

Hesburgh on right and wrong

THEODORE HESBURGH, CSC

The following excerpts are taken from an address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame, at the first joint meeting of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the American Council on Education, October 1983. With two exceptions the second half of the speech, beginning with the discussion of nuclear threat, is published in its entirety.

How we educate, this is perhaps the greatest moral dilemma of all, because there is all too little agreement among us as to what is right or wrong in what we are purporting to do. We have many hints from the past.

Again, I trust that I am not overstating the ultimate moral dilemma that faces us, how we educate, but there is, notwithstanding Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Arnold Buber, Ghandi, or even Robertson Davies. Their visions, I fear, are far from our reality.

In the horrible jargon modern youth, they would say we ought to "get our act together", but I doubt we will do whatever that means unless we can at least agree on something not too popular in modern universities and colleges: defining what we are really trying to do, what we most fundamentally believe higher education to be, what we deeply believe these future leaders should learn from us.

Doing this will require something even more unpopular in modern universities and colleges, spending a few moments to consider transcendentals like the true, the good, the beautiful, and the moral imperatives that flow from them, if indeed they are very relevant to what we are educating young persons to be, what will really qualify them to lead us out of the present wilderness into a better future. This will require more than simply useful knowledge, in the most pragmatic sense of "useful". I need not insist here that if we, the faculty, do not see the road ahead fairly clearly, it is unlikely that we will surmount this moral dilemma in time to help our present students become effective leaders in a world of considerable moral confusion.

It would seem to me that the pursuit of truth is a good shared goal with which to begin to re-orient and revivify our institutions as we attempt to shape the future through out students.

Our best goal is not just to educate in a thousand different ways--although we will do that too--but to give a version of truth, a zest for the pursuit of truth, along all the avenues to truth, that might well lead these young persons to nobility of spirit and a commitment to do what each can do to create a world of greater justice and beauty as well, in a word, to educate persons really capable of shaping the future, not dull and drab practitioners of what is and has been and still needs changing.

Perhaps I am being too idealistic, but I do believe, after living all of my life since age seventeen in a university, that students do react positively to a great vision of what they and their world might become. If we really want to shape the future, the operative question is: Do we want to shape it in truth, justice, beauty, the good and, yes, in love, too? If we are unclear or less than enthusiastic about this, who will follow the uncertain trumpet? Certainly not our students. We all know we are decent people, totally engaged in a noble quest. But let it not be forgotten that how we think and what we do is so much more important than what we say. Every act of ours is

teaching. Our words are only buttressed by our deeds, and our deeds are inspired by our convictions. If we are not deeply concerned about truth, justice, beauty, the good as we know it, how will they be?

I could speak of a whole series of other ethical challenges that face us: How to preserve excellence in a time of retrenchment (the Carnegie Commission has the ultimate word on this one); how we preserve our freedom while seeking new and massive funding from business enterprises; how we respond to the legitimate desires of women and minorities when there are so few openings on our faculties... All of these are fundamental moral con-

cerns for our educational endeavors. I could say something about all of them, but just let me address the most important, the nuclear dilemma. If we do not learn

and teach our students how to cope with this primordial nuclear problem, we need not worry about all the others. After total nuclear conflagrations, all human problems are moot.

Perhaps I can cap this discussion of our greatest moral challenge as educators by making it concrete in seeing how we might face the greatest moral problem confronting humanity today or ever. Weak tea will not do here. I speak of the nuclear threat to humanity.

I am often asked, "Why the sudden concern?" The nuclear threat has been with us for 38 years since the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Somehow we have survived."

I believe the sudden concern stems from current accelerating trend to the disaster which has during the past 38 years and increasingly the past 2 or 3 years, been escalating upwards.

To give some small sense of the rate of escalation, we have been told in recent years that the Russians are escalating wildly, which they have been doing, presumably been sitting on our hands, we have developed the MX with ten warheads, the Triton submarine with new super accurate missiles, the Pershing II, the cruise missile, the B-1 bomber, and the upcoming Stealth bomber. What would we have done if we were not sitting on our hands?

All the movement, on both sides, has been massively upward and destabilizing an already touchy situation, and all of this is happening in a very troubled political climate, where arms control talks go nowhere, and the leaders of the super powers have not met since President Carter signed the SALT II Treaty - still unratified - in Vienna. As the little girl, Samantha, who visited Russia at Andropov's invitation last summer, asked: "If both sides say they will not start a nuclear war, why do they both continue to build more weapons?"

Never before has mankind - mostly mankind - had in their hands the power to destroy the total work of creation, fourteen times over, in a few moments, even accidentally. The newer weapons are greatly destabilizing, because they are either non-verifiable, like mobile SS-20's or cruise missiles that evade radar and defense systems, or they are offensive, first strike, like MX, rather than defensive and deterrent. The military on both sides are jittery and for good reason. Once the nuclear barrier is breach-

ed, for whatever reason, even no reason, or mistake, it is bound to escalate. As a Russian scientist recently put it: "These are not weapons, because weapons are to defend yourself and if you defend yourself with this weapon, you are dead. Neither, he added, is nuclear war, war in any rational Clausewitzian sense. Wars are won, but in nuclear war, there is nothing left to win, all is death, destruction, and devastation, your country and ours and probably most others."

It has to be the worst sin, the worst blasphemy, to utterly destroy God's beautiful creation, Planet Earth, the gem of our solar system, and all we have created here, so painstakingly, in a few thousand years; all our institutions that we have labored to perfect, all learning, all science and technology, all art, all books, all music, all architecture, every human treasure, everything, but especially millions of men, women and children, all their future and all futures, utter obliteration at worst, a return to the Stone Age at best.

It has to be utter insanity for rational creatures to have painted themselves into such a corner, to have created such a monster. But in freedom, what we have created, we can uncreate, dismantle, and we must.

It will require, most of all, hope that it can be done, the beginnings of serious, high level conversations, with creative options on the part of the super power leaders. All movement must be reserved - downward for a change - done mutually and done in a totally verifiable manner. This is not a Russian or American problem. It is a threat that profoundly affects every human being on earth.

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It is conceivable that universities and colleges who traditionally have been rational and objective critics of our society, local and global, can be silent in the face of the nuclear threat? Is it possible that our students can prepare to be future leaders and still not learn from us the dimensions of this threat, the moral problems, and possible solutions? It is mainly of their futures that we speak. Our lives are on the downside.

I have spoken of the pursuit of truth as our greatest moral imperative. There is no truth about the world and humankind today that does not become darkened in the shadow of the thermonuclear mushroom.

What do we do? Many things. While the problem is fundamentally geo-political, politicians are mostly concerned with what their constituents are saying, especially if it is loud and clear and universal. I fully realize that our opportunity for political action far transcend that of those in controlled societies especially behind the Iron Curtain. But even there, one finds great and I think, sincere concern. One would have to be crazy not to be concerned. Again, as a top Russian scientist told me: "I'm really worried about your computers, and ours are worse."

Each of us and each of our institutions must do what we can do best, and there are some things we can do together. The nuclear problem involves the expertise of all our faculties and departments.

The physicians are best organized at the moment. After their international meeting last in Cambridge University, the three American leaders, two of the Notre Dame graduates, joined three Russian medical colleagues to discuss the medical effects of nuclear war on Soviet national television.

At their Amsterdam third international meeting this year, Dr. Bernard Lown, the Harvard co-founder of IPPNW said in his message:

"We can and must instill a sense of moral revulsion to nuclear weaponry and to the Orwellian term 'deterrence', which is but a sanitized word for indiscriminate and colossal mass murder. Our goal should be the widest conditioning of an anti-nuclear instinct as potent as hunger. Moral arousal, I believe, will help tilt the perilously balanced scale in world affairs towards survival.

"President Eisenhower predicted that there will come a day when the people will generate such a mighty popular groundswell for peace that governments will be forced to get out of their way. Such a day is no longer remote for it is beckoned by the unleashing of the deepest forces imbedded in humankind when threatened with extinction." (IPPNW Report, Vol. 1, No. 2, P. 15)

I am presently attempting to bring worldwide scientific and religious leaders together - making common cause for the first time since Galileo - against the nuclear threat.

The scientific statement, signed by 36 national Academies of Sciences at the Vatican in September 1982, is very explicit, calling for moral judgment from religious leaders and indicating some possible first steps towards the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons. The statement was reproduced in full in the most popular technological review in the USSR, with a circulation of 3,000,000. Something can be done, even there, if one tries.

Our students especially must learn that they are not powerless. The groundswell is there in the Freeze Movement, but this is just a first step and the whole movement needs more creative direction and focus. We have launched a new course at my university this semester involving at least ten different departments. We are also founding a new Academy of Peace at our Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Research in Jerusalem, under the Presidency of Landrum Bolling. Many other universities are similarly involved.

I must close now. I would not want the urgency of what I have just said to exemplify one moral dimension of our educational endeavor today, to overshadow - even though it almost must - the long range moral concerns about which I spoke earlier in this talk. As one said in another connection, "It's difficult to discuss wetlands ecology when up to one's hips in alligators", but unfortunately,

we must do all at the same time, the urgent and the long range. Indeed, if we are to shape the future, we must educate as best we can, part of which endeavor will be to concern ourselves and our students that if we act as we should, there will still be a future, despite the current run-away nuclear threat.

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