The Education Of The Whole Man

By EARL V. PULLIAS

The nature of man is the central problem of education. Perhaps, in truth, what man is like, in reality and in potential, is the most significant issue in all of human life. The conception we, as individuals and as societies, have of man and the implications that flow from that conception are a major influence in determining the direction of all thought and action — in short, of civilization.

If man is conceived as merely a high order of animal, destined to snarl and fight his way to such advantages as he can attain; as a complex mechanism in a mechanistic universe devoid of meaning or love; as a cursed, sin-ridden changeling marooned on a muddy insignificant speck called earth; as a canny, somewhat intelligent but strangely selfish and often vicious organism to be controlled and if possible exploited; then the various aspects of a society reflect those conceptions. Education, law, economics, government, religion — the varied means of organized life — are built in terms of the way man is conceived.

If, on the other hand, man is conceived as a delicate combination of the physical and spiritual, perhaps unique in the universe; as a treasure of almost unlimited potential which proper processes can uncover; as a sensitive yet unbelievably durable instrument for the discovery, refinement and creative use of truth, beauty, goodness and love; as a remarkably versatile and energetic thinker, knower, builder, seeker who can be guided by love and truth; as a sacred being still in the process of creation, a part of which can now be self-directed; if these are the conceptions of man, then it follows somewhat as the night follows the day that man’s thought and institutions — his attempts to order his life and find answers to his problems — will be given direction by these conceptions.

But the desire and need of the teacher are to know the truth about the nature of man, for man in all his complexity and variety is the “material” with which the teacher works. To complicate the matter further, the teacher himself is man, more or less mature, more or less whole, more or less self-actualized. So the teacher and the student and the relation between them are intricately involved in the problem of the nature and potential of the material (the human personality).

About the Author

Dr. E. V. Pullias, Professor of Higher Education, University of Southern California, and a consulting psychologist in his private life, has come to see man in many roles and conditions. As a member of Los Angeles County Board of Education, and in his deep dedication to his students, he places high his belief in man’s potential. His forthcoming book Toward Excellence in College Teaching reflects the thought that has made his graduate courses appreciated by many physical educators across the land. In this issue of Quest a discussion of the meaning of the wholeness of man could not be in more competent hands. He sees man’s individualness as formulating an imperative that a highly purposed physical education program be provided every student.
which is both the means and the end of their efforts.

Yet man's knowledge of himself is still relatively slight and greatly confused. There is no lack of evidence about man. The account of his thought and endeavor is not complete but is abundant. In spite of frenzied orgies of destruction much remains from the efforts of man at his best. In recent times science (anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.) has added much to the knowledge of man's nature and full potential. Still the story remains confused and the picture of the genuine nature of man is unclear and contradictory.

Perhaps the clumsy and often ugly practices of all civilizations which have arisen out of age-old struggles to survive and to secure and retain advantage make it almost impossible for us to examine objectively and sympathetically the nature of man which is being neglected, abused, or exploited by those practices. Even a mind of the quality of Aristotle's or Plato's, one supposes, could not face squarely the question of the nature and potential of man when the whole framework of the society rested on the exploitation of individual men in slavery. Could New England or Chicago families whose fortunes and favored positions resulted from the stunting labor of immigrant workers bear to study objectively the nature of man as man? Could the Southerner enjoying the benefits of cheap and servile labor ask the deep questions about the nature of man? To come uncomfortably closer home, do we as modern men have the courage to examine the varied evidence about the nature and potential of man in the face of our treatment and neglect of him as manifested in living conditions, work, recreation, nutrition, education, religion, medical care and all the rest? Such a view would be painfully self-condemning. It is so much easier to refuse to see the true nature of that which we neglect or destroy in ourselves and others.

We come then to a serious impasse in our thought about the education of the whole man: A clear conception of the nature and potential of man is necessary to the effective education of the whole man, but our conception of man is fragmentary, confused and often distorted and contradictory. Our processes of civilized life, including much of formal and informal education, reflect this state of affairs; that is, much of education is correspondingly fragmentary, confused, distorted and contradictory.

This situation does not surprise nor dismay the thoughtful student or man and his history. It simply suggests where we now are on the "immense journey." It profits little or not at all to curse our state and search irresponsibly to place blame. The demands and opportunities of the present and the future require better things of us.

Man is engaged in a prolonged and urgent search for an education that will realize his full potential — that is appropriate to the complex needs and abilities of his nature as man. It would be foolish to expect easy or quick answers for a problem of such depth and
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magnitude, yet the swift development of some aspects of civilized life since the Renaissance (particularly the areas of the natural sciences) makes effective education a prime necessity not only for a meaningful life but even for survival.

Man thus faces a crisis of first magnitude in education. Of one thing we can be sure: answers will not be found through mutual accusation or by going backward to some simpler time. The only hope lies in learning (1) to ask the right questions, and (2) to seek through every available means answers to those questions. Both the asking and the seeking must build upon all we have learned but must be free, unfettered by the fears and vested interests of the past and present. The times require questions which come fresh from the present and are oriented toward the new humanity and the new world civilization that must arise in the future; they require the best answers faith, reason, and science can provide.

If man can avoid destroying himself during this crucial transitional period, he will find constructive answers to this problem and will in the course of time move upward in his journey, perhaps coming very near to a genuine new world civilization. The working teacher must believe that man will have this needed time, for only then can his work have the zest and skill which such faith provides.

I wish to suggest four approaches that may help in this search. But first a word about my personal attitude toward man.

I am not ignorant of the dark history of man, nor unmindful of his long record of inhumanity to his fellow creatures. I am painfully aware of his gaudy and proud empires built on human misery, suffering, and exploitation; of his armies of helpless and ignorant men that "clash by night;" of his wide-flung brothels that traffic in bodies and souls; of his storied, ostentatious wealth side by side with grinding poverty and deprivation; of his indignities and cruelties to women, minorities and even his own children; of his irresponsible rape of the good and beautiful earth; even of his puny pride in his accomplishment, bringing him dangerously near a self-destructive cosmic irreverence — the hubris that nemesis ever follows.

But the potential of man is judged most meaningfully by what he has thought and done at his best. These high-water marks, largely individually achieved, give the true estimate of the nature of man; they suggest what he can be. I refer not only to the high points reached by so-called geniuses but equally to the best each of us occasionally reaches in dream or action. These "peak experiences" throw a quickly passing but revealing light, like a flash of lightning on a dark night, on the real potential of man.

Now to the four suggestions:

1. The remarkable abilities common to all normal men should be the center of the educator's concern, rather than the special abilities and talents of a few men. This principle does not suggest the neglect of special ability, but urges that emphasis upon what seems to distinguish a small percentage of persons not be allowed to distort our vision of
the enormous potential of man, as man.

The educational scourge of our time (perhaps of most of the historical period of man) is the tendency, almost compulsive in nature, to fasten upon a certain percent of the population as the only ones capable or worthy of full education. I am suggesting that the difference between that group (whether it is the highest five, ten, or twenty percent) and the general population is not nearly so significant as it is made out to be, certainly not so important as the abilities that distinguish man from all other living forms. The point here is that major emphasis on identifying and educating the elite has caused man seriously to neglect and misuse that reservoir of ability and talent common to all men.

As examples, let us think of language which requires such uncanny skill in perception, conception, memory, and delicate adjustment of the relationship of meanings. Yet all people under proper circumstances learn language quickly and well. Or consider sensory and muscular skills as manifested in seeing, hearing, and walking, not to speak of dancing, playing, and the varied achievements of creative work. Most impressive of all are the abilities and talents usually called spiritual: love, loyalty, sacrifice, appreciation of beauty, worship, kindness. Do we really know the extent, limit, and significance of these abilities which all men have in common?

It is my thesis that progress toward a genuine education of the whole man depends, in a crucial way, on a more adequate understanding and appreciation of the abilities and talents common to all men.

2. A central emphasis in education should be upon the unity or oneness of personality and upon the delicate interdependence of all aspects of the self. Or to put the principle more simply, education of the whole man requires a balanced attention to the three major aspects of the self: body, mind, and spirit.

I am aware that this ancient division of man into the physical, mental, and spiritual is, in an important sense, arbitrary and becomes meaningless and even confusing if pressed too far. The boundaries between these areas of the personality are not clear; indeed, there may be in actuality no such boundaries, for each aspect, at least in this life, partakes of and depends upon the others for its function and meaning. Such is the baffling complexity of the wholeness of man.

Still, it seems to me, for practical purposes, in planning the process of education we can best understand man if we think of him as body, mind and spirit. Assuming for the moment that these terms represent three significant aspects of human personality, then we can ask whether a particular educational program is designed to unfold or educe man’s full potential in each of these aspects of self and, equally important, if an unbalanced emphasis upon one aspect or area hinders the proper education of the whole.

In essence, the questions would be these: (1) Are experiences provided throughout all levels of education that
will realize the full potential of the remarkable human body to the end that it might approach its best in vibrant health, in skill, in joy, and in creative use? (2) Are optimum experiences provided to develop the full potential of the human mind that it may be informed, reasonable, flexible, imaginative, and curious? (3) Are experiences provided that will unlock and cultivate the aesthetic and moral qualities inherent in man that enable him to give and receive love and loyalty and to order his life after the ways of truth, beauty, and goodness? (4) Does the educational experience keep these three aspects of man's self in proper balance in such a way as to avoid distortion and to achieve wholeness?

3. The optimum education of the whole man is basically a matter of growth, and hence should not be rushed and crowded. The current fever to put more into the curriculum, to press for increased amounts of work at higher and higher speeds, and to lengthen the work day, week, and year could have reached such a pitch only by a refusal to remember the nature and goals of the educative process. It may be that a kind of quick result will be achieved by increasing the amount and concentration of stimulation, but I doubt that the best in human education can be secured in that way. Perhaps forced feeding, artificial light, chemical injections, and other commercial processes are successful in increasing egg production or plant growth or beef production, but the human personality is something of a very different order.

One of the greatest steps in the improvement of education would be the reduction of artificial pressures which threaten wholesome growth at its very roots. The urgent need is for ample provision for additional space and time in the entire process. Such breathing room might allow the most significant aspects of man's nature to take root and grow. Then perhaps some things might be learned deeply; crucial skills might reach rewarding and satisfying levels of excellence; reason, imagination, intuition might grow and flower.

4. Health should be a major concern in all education. By health I mean the optimum functioning of the human organism in all its complexity from the subtle processes of metabolism to the most sensitive perception of beauty or truth or love. When any significant aspect of this functioning goes awry then the quality of human life is threatened. The extent of the threat depends upon the nature and degree of the malfunctioning. Advanced illness whether centered in body, mind, or soul rapidly destroys the effectiveness and meaning of all of life. These three aspects of man are so related and interdependent that serious malfunctioning in any one rapidly affects the others.

This truth is so evident that one marvels that any responsible educational effort could neglect it. The seriously unwell person loses all the best qualities of man: energy level is lowered, perception is narrowed, reasoning is more rigid, zest for living is reduced, imagination is dulled or confused, human rela-
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Questions are embittered, fear is increased, ethical judgment is warped. Aware of these facts, I have long been convinced that the part of education usually called Physical Education, including health and recreation, has a contribution of incomparable value to make to the education of the whole man. The current tendency to downgrade these phases of education in the face of the demands of modern life seems to me little short of madness.

These then are a few thoughts on the intriguing topic of the education of the whole man. They are tentative thoughts put forth in the midst of a never-ending search for truth and wisdom about that most important of all problems, What is the best education for man?

“Let me repeat once more that a man’s vision is the great fact about him.”
— Will James

“Mountains and seas and even desert plains are smaller obstacles to the diffusion of ideas than the unreasonable obstinacy of man.”
— George Sarton

“We must not expect simple answers to far-reaching ideas.”
— Alfred North Whitehead

“The claim for freedom in education carries with it the corollary that the development of the whole personality must be attended to.”
— Alfred North Whitehead