

Tom Horne Reports

Considering The Qualities Education Should Instill

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A few days ago I was present at a discussion about the purpose of education. "We must fill the children's' minds with knowledge," said one participant. "No," answered another, "knowledge changes too fast. We must give them the skills to obtain knowledge when they need it." On the discussion went, a clash not of right and wrong, Mr. Horne but of competing rights. The discussion caused me to look up an essay that I had enjoyed when I was in high school, "The Aims of Education," by Bertrand Russell.

Russell discusses four qualities which education should instill: vitality, courage, sensitiveness, and intelligence.

Vitality is associated with the pleasure in feeling alive. It heightens pleasures and diminishes pains. Its opposite is present when people become too absorbed in themselves. According to Russell, this entails at best boredom, and at worst melancholia. In our own society, it can be seen in our drug problem, where insufficiently educated students, unaware of the wonders to discover in the external world, turn instead to chemical stimulation of their own empty selves. Vitality promotes interest in the outside world. It also promotes the power of hard work.

Courage is the second quality. Russell was raised in an educational system designed to train aristocrats to rule the British Empire. Courage was emphasized, he was taught to "always speak the truth except when something frightens you." He transcended and rebelled against the system, but continued to believe that certain kinds of courage were necessary. One must overcome irrational fears, and control rational fears. An example of a harmful product of uncontrolled fears is rage. At school board meetings, we occasionally observe an inadequately educated patron, who gives way to rage as a manner of expression.

As a trial lawyer for the last ten years, I have also observed this phenomenon in the courtroom. The only man I have ever known to break down in tears and flee the courtroom in the middle of a cross-examination happened also to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Courage, and the absence of irrational fears, is a necessary basis for tolerance, open-mindedness, and innovativeness.

Sensitiveness is the third quality discussed by Russell. An example of sensitiveness is sympathy. A young child will cry because a brother or sister is crying. Two enlargements are needed: First, to feel sympathy even when the sufferer is not an object of special affection. Second, to feel it when the suffering is merely known to be occurring, not sensibly present. In its most intelligent form, this would enable a person to be moved emotionally by statistics. Russell viewed the development of technology and large-scale industrialism, without a concomitant development of sensitiveness, as a cause of major suffering in our century.

Another example of sensitiveness, to be developed in education, is aesthetic sensitiveness - the ability to appreciate beauty in various forms, such as music, art, and literature.

The fourth quality is intelligence. It is possible to impart information in ways that do not train intelligence. This is not desirable. But some people have mistakenly concluded that it is possible to train intelligence without imparting information. In fact, intelligence can be trained only by imparting vast quantities of information.

In our own society, unduly progressive forms of education, which attempt to train intelligence without imparting sufficient information, produce, in my personal view, nothing more than likable ignoramuses.

Intelligence includes not only knowledge, but also receptivity to knowledge. The more a man has learned, the easier it is for him to learn still more. Ignorant people are both credulous where they should be skeptical, and incredulous where they should be receptive.

An intelligent person must maintain perpetual curiosity, and associated techniques, including habits of observation, belief in the possibility of knowledge, patience, and industry.

These questions do not have final answers. But I find Russell's thoughts, which I have summarized, with a few interjections of my own, to be thought provoking.