementary components. He has his class plan a four-day biology field trip and retreat during the third week in September. He uses this to draw the class into a community. The students and teachers involved get to know each

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other in different settings. They need to work together on chores like preparing their meals, and in doing tasks in small groups on ecology and geology hikes. This trip affects students’ relationships in the classroom for several months. It strengthens group and collaborative learning, with far more students willing to interact and do their share of the work. The students also sing and pray together. They get to know each other as persons.

The other component is an introductory unit that looks at human relations with nature. Students analyze modern scientific, aboriginal and Christian views of such relationships. They discuss films and articles on wildlife and forest management issues. They consider biblical passages to analyze Scripture’s views of human’s relationship with God, each other, with nature. They react to articles by aboriginal people that regard the earth as our mother and describe people conversing with animals. Are their insights closer to Biblical views than western technological ones? They discuss a satire about it being too late to save our planet. Derk concludes the unit by pointing out that we all act on the basis of beliefs. He shows that often we say one thing but do another, also in how we relate to and use the physical world, and discusses why this is so. He then invites students to act on their convictions and commitments.

Derk’s biology students will not know what it means to love God and neighbor as stewards of

the earth unless they experience positive relationships with each other and the physical world. He also knows that the more abstract learning they will do as they prepare for government examinations the rest of the year will have little long-term meaning, *unless* he can present the topics within the framework of basic values that his class develops during the first unit. Throughout, Derk stresses that recognizing God as Creator enriches our lives only when we know that Creator through Christ Jesus and therefore use our scientific knowledge wisely as caretakers of God's gifts to us.

Derk makes education an affair of the heart as well as the mind. He actively and intentionally engages his students in discussions about real issues. He also takes them to a wilderness area where they concretely experience the relationships discussed in class—with God, each other, animals, plants and physical things. Their new insights, he holds before students, are intended to nurture such relationships rather than control for personal or communal self-interest. We deepen our knowledge so that we are better able to serve—an important value in itself.

During this unit, Derk's students learn a great deal about responsible stewardship of time and resources, about loving your neighbor, about living as a supportive community. They also consider the importance of values such as economic, social and biological justice, and respect for the views of other cultures. The field trip, especially, gives opportunity for modeling the importance of prayer and a trusting relationship with God. The unit also show how people's faith commitments and values affect their personal lives within their social context, and the way they approach cultural issues, their communities, and all of culture.

Finally, Derk also recognizes the importance of what is sometimes called the hidden or implicit curriculum. He deliberately nurtures warm, caring and supportive relationships while setting high but realistic expectations. He uses students' particular gifts to contribute to the whole learning community. In this way, he encourages students to take on roles as Christ-like servant leaders.

Let me sum up. Whether intentionally or not, schools and teachers teach values. Textbooks, course outlines, unit plans, and classroom approaches all embody a blend of the predominant values of our culture and of the educators involved. As Chris-

tians, therefore, we must carefully choose the values we nurture. We need to ensure, at the same time, that our teaching does not become manipulative indoctrination that prevents normal rational growth.

Biblical values include not only spiritual and moral values, but also political, economic, social, communicative, analytic, aesthetic, psychological, biological and physical ones. The biblical notion of *shalom* encompasses all these values: it embodies values such as peace, truth, righteousness, compassion and justice.

As Christian teachers we model such values, use discipline to uphold them, give reasons for them, and introduce literature and cases that lead students to consider how the universal values apply in particular circumstances. We teach values both through the explicit and implicit curricula, and through how we assess and evaluate students. To encourage tendencies and commitments in line with biblical values, we must consider in what ways everything we do in each of our courses and units affects our students, and we involve parents in our efforts.

Thus we help our students become bearers of love, justice and hope in society. We encourage them to reject the deterministic conditioning of technology and economic growth for its own sake, and rest in the affirming love of God. In him and in him alone the future is possible and positive.

Of course, justice and love and *shalom* will not prevail until Christ returns. Meanwhile, however, God calls us to help students become committed to values that, like points of light, penetrate our cultural darkness. We need to stir our students' minds *and* their hearts. So help us God, each day again.

NOTES

- 1 The classroom examples in this paper are taken from *Steppingstones to Curriculum: A Biblical Path* (Seattle: Alta Vista College Press, 1994). Copyright Harro Van Brummelen. The examples are used with permission of the teachers involved.
- 2 Harold Faw and Harro Van Brummelen, "Staying on Course or Straying Off Course? Final Examinations and the Missions of a Christian College," in D. John Lee and Gloria Goris Stronks, eds., *Assessment in Christian Higher Education* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 157-177.
- 3 Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 28-30, 314, 403-05.