



LAUCKS FOUNDATION

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As a public service, Laucks Foundation calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification of issues affecting world peace, equity among peoples and environmental responsibility.

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David W. Orr

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Dorothy Day

Teach kids wisdom about the earth



If today is a typical day on planet Earth, we will lose 116 square miles of rainforest, or about an acre a second. We will lose 72 square miles to encroaching deserts. We will lose 40 to 100 species. We will add 2,700 tons of chlorofluorocarbons and 15 million tons of carbon to the atmosphere. By year's end the numbers are staggering: The total loss of rainforest equals an area the size of the state of Washington; expanding deserts equal an area the size of the state of West Virginia.

It is worth noting that this is not the work of ignorant people. Rather, it is largely the result of work by people with B.A.'s, B.S.'s, M.B.A.'s, and Ph.D.'s. Elie Wiesel recently made the same point about the Nazis. In most respects the Germans of the 1920s and '30s were the best educated people on earth, but their education did not serve as an adequate barrier to barbarity. What was wrong with their education? In Wiesel's words, "It emphasized theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstraction rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience."

I believe that the very same thing could be said about our own educational system in regard to the natural world.

It is a matter of no small consequence that the only people who have lived sustainably on the planet for any length of time—tribal people—could not read or, like the Amish, do not make a fetish of reading. Education is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom. This is not an argument for ignorance, but rather a statement that education must now be measured against the standards of earth stewardship and human survival. Education alone will not save us, only education of a certain kind.

What went wrong with contemporary culture and with education? Historically, Francis Bacon's proposed union between knowledge and power foreshadowed the contemporary alliance of government, business, and knowledge that has wrought so much ecological

and social damage. Galileo's exaltation of the intellect foreshadowed the dominance of the analytical mind over creativity, humor, and wholeness. And in Descartes' epistemology one finds the roots of the radical separation of body from mind. Together these three laid the foundations for modern education. These foundations are now enshrined in dangerous myths about our world that we have come to accept without question: the myth that knowledge is increasing and, by implication, so is human goodness; the myth that with enough knowledge and technology we can manage planet Earth; and the myth that we can adequately restore what we have dismantled.

How might we rethink education so that it aids and nourishes the work of building a healthier, happier, more harmonious planet? Let me suggest six principles that are lacking in today's education.

- **All education is environmental education.** By what is excluded from the curriculum, we now teach students that they are separate from the natural world. To teach economics, for example, without reference to the laws of thermodynamics or those of ecology is to teach a lesson that is fundamentally wrong: that physics and ecology have nothing to do with the economy.

- **The goal of education is not a mastery of subject matter, but mastery of one's person.** Subject matter is simply the tool. Much as one would use a hammer and chisel to carve a block of marble, one uses ideas and knowledge to forge one's own personhood. We currently labor under a confusion of ends and means, thinking that the goal of education is to stuff all kinds of facts, techniques, methods, and information into the student's mind, regardless of how and with what effect it will be used.

- **Knowledge carries with it the responsibility to see that it is well used.** The results of a great deal of contemporary research were foreshadowed by Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*; we have monsters of technology for which no one takes responsibility or is even expected to take responsibility. Whose responsibility is Love Canal? Chernobyl? Ozone depletion? The *Valdez* oil spill? Each of these tragedies was made possible by the creation of knowledge for which no one was ultimately responsible. This may finally come to be seen for what I think it is: a problem of scale. Knowledge of how to do vast and risky things has far outrun our ability to deal with the consequences of these projects. A small environmental mishap can be contained by a combination of human intervention and natural systems; not so a massive mishap.

- **We cannot say that we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities.** I grew up near Youngstown, Ohio, which was largely destroyed by corporate deci-

sions to pull jobs out of the region. In this case, M.B.A.'s, educated in the tools of leveraged buyouts, tax breaks, and capital mobility, have done what no invading army could do—they destroyed an American city. They did this in the name of something called the "bottom line." But the bottom line for society includes the costs of unemployment, crime, alcoholism, child abuse, and wrecked lives. In this instance what was taught in the business schools and economics departments did not place any value on good communities or the human costs of corporations' narrow focus on ever greater profits.

- **Example is more powerful than words.** Students hear about global responsibility in their classes while being educated in institutions that often spend their budgets on and invest their endowments in the most irresponsible things. The lessons being taught are hypocrisy and, ultimately, despair. Students learn, without anyone ever saying it, that they are helpless to overcome the frightening gap between society's high ideals and the world's harsh reality. We desperately need faculty and administrators who provide role models of integrity, care, and thoughtfulness—and institutions capable of embodying ideals wholly and completely in all of their operations.

- **The way learning occurs is as important as the content of particular courses.** Process is important for learning. Lecture courses tend to induce passivity. Indoor classes create the illusion that learning only occurs inside four walls isolated from what students call, without apparent irony, the "real world." My point is simply that there is a tacit curriculum: Students are being taught in various and subtle ways beyond the content of courses.

This is the kind of thinking about education we must undertake if our colleges and school districts are to become institutions that further the cause of sustaining the planet rather than adding to its destruction.

As Aldo Leopold asked in a similar context, "If education does not teach us these things, then what is education for?"

—David W. Orr
Trumpeter

The Elmwood Institute offers resources and training in environmental education and ecoliteracy. For more information, contact them at 2522 San Pablo Av., Berkeley, CA 94702; 510/845-4595.

This essay originally appeared in the Canadian ecophilosophical journal Trumpeter (Summer 1991). Subscriptions: \$20/yr. (4 issues) from Trumpeter, Box 5853 Stn. B, Victoria, BC, Canada V8R 6S8. Back issues: \$14 to \$22 from same address. It was reprinted in the Center for Respect of Life and Environment quarterly Earth Ethics (Spring 1992). Subscriptions: \$20/yr. (4 issues plus membership in the center) from CRLE, 2100 L St. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Back issues available from same address.

(The following, reprinted from the October/November/1993 **CATHOLIC WORKER** (Address 36 E. First St., NY, NY 10003) is a re-publication of an article from one of their 1955 issues.)

[**Dorothy Day**, the revered co-founder and matriarch of the Catholic Worker movement that began in the 1930s during the Great Depression, was the driving force behind the soup kitchens set up then (without ecclesiastical direction or support) to feed the endless lines of the hungry on the streets of the lower East Side of New York. By 1980, when she died, Dorothy Day's spiritual force and passionate dedication to the poor had given impetus to the founding of Catholic Worker "hospitality" houses in most of the larger cities of the country, where thousands of destitute men, women and children still, today, line up daily for food, shelter and clothing. Dorothy Day is widely recognized and respected in both religious and secular circles. Deemed a saint by some people, she is regarded by others an enigma, because the "harsh and dreadful love" that inflamed her spirit seems beyond relating to ordinary human charitable aspiration. The article reprinted below describes, in her own words, what she was trying to do.]

God Wants Our Freely Bestowed Love

By **DOROTHY DAY**

It is necessary to restate our position and tell our readers again just what it is we are trying to do—what it means to us to perform the works of mercy, spiritual and corporal. The most important thing in the world to us is to grow in the love of God, to try to do His will. Our Lord Jesus told us that what we do to the least we do to Him. St. Paul told us we are "members one of another, and that when the health of one member suffers, the health of the whole body is lowered."

We believe not only in St. Thomas' doctrine of the common good, but feel it can be effected only if each one of us alone realizes our personal responsibility to our brother and sister, that our love for God must be shown in our love for our brother and sister, and that love must be expressed in the works of mercy, practiced personally, at a personal sacrifice. So we live together, here at the Catholic Worker, pool resources of money and abilities, and so are able to take care of far more than just ourselves.

People have so lost that sense of personal responsibility that our country is becoming a country of institutions, and a gigantic part of our income goes to support them. State responsibility has come to take the place of personal responsibility. Doctors at mental hospitals and veterans hospitals have said that a tremendous number of patients could be cared for at home if their families would take the responsibility. On the other hand, houses and apartments become smaller and smaller so that there is "no room at the inn." We are able to have fifty in our own home here at Chrystie Street because it is two old houses thrown in to one, built at a time when people wanted space. When people come to us, we cannot say "Go, be thou filled," and refer them to an agency. So we have come to be feeding and clothing a vast number of people who come in to us day after day, the lame, the halt and the blind.

But we are not organized as an institution of any kind and the city does not know how to classify us. We are not a multiple dwelling, a rest home, a convalescent home, a shelter or an asylum or a convent. We are a group of people living together under one roof, with one head, who is Charlie McCormack, now that Tom Sullivan has gone to the Trappists. Often I am considered the head, being older and the publisher of the paper. I get the sum-

monses, the complaints. We are not registered as a charitable agency, it has been pointed out. But we hope our dear Lord recognizes us as charitable people. We try to keep the laws and regulations about housing, health, fire prevention, and take as good care of our family as we can. But we find we are always coming up against some ordinance, some infraction. We will always be in trouble with the city and the state because, though we also consider ourselves good citizens and lovers of our country as well as children of God, and try to bear our share of the responsibility for each other, the city and the state have come to feel that this is their field (since it has been left to them). A western bishop said to me once that he did not believe in state ownership of the indigent. God wants our free service, our freely bestowed love. So we protest and cry out against every infringement of that great gift of God, freedom, our greatest gift, after the gift of life.

That love of brother and sister, that care for their freedom are what cause us to go into such controversial subjects as humanity and the state, war and peace. The implications of the Gospel teaching of the works of mercy, lead us into conflict with the powers of this world. Our love of God is a consuming fire. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is a living God and a living faith that we are trying to express. We are called to be holy, that is, whole in this life of ours. We are trying to follow this call. It has led many of our workers into the priesthood, into Trappist monasteries, into convents. But we as a group, not having *this* vocation, are not classed as a *religious* group, not even as a *Catholic* group, and so do not have the protection of that classification. We are individual Catholics, not Catholic Action.

Many have left us to marry and raise a little community of their own, and endure all the sufferings of trying to lead this life in the factory, on the farm, enduring the frustrations

of seeing their talents unused, their best energies of all their work days put into meaningless work in the cities, and not having the help we have of our community life and the assistance of our friends in our houses and farms.

We never intended to have breadlines, to care for so many, but it is always so hard to turn people away. People out of hospitals, with no place but the public shelter housing other thousands, turned loose on the streets by day. We have had people come in to us from the streets who have died a few weeks after, from their long endured miseries. We still have people coming who sleep in doorways and spend their days with us and share our meals. It is so hard to limit oneself, and then, too, our Holy Father, Pius XII, told some sisters once never to be afraid to run up bills for the poor. Of course it always comes back to the fact that we are not an accredited agency. We are not a charitable institution. And we are never going to turn into that because we are trying to make the point, by our lives, by our work, that personal responsibility comes first. We are born alone, we die alone, we must, each one of us, do what we can for God and our brother and sister—not God and country, but God and our brother and sister, as Christ stated it.

We are in difficulties, not only with our bills, but with the state, with the city. But we must continue to keep going with these ideas of ours about mutual aid, voluntary poverty, and the works of mercy. If we were forced to cease, how great a burden which we are bearing now would fall upon the state or city—mental hospitals and convalescent homes, relief rolls and the bread lines of the Municipal Lodging House. And how many would be just wandering the streets, crouching in doorways. O God, look upon the face of Thy Christ in these poor, and help us to keep going. †

[From an appeal letter, CW, November 1955.]

(The following is an excerpt from "They Would Not Listen", **MANAS**, 3/10/54, p. 6)

The trouble with respectability is that its guardianship of what we call "morality" draws its restraining power from the fear of social disapproval, and not from reason. In time, a society which places great faith in respectability comes to identify morality itself with social approval, and when this happens, the end of the long road of cultural decay has been reached. When respectability has this role, contempt for its compulsions is deserved, and if, in the hands of immaturity, this contempt sometimes spreads into a disregard of balance and discipline in personal relations, we ought not to suppose that a stronger hand in enforcing the dictates of respectability might change things for the better. Actually, undue reliance on respectability is itself a deep-rooted form of insecurity which attacks those whose principles are weak. Its long-term effect is to blind people to the evils of hypocrisy.

What is difficult, in social criticism, is to evaluate the degree of hypocrisy which has already become conventionally acceptable in any given society. If the hypocrisy is widespread and powerful, a forthright appeal to positive ideals may fall on deaf ears. The social soil is now corrupted, and the long, slow process of psychological regeneration has to precede any sort of political movement which depends upon simple verities for its success.

One of the symptoms of decline through the worship of respectability is the unwillingness of the great majority to listen to critics of the existing state of affairs. Critics never start out as revolutionaries, but they always end as angry, alienated men when their just complaints and strictures receive no attention.



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Education for Peace Equity among Peoples Environmental Responsibility