

The Aspiration to Be a Catholic Social Scientist in the Eyes of Robert Coles: The Search for Wisdom in an Information Age

Randy Lee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/jcls>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

This Symposium is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Catholic Legal Studies by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact selbyc@stjohns.edu.

THE ASPIRATION TO BE A CATHOLIC SOCIAL SCIENTIST IN THE EYES OF ROBERT COLES: THE SEARCH FOR WISDOM IN AN INFORMATION AGE

RANDY LEE†

INTRODUCTION

To aspire to be a saint is to embrace God's plan for one's life, and God's plan for the life of each person is to know God, love God, and serve God.¹ Thus, the Catholic social scientist is defined not by a desire to master a field or to accumulate knowledge for his own sake or the sake of the information itself. The Catholic social scientist seeks to understand his world so he can know his God. He is called by love to the questions that he addresses, and the answers he finds to those questions draw him to a call of service, a call to make a life other than his own at least a little better. This is a call, as Dorothy Day put it, "to try to make things better in this world."² As Jesus put it, it is a call to "lay down one's life for one's friends."³

In this spirit, Dr. Robert Coles once described the goal of higher education, so much the citadel of the social sciences, as being to learn "[h]ow to live a life. How to live an honorable, a caring, and a decent life."⁴ In furtherance of this goal, Dr. Coles, as a Harvard professor, used to end his courses by taking his students to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts so that they could view a triptych by Paul Gauguin. In that triptych, Gauguin asks in French the very questions God has answered in His plan for

† Professor of Law, Widener University School of Law, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

¹ See CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶¶ 1, 2084 (2d ed. 1997) [hereinafter CATECHISM].

² ROBERT COLES, *THE CALL OF SERVICE: A WITNESS TO IDEALISM*, at xxiii (1993).

³ *John* 15:13 (New American).

⁴ Dr. Robert Coles, *Bruce Springsteen and Staying on the Jersey Side: An Interview with Robert Coles on Human Connection and the Law*, 14 WIDENER L.J. 953, 977 (2005).

our lives, “D’où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?”: Where do we come from; what are we; where are we going?⁵

Dr. Coles first encountered the triptych when his parents took him and his brother to the museum to look at it. Dr. Coles’s father would translate the French to English and then comment, “There, there is the human story.”⁶ Although, at the time, Dr. Coles could not help thinking that his father had “gone off,” in time he began to embrace the questions for himself, and, ultimately, Dr. Coles dedicated his life to helping others find answers to them as well.⁷ Through this commitment to tell the “human story” and to address for himself and others the questions that lay at the heart of “[h]ow to live an honorable, a caring, and a decent life,”⁸ Dr. Coles has become one of the preeminent social scientists of our time.

Dr. Robert Coles is the James Agee Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard, a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at the Harvard Medical School, and a research psychiatrist for the Harvard University Health Services. Dr. Coles has written more than fifty-five books and 1,200 articles and essays and is widely recognized as one of America’s greatest moral voices over the last fifty years. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for his five-volume work, *Children of Crisis*, which drew in part on his work with children who had been victimized by polio as well as children in the South who suffered from the stress of desegregation. His quarterly magazine, *DoubleTake*, won the 1998 National Magazine Award for General Excellence. Among his many awards and honors, Dr. Coles received from President Clinton in 1998 the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor America bestows, and in 2002, President Bush awarded him the Medal of Humanities.⁹

Yet, for all his publications and accomplishments, Dr. Coles would say that he has not so much performed research throughout his career as he has been a student of life. He also

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

⁷ *Id.* at 977–78.

⁸ *Id.* at 977.

⁹ See William J. Cromie, *Robert Coles Wins Medal of Freedom*, HARV. UNIV. GAZETTE, Jan. 15, 1998, http://www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/1998/01.15/Robert_ColesWins.html; see also Lawrence Van Gelder, *Footlights*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 20, 2002, at E1.

would add that he is not so much an author as he is a storyteller, which, in his own words, makes him a healer because “healers make sense of stories.”¹⁰ Most noticeably, Dr. Coles is never the hero of his own stories. Those stories always feature the virtues of others, and when Dr. Coles does take center-stage in one of them, it is only to illustrate some lesson he has had to learn from some wiser spirit.

During his life, Dr. Coles has befriended Ruby Bridges, worshipped with Martin Luther King, Jr., campaigned with Bobby Kennedy, offered hospitality with Dorothy Day, treated patients with William Carlos Williams, rocked with Bruce Springsteen, and hid Daniel Berrigan from the FBI. He has taught Dickens to law students, been comforted by the child victims of polio, and taught teenagers ensnared in the juvenile justice system how to drive a stick shift. Dr. Coles insists that his research into what matters most has been as much influenced by literary figures such as Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy as it has been influenced by more traditional scientists like Anna Freud and Erik Erikson, and Dr. Coles has known each of these people as a friend.

Admittedly, much of Dr. Coles’s work challenges many of the conventions and trends of the modern social sciences. While the social sciences increasingly seek to emphasize the mathematical and quantifiable and focus their attention on studies involving multiple subjects, Dr. Coles’s efforts to sort out the purposes of life have led him, more often than not, to attempt to capture the wisdom of the exceptional individual and to do so by listening humbly. While some of these exceptional individuals have been leaders of their time and field, others have been poor farmers,¹¹ school cafeteria workers,¹² and distraught students.¹³ In fact, Dr. Coles would say that he has spent much of his life learning at the feet of children: the younger, the poorer, the more broken, the

¹⁰ Peter Wortsman, *Alumni Profile: Robert Coles: An American Odyssey*, 24 P.S. (2004), <http://www.cumc.columbia.edu/news/journal/journal-of/fall-2004/alumni.html>.

¹¹ See generally ROBERT COLES, *THE OLD ONES OF NEW MEXICO*, at ix (rev. ed. Walker Publishers 2000) (1973).

¹² See ROBERT COLES, *Teaching and Learning, Strutting and Conniving*, in *HARVARD DIARY: REFLECTIONS ON THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR* 201, 203–04 (1988) [hereinafter *HARVARD DIARY*].

¹³ See ROBERT COLES, *Small Gestures*, in *HARVARD DIARY*, *supra* note 12, at 109, 109–11.

better the teacher.¹⁴ Dr. Coles relies on classic books rather than web sites, writes everything by hand on yellow legal pads, and does not do email.

This is not to say that the Catholic social scientist must shun statistical work or broad group studies, deny himself the analytical tools available to his secular counterparts, or, in the academic language of the day, be “less rigorous” than others. In fact, the Catholic social scientist should be prepared to engage other social scientists with work that embraces the preferred methods of study and reflects the preferred language of his discipline precisely because he is Catholic.

At Pentecost, God spoke through the apostles in a way such that “each one heard [these men] speaking in his own language.”¹⁵ He did that so that everyone who heard could understand and believe.¹⁶ God speaks through the Catholic social scientist today in much the same way and for much the same purpose. God has called us to our institutions and our disciplines so that we may be missionaries of truth, so that we may proclaim the realities by which God has created and ordered our world and the people in it, and so that those to whom He has sent us can respond to those realities.¹⁷ Thus, if one’s audience or colleagues only understand the language of statistics, tables, graphs, bound volumes, glossy reports, or prestigious journals, the Catholic social scientist must find a way to speak his message, his spark of truth, in such languages. To respond to God’s call for us, we, like the Apostles, must be willing to speak in a multitude of ways so that ultimately each can understand. God has called the Catholic social scientist not to prevail in the public square but in the heart of each of His children.¹⁸ The irony of the “culture war” for the Catholic social scientist is that

¹⁴ See Robert Coles, *Children as Moral Observers*, Lecture at the University of Michigan (Apr. 7, 1980), in THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES 119, 141 (1981), available at <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/coles81.pdf> (“And then *we* decide that only a few of *us*, the much older, can see as Jo [a boy of the streets in *Bleak House*] did, and respond to what is seen as he did.”).

¹⁵ *Acts* 2:6 (New American).

¹⁶ *Acts* 2:36.

¹⁷ See CATECHISM, *supra* note 1, ¶ 3.

¹⁸ For a discussion of the distinction between discourse that appeals to each as opposed to discourse that appeals to all, see Robert Justin Lipkin, *Reconstructing the Public Square*, 24 CARDOZO L. REV. 2025 (2003).

when God wins, all the soldiers on both sides of the battle live forever.

Yet, as much as the Catholic social scientist must embrace the professional methods and languages that allow him to engage his professional colleagues, he must remember not to let them define his message, his work, or himself. In all things, he must remain true to the wisdom and knowledge God has called him to reveal. The Catholic social scientist must remember that we serve our brothers and sisters, not by doing research, but by answering questions that matter. Therefore, we must never let the preferred methods of research define the questions that we seek to answer; rather, the method of our research must always conform to the questions we have been called to answer. We should not lose access to a truth because it cannot be accessed by the research methods favored by our time, much as we should be alert to the danger of allowing those who deny truth to set the agenda for where and how it can be found.

Robert Coles is a psychiatrist, a medical doctor, and a "hard" scientist. He has done medical research and he can speak to his fellow scientists in their own language. Yet, Dr. Coles has never allowed the conventions of his discipline to define the truth that he can discover and ultimately share. In all things, he has remembered that his calling is to teach his fellow sojourners how to live an honorable, a caring, and a decent life.

We can see all of this in the historian Dr. Coles and in his work with Catholic social activist and co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day. As a historian, Dr. Coles has written the leading account of the life of Dorothy Day. In fact, as a window into who Ms. Day was, Dr. Coles's *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*¹⁹ is second only to Ms. Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*.²⁰ Yet, for all the book accomplishes in its consideration of Ms. Day's life, dates in the book are remarkably scarce. Instead, the book is filled with people, conversations, stories, insights, and reflections. For the record, Dr. Coles reports that Ms. Day was born on November 8, 1897 in New York City,²¹ and then he goes silent on the particular dates that might mark his subject's life.

¹⁹ ROBERT COLES, *DOROTHY DAY: A RADICAL DEVOTION* (1987).

²⁰ DOROTHY DAY, *THE LONG LONELINESS* (1952).

²¹ COLES, *supra* note 19, at 1.

Dr. Coles's approach to Ms. Day's biography was led by Ms. Day herself, who once told him, as he attempted to pin her down on the details of her life, that dates are "not what matters."²² While such an assertion may grate on our learned perceptions of the objective science of history, it seems undeniably true that dates are not what matters in the life of anyone who has striven after the eternal. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the historian who seeks to write in pursuit of the eternal may need to learn to transcend time.

Dorothy Day strove after the eternal. The issues that defined her life were timeless, much as are the lessons that her life offers: lessons touching on love, service, healing, and the essence of human dignity; lessons about where we come from, what we are, and where we are going. Dorothy Day said strange things apt to frighten and confuse a world perhaps better accustomed to recognizing "the badness of goodness and the goodness of badness."²³ Ms. Day said things like:

[E]mbrace work rather than leisure, desire poverty, be healed by the broken, and turn your back on the great institutions of our age and go back to your family, to the farms, and to an age of craftsmen. In an era of personal autonomy, self-esteem, and a thousand other self-words, Dorothy Day said that we can only find ourselves in God and we can only find God in community with others.²⁴

Rather than dates or data, the historian Robert Coles embraced those words and the life that gave them meaning, and that is what he sought to communicate in *A Radical Life*.

More generally, the approach that Robert Coles has taken to his work over the years, as well as the body of work itself, offers five lessons to social scientists aspiring to be Catholic in their work. First, Dr. Coles has always approached his work with a sense of wonder, an appreciation that man is, for all his faults and flaws, the pinnacle of creation.²⁵ Second, Dr. Coles has never been afraid to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets of old who were frequently rattling the cages of the

²² See *id.* at 7.

²³ PETER KREEFT, C.S. LEWIS FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM 88 (1994).

²⁴ Randy Lee, *Dorothy Day and Innovative Social Justice: A View from Inside the Box*, 12 WM. & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 187, 187-88 (2005). For a discussion of these lessons in the context of the life of a lawyer, see generally Lee, *supra*.

²⁵ See *Genesis* 1:27.

established powers of church and state.²⁶ Third, Dr. Coles has never been content to observe life, but has sought to be in the midst of it, even if that means being in the midst of trouble. Fourth, Dr. Coles has realized that he has been called to learn not only from the brilliant but also from the broken. Fifth and finally, he has seen his work as a call to heal rather than simply to evaluate. Each of these lessons shall be considered here.

I. LESSONS FROM A STUDENT OF LIFE

Initially, Dr. Coles would remind the aspiring Catholic social scientist that we are called to “look within and wonder, to affirm our humanity.”²⁷ As G.K. Chesterton was apt to point out, man was, from his earliest moment, distinctly the creature who drew pictures on the wall of the cave.²⁸ Dr. Coles insists that we remember that “[w]e are the creature of language and of song.”²⁹ Dr. Coles, in fact, calls the Catholic social scientist to celebrate that while “[a]ll other creatures live, prosper sometimes, or fail and die, . . . we’re the ones who have words to inform our habits. We have language, and thereby inquiry and thereby storytelling, and thereby singing and heralding and pointing out.”³⁰

Second, with respect to being a troublemaker, as a scientist, Dr. Coles has not been afraid to draw on the wisdom of the novelist; this alone could have made him an object of contention as a scientist. Dr. Coles, however, has even chosen to be influenced by novelists who are likely to make him rattle even more cages. One novelist upon whose wisdom Dr. Coles has drawn, for example, is the Catholic Walker Percy. As a novelist, Percy was not afraid to be informed in his work by his great hero, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard.³¹ Thus, Dr. Coles would insist that he himself has been influenced vicariously by the likes of Kierkegaard, and he relishes the implications that it has for the social scientist in him.

²⁶ See Coles, *supra* note 4, at 982.

²⁷ *Id.* at 978.

²⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, in 2 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF G.K. CHESTERTON 135, 167 (1986) (“All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man; and that we cannot talk about it without treating man as something separate from nature.”).

²⁹ Coles, *supra* note 4, at 978.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

As Dr. Coles points out:

Kierkegaard . . . wasn't a professor. He was a "troubled eccentric[,] . . . us[ing] "eccentric" with quotes around it. Kierkegaard was an oddball in the nicer sense of the word, an oddball who was railing against all kinds of established power and finding flaws here, there, and everywhere, in the sort of way that Dickens does in his novels, and in the way that Bruce [Springsteen] does in his singing, traveling life.³²

Through Kierkegaard, Dr. Coles reminds the Catholic social scientist that in affirming our humanity, we may be called to look beyond the comfortable and remind our world that "[r]ight around the corner, there . . . are people who are getting a raw deal,' . . . '[t]here's human vulnerability, and it is our task to be aware of it and yes, to respond to it.'"³³

Third, Dr. Coles would insist that the calling of the Catholic social scientist goes even further than looking beyond the comfortable. As a student of life, he must be, as Dr. Coles puts it, "*in medias res*, getting into the fancy Latin talking, 'in the midst of trouble,' right in the midst of it."³⁴ Certainly, this has been true of Dr. Coles as he shared with children in the polio wards or stood with other civil rights workers in the midst of lynch mobs in the South. It was also true when he hid Daniel Berrigan from the FBI,³⁵ and when he stumbled into Ruby Bridges's life because she was walking through a mob to get into school as Dr. Coles was on his way to a medical meeting. It was then that Dr. Coles first found himself in the midst, not only of Ruby's life, but more immediately, of the mob who had gathered that day to tell this six-year-old child that they wanted to kill her because a federal judge had ordered her, in spite of her race, into the William Frantz Elementary School.³⁶

Dr. Coles would choose, instead, to illustrate what it means to be a student of life in the midst of trouble by drawing on the life of someone else, someone whom he admired, no doubt someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In fact, Dr. Coles is quick to

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.* at 978–79.

³⁴ *Id.* at 979.

³⁵ See generally DANIEL BERRIGAN & ROBERT COLES, *THE GEOGRAPHY OF FAITH: UNDERGROUND CONVERSATIONS ON RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE* (expanded anniversary ed. Skylight Paths Publ'g 2001) (1971).

³⁶ See ROBERT COLES, *The Inexplicable Prayers of Ruby Bridges, in FINDING GOD AT HARVARD: SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS OF THINKING CHRISTIANS* 33, 34 (1996).

emphasize that in the story of Bonhoeffer, “there’s a story,”³⁷ a story worth being moved by. As Coles tells it, the story is of how a young man, “of brilliant intellectual ability, a marvelous writer, a theologian and philosopher, studying at Union Theological Seminary in the Thirties,” decided to return to Nazi Germany, his native country, so that he could stand up against Hitler in the midst of the horror and trouble.³⁸ For Bonhoeffer, it was not enough to stand up against Hitler from the safety of “a great intellectual center” in New York city; Bonhoeffer needed to be in the midst of his “own people, people who, at that time, were living under the most murderous regime ever—the ‘horror’ of which no one had ever seen before.”³⁹

Fourth, while Dr. Coles is not apt to set himself up as an example of a social scientist who has stood in the midst of trouble, even though he will grudgingly admit that he has, Dr. Coles is quick to cite himself as an example of the social scientist who can learn from those the world sees as the small, the weak, or the broken. He relishes, for example, the opportunity to share how much a six-year-old child named Ruby Bridges was able to teach a pediatrician-child psychologist named Robert Coles. As Dr. Coles has described one particular lesson:

As I would sit with Ruby, I would think to myself, “She is going through this mob, and they are telling her all these horrible things. At least, I should be a clinician and ask her what comes into her mind when she hears all this from all these people: people telling her that they are going to try to end her life, people swearing at her.” Eventually, after I did get to know her pretty well, I finally said, “Ruby, tell me, when you go past that mob everyday, before school and after school, what do you think about when you hear all that?”

It is an ordinary clinical question and a human question, too. Ruby looked at me, and then she said, “Well, you know, I don’t really think too much about it. I just pray for them.”

I can still feel that moment, her telling me that. I looked back at her and said, “Ruby, you pray for those people?” I was trying to help her clinically by asking that, trying to get her toward the *anger* she must feel towards these people and to get her away

³⁷ Coles, *supra* note 4, at 980.

³⁸ *Id.* at 980–81.

³⁹ *Id.* at 981.

from the possibility of *depression* and also trying to help her to *express* all this.

Ruby just looked at me, and she said, "Don't you think that they need praying for?"

I could only look at her; I couldn't respond, and I will never forget, my wife was sitting there, and she looked at me, and she looked at Ruby, and she said, "Ruby, a lot of us need praying for."

That was that. I can still feel that in me: Ruby and, in her own way, my wife punctuating a sentence that had been uttered, "Don't you think they need praying for?"

....

Boy, I remember that moment: me looking for a kind of clinical wisdom and finding out from a girl who was a child of six that there are other kinds of wisdom that maybe I ought to seek.⁴⁰

Finally, Dr. Coles would suggest to the social scientist aspiring to be Catholic that he seek to be a healer rather than simply an evaluator. Such a role, after all, follows from a dedication to know, love, and serve God. One would expect that the Catholic social scientist would be "an honorable person . . . who has a helping hand to offer and offers understanding of a world, of a terrain, that [others don't] understand."⁴¹ One would expect the Catholic social scientist to be a person who can explain to the oppressed person "an illness in the social fabric," but then if necessary, the Catholic social scientist should be able to go on "to present [the oppressed person's] case . . . to a community who needs to understand what the [person] is about but may not be disposed to want to understand that."⁴² Furthermore, one would expect that if more than that were necessary, the Catholic social scientist would seek to undertake what needed to be done to facilitate healing, and he would do it all purely "in an effort to improve the [person's] condition."⁴³ Dr. Coles would attribute such a response to what he has called a "demanding conscience."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 985–86.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 979 (referring to the hope that lawyers are "honorable" people).

⁴² *Id.* (discussing further the role of lawyers in society).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ ROBERT COLES, *The Hero Without and Within*, in HARVARD DIARY, *supra* note 12, at 113, 115–16 ("[A] voice within that (at a minimum) said there is no pathway but *this* pathway, and a voice which was heard by the person in question.").

Reminiscent of all this, as a young psychiatrist, Dr. Coles often got confused about his role in institutional settings. When he was a psychiatrist for the Air Force, his job was to evaluate whether certain service personnel should remain in the Air Force, but Dr. Coles could not resist the temptation to try to help the men he encountered. He had the same problem when he was supposed to evaluate juveniles for the Massachusetts judicial system. One day, in fact, as Dr. Coles was interviewing a rebellious teenager whom the Commonwealth had assigned to him in some Commonwealth office space, Dr. Coles suddenly said to the teen, "Come on; we're getting out of here." Somewhat uncertain of what was coming down, the teen went hesitatingly with Dr. Coles out of the building and onto the street where Dr. Coles had parked his Porsche Spyder convertible, a car he had bought because it reminded him of Jim Stark, James Dean's character in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Dr. Coles directed the teen to the driver's side and asked him if he knew how to drive a stick. The teen did not know and was not inclined to try, but Dr. Coles ordered him to get in on the driver's side anyway; he could learn. From then on, the two met in the Spyder, and the teen learned how to drive a stick.⁴⁵ In the process he also learned about his life: who he was, where he came from, and where he was going.

Confronted with such a story, a layman might ask why would Robert Coles put a juvenile delinquent behind the wheel of his Porsche Spyder when the kid didn't even know how to drive it; but a Catholic social scientist would know it was, to state the obvious, because the kid meant more to Dr. Coles than the car did.

II. A YOUNG PSYCHIATRIST LOOKS AT HIS PROFESSION

Dr. Coles not only has advice to offer those who aspire to be Catholic social scientists, but he has warnings for them as well. These warnings are best captured by reviewing a critique of psychiatry that Dr. Coles wrote early in his career.

Dr. Coles emerged as a voice of American conscience in 1961 with the publication of his article, *A Young Psychiatrist Looks at His Profession*.⁴⁶ There, Coles observed that psychiatrists had

⁴⁵ Interview with Dr. Robert Coles, Professor, Harvard Med. Sch., in Concord, Mass. (July 6, 2007).

⁴⁶ ROBERT COLES, *A Young Psychiatrist Looks at His Profession*, in *THE MIND'S FATE* 5 (2d ed. 1995).

evolved from an “[o]pinionated, determined, oblivious of easy welcome” “band of outcasts” who “were fighters for their beliefs”⁴⁷ to “Organization Men.”⁴⁸ He explained that the profession, whose ranks were once filled with the “curious and bold,” had become the province of “carefully well-adjusted and certified”⁴⁹ professionals overwhelmed by a “monthly tidal wave of minute or repetitive studies,”⁵⁰ incapable of “[i]ndependent thinking.”⁵¹ These organization men found themselves arguing “longer and harder about incidentals, such as whether our patients should sit up or lie down; whether we should accept or reject their gifts or answer their letters; how our offices should be decorated; or how we should talk to patients when they arrive or leave.”⁵² Rather than existing as a community of friends, their societies had become bureaucracies,⁵³ and individual psychiatrists had all too frequently suffered from the “death of the heart.” They had become people whose “sensibilities ha[d] die[d], and we no longer care or notice.”⁵⁴

In *A Young Psychiatrist Looks at His Profession*, Dr. Coles offered psychiatrists four symptoms that they might use to diagnose their own death of heart, but these symptoms could serve the practitioners of any of the social sciences equally well. Are our ranks dominated by the curious and bold? Do we argue longer and harder about incidentals oblivious to the state of the human condition around us, which we might seek to heal or serve? Are our “societies” bureaucracies? If we learned that our sensibilities had died, would we care?

Dr. Coles noted that as psychiatrists experienced this death of their hearts, their language slipped “into wordy and doctrinaire caricatures of life.”⁵⁵ Not only their professional language, but even their “habits of talk bec[a]me cluttered with jargon or the trivial . . . excused as a short cut to understanding a complicated message by those versed in the trade.”⁵⁶

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 6.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 9.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 10.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 7.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 9.

⁵² *Id.* at 7–8.

⁵³ *Id.* at 7.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 9.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 10.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

To the young Dr. Coles, the end result of this death of heart and language was isolation and an embrace of “icy reasoning and abstractions” over human relationship, an ironic outcome for people “attracted to psychiatry as a job with human contacts” in an “often lonely” and “unreliable world.”⁵⁷ This isolation extended not only to clients and co-workers but to wisdom as well. Like that of theologians, philosophers, and artists, the work of the psychiatrist is “the human condition,” “the ‘nature and destiny of man.’”⁵⁸ Yet, American psychiatrists seemed “afraid to recognize [the] common heritage” they shared with these fellow sojourners in the human experience, and, in fact, refused to accept the counsel to be taken from a Dostoevski, Shakespeare, Niebuhr, or Salinger.⁵⁹ “While,” Dr. Coles observed, “this is surely a problem for all professions, it is particularly deadening for one which deals so intimately with people and which requires that its members themselves be alive and alert.”⁶⁰

The call to plain English is nothing new for social scientists, and one could certainly defend, both on practical and ethical grounds, a requirement that academics use language that best serves the public rather than professional jargon created only for their own convenience.⁶¹ The deficiency in language that Dr. Coles noted for psychiatrists, however, runs deeper than the choice to use professionally precise language rather than language accessible to lay people. Instead, Dr. Coles criticized psychiatrists for creating language that made their professional lives easier for them to accept, as it dehumanized and abstracted the realities they faced in their work. As Dr. Coles put it, “As the words grow longer and the concepts more intricate and tedious, human sorrows and temptations disappear, love moves away, envies and jealousies, revenge and terror dissolve. Gone are strong, sensible words with good meaning and the flavor of the real.”⁶²

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 11 (quoting Reinhold Niebuhr).

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 10–11.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 7.

⁶¹ See *supra* text accompanying notes 14–18. While the Catholic social scientist must be able to speak in the language of the social scientist to other social scientists, he must also be able to speak to his lay brothers and sisters in their language as well.

⁶² COLES, *supra* note 46, at 10.

The question, then, about our own languages as social scientists is not simply whether lay people can understand these languages, but whether our languages can accurately communicate to ourselves the world in which we live and the realities of what we do in our work for the lives of others. Do “we best understand by this strange proliferation of language the worries, fears, or loves of individual people”?⁶³ Do the languages of our chosen fields give us access to, or allow us to enhance, the lessons to be learned from others who similarly seek to address where we come from, what we are, and where we are going,⁶⁴ or, instead, do they allow us to isolate ourselves from such wisdom? Do they allow us to reduce the likes of Dickens to literature or facilitate our understanding of it as the stuff of life?⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

It has been offered here, that Robert Coles, psychiatrist, teacher, moralist, activist, author, and friend, would provide five pieces of advice to social scientists who seek in their work to know, love, and serve God. First, work with a sense of wonder and awe. Second, be a troublemaker. Third, never be content to observe life but place yourself in the midst of life even if that means being in the midst of trouble. Fourth, learn not only from the brilliant but also from the broken. Finally, do not just evaluate, but seek to heal.

Meanwhile, Dr. Coles also would caution such social scientists to avoid being caught up in discussions of the trivial and to avoid isolating themselves from the wisdom of other disciplines, particularly from the insights of social scientists like Dostoevski, Charles Dickens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Dorothy Day. Dr. Coles would insist that social scientists keep both their hearts and their languages alive so each can comprehend the passions and vibrancy of life as it is not only studied, but lived.

Most of all, however, Dr. Coles would insist that we never forget that a life well spent is a life spent trying to find truth, understanding human suffering, and doing what is right. As he

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ See *supra* text accompanying note 5.

⁶⁵ For a discussion by Dr. Coles of how Charles Dickens educates the science of law, see generally Robert Coles, *Charles Dickens and the Law*, 59 VA. Q. REV. 564 (1983), and Randy Lee, *Nineteenth Century Visions of a Twenty-First Century Bar: Were Dickens's Expectations for Lawyers Too Great?*, 15 WIDENER L.J. 283 (2006).

said once, as a young man in a fast car, to his fellow psychiatrists:

We cannot solve many problems, and there are the world and the stars to dwarf us and give us some humor about ourselves. But we can hope that, with some of the feeling of what Martin Buber calls "I-Thou" quietly and lovingly nurtured in some of our patients, there may be more friendliness about us. This would be no small happening, and it is for this that we must work. Alert against dryness and the stale, smiling with others and occasionally at ourselves, we can read and study; but maybe wince, shout, cry, and love, too. Really there is much less to say than to affirm by living. I would hope that we would dare to accept ourselves fully and offer ourselves freely to a quizzical and apprehensive time and to uneasy and restless people.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ COLES, *supra* note 46, at 13.

