

Forum

The Ethics of Adult Educators: A Senior Perspective

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Old age is historically the time of summing up what we have been throughout our lives. Curiosity and enthusiasm help make the twilight years a glorious sunset, but only those who have been inquiring and enthusiastic in youth are likely to be that way in age. Carl Jung says we spend the first half of our lives finding our appointed work, finding what things serve us well and what we must avoid or abjure. By age forty or so, we change direction and begin to seek knowledge of the world, of humankind, and of ourselves. This last can be a distinct shock to some. Certain theologians have referred to this as “making up our should,” something quite different from merely making up our minds. This latter half of life is what, if successfully done, makes possible accepting aging without anxiety and facing inevitable demise. The following remarks are written from this chronological perspective.

Some people apparently believe that if only someone would write down a set of explicit rules that would tell them how to act in every circumstance, they would become comfortably ethical and right in their behavior. There would be no perplexing decisions, no painful wondering what is the right thing to do. If these people are adult educators, they seem at times to believe that there should be such a set of standards to govern right behavior. To the extent that these standards are already set for, and accepted by, adult educators, there must be in place an ethics of the profession. Such an adult education ethic will be found different from that of civil engineers, dentists, architects, stock brokers, or lawyers. Why, we wonder, haven't the organizations of adult educators adopted such a set of standards and made efforts to have us practice and live by them? It may be argued, of course, that an ethic can be inferred by observing what adult educators do. Such a derived code would constitute our ethics, regardless of whether it is written down and subscribed to openly.

Perhaps adult educators should be glad that their situation is not like that of physicians who, in the past twenty-five years, have seen their ethics increasingly questioned. Physicians have moved considerably from a paternalistic, omniscient status in which they made

decisions on what course of action a patient would take, a position in which they possessed sweeping and unquestioned authority. Indeed, medical ethics was widely accepted as different from that of many other professions. Deviations from the code, such as the experiment in 1966 in which penicillin was withheld from some servicemen to study alternative means for preventing complications, have no counterpart in adult education.

However, lacking such a code of ethics, adult educators in considerable numbers may have followed certain promoters of relatively untested practices based largely on enthusiasm and need for status of promoters. As an example, one recalls the cult of group dynamics with its T-groups and buzz-groups. Does the lack of an announced and commonly accepted system of ethics explain the virtual abandonment of the arts, philosophy, and related fields, including ethics itself, by adult education? The suggested response is that adult education, in practice, survives only where and when it can turn a profit for its sponsors. When a group or individual is faced with this major obligation, then ethical considerations change. One only need recall that doing what is necessary to survive has been the excuse for many forms of undesirable behavior which, as a major factor in one's ethics, may leave much to be desired.

For generations the recorded wisdom of at least the Occident has been that humankind is, as Alexander Pope put it, "Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err; / Alike in ignorance, his reason such, / Whether he thinks too little or too much" (*An Essay on Man*). Whether in individual life or in group action, we seem to repeat much of the past, both good and bad. Witness Edmund Burke's prediction that the "Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité" of the French Revolution would soon turn into its opposite, or the argument during and soon after the American Revolution that liberty would be overcome by political democracy, and this century's argument that the welfare state will overcome liberty. Do we take the position, as did Rousseau, that humankind is perfectible, or the view of Hobbes that we are a dismal lot and will come to no good end? If the answer is that by our actions you shall know us, tell us: Who are we?

Adult educators, by virtue of their occupation, seem closer to Rousseau, although, judged by what passes for research in the field, they have not spent much time investigating the matter. One would like to say that our ethics are established by humane behavior in times of disaster as well as by steady, persistent efforts to prevent and relieve the suffering of the afflicted, who are, so often, those in minority status. If this is so, is adult education then part and parcel of the salvationists, the reformers, the rescuers of the unfortunate of our

species (and, by extension, the other animals and vegetable kingdom of our planet)? Finding answers to these questions is very difficult because there seems to be a drawing back from full and public avowal by adult educators of any credo by which they can be identified and for which they will struggle. Some say that our deeds provide our identity, so why waste effort putting it on paper?

Another objection, voiced in the ranks of both theorists and practitioners, is that we are instrumentalists, not advocates. We study and demonstrate how adults can learn, or be taught, but give no advice on the use to which that knowledge is put. We are neither moral nor immoral, merely amoral. Our hands, a la Pontius Pilot, are clean. We lack the courage and clarity of Rabbi Ben Ezra, as expressed by Robert Browning's poem of that name: "Rather I prize the doubt / Low kinds exist without, / Finished and infinite clods, / Untroubled by a spark . . . Should not the heart beat once / 'How good to live and learn?'" And finally, "Let age speak the truth and give us peace at least."

Consequently, adult education shows little indication it even believes that truth exists, except perhaps in temporary form, as if that were possible. It prefers to deal largely with the functioning, the processed, the details of providing and administering whatever learning the maturing human being will pay to have. It would seem that as educators of our peers we have nothing to offer or recommend except to say that, under certain conditions, such and such methods of teaching and specific bits of information seem more desirable. If this is the case, "caveat emptor" should be a term often used by the advisor of adult students.

In the midst of world angst, sinking in a worldwide quagmire of tribulation, it is easy to hide our faces behind a false face of professionalism. We can either keep to ourselves our feelings for the overgrown human population, or we can make assessment of the chances for a good life for those who can survive with some dignity and throw our weight on the side of reason. We surely must understand that, under the current system of education worldwide, a very small fraction of the whole of humankind feasts on an educational banquet. The huge majority get only scraps from that table.

Haynes Johnson's social history of the eighties, *Sleepwalking Through History*, records some of our recent past. We, the people, elected a somnambulist president and an avaricious, cowardly congress, and together we sold our nation into future bondage for current pleasures. Even today, we seem unwilling to deal with the rough realities of our times. With no ethical guide clearly announced to guide us, adult educators have reason to accept our full share of responsibility for things being no better than they are.