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# THE ROLE OF THE PARENT

MIRIAM T. ROONEY\*

WITH THE SECOND HALF of the twentieth century well under way, it may be safely predicted that this will be set down in history as an era of conflicting ideologies. There have been, of course, striking advances in mechanical inventions. There has been a tremendous improvement in the standard of living, especially in this country. But even more significant on the world scale have been the efforts at persuasion, at propaganda, so-called, and thought control. Developments in electronics — in telephone, radio, tape recordings, photography, and television — have made mass communication easy. New professions, such as public relations, advertising, opinion research, and even journalism itself, have been directed not so much toward reporting facts as toward channeling communications for the purpose of arousing the greatest possible response. The Supreme Court, keenly sensitive to these pressures, has gone to great lengths to emphasize the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and of the press. All over the world, the people are expected to take sides for or against specific forms of governmental powers, but they are often required to choose on the basis of suppressed, subverted, or deceptive information rather than frankness and truth.

Implicit in all this is a recognition that man's intellect is the most important feature about him, and that he has in fact free will, or the power to choose between alternatives presented for his judgment. Appeals are directed through his need for better food, better clothing, better housing, and more labor-saving devices. Arguments based upon the desirability of increased income probably are the most insistent of all. Although the propaganda is usually aimed at bodily comfort, toward which man, along with the lower animals, is instinctively drawn, nevertheless it in fact

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acknowledges that he may accept or reject whatever is proposed for his consideration, and that no matter what his decision ultimately amounts to, it can have tremendous effect on production, consumption, and human activity in general. Even the production and consumption of propaganda itself is recognized as premised upon man's ability to receive or to refuse.

With the ultimate battleground, therefore, located in each person's mind, the most important task in the world is to assist that mind to make its best possible decisions. Information is, of course, the first requisite, since a person cannot choose what he does not know. Accordingly, efforts must be made to make information — true, accurate information — available for each mind to grasp. However, merely making the information available is not enough. It must be presented in such a way as to arouse a person's interest, and only such notions are interesting as are immediately related to one's individual experience. Skill is required, therefore, in providing useful information, and this skill involves an understanding of how the human mind works. The attempt to pour information from one mind into another is never successful. Rather, a step by step process, carefully planned in accordance with ever widening concentric circles of interest, must be worked out. To provide this, schools have been established, all the way from kindergarten to university, and teachers have been in incessant demand. But what happens if the teachers are unskillful or not fully informed; what if the schools are themselves instruments of propaganda through governmental compulsion?

All education which is effective is ultimately self-education. The pupil whose interest is aroused, naturally shows his eagerness to learn by such expressions as,

"show me," "how do you do that?," "why?" Through imitation he begins to develop his own powers, but not until he makes the experience fully his own does his personal education take shape. A well-educated man has put forth a tremendous amount of effort in self-development, and all who would be fully civilized are obliged to do the same. No one can, however, become completely educated by his own efforts. He needs someone to point out to him distinctions and differences, to make comparisons, to give explanations which seem plausible to him on the basis of his own experience. Without these, he becomes bored, frustrated, or merely uninterested. The extent of his intellectual development is in fact dependent upon the quality of the teaching that is available to him. Given the right start, he may go far on his own, but handicapped by little or no good teaching, his efforts may advance him only part way toward the goal he might otherwise have been capable of reaching. This is what is meant when it is said that education is in effect a social process — although the school exists not for society, not for the government, not even for the teachers, but rather for the student.

Each person has not only a natural inclination to learn but also a natural duty to exercise and perfect all his powers, both mental and physical, in the development of a sound mind in a sound body. The instinct to do this is observable in small children, whose insistent "why?" or "tell me," or "let me" is as natural as the urge to creep or to touch. Unfortunately, in too many cases, the child who is given conscientious attention by his parents in the interests of bodily health finds that his intellectual urges are not so readily satisfied, and he becomes a comfortably adjusted individual, instead of a fully developed one.

No less important than the duty to learn is the duty to teach. The obligation to teach, by word or by example, rests upon every member of society, because, by his very existence as a human being, he necessarily communicates to other human beings in his immediate environment. Whether what he communicates is for good or ill is his responsibility, but the natural obligation to teach implies, of course, the duty to teach what is right.

The duty applies particularly to parents, through whom the child enters society. How are they to know what is right? How can they acquire the skills needed to prepare the child for the proper reception of new intellectual experiences? Such knowledge rarely comes by direct revelation, or even by instinct, but rather is itself part of the learning process. The parents provide the example which the child imitates. The parent is the one relied upon by the child to answer his questions. The parent is the one expected to hold out a strong hand to help over stumbling blocks when the going gets rough. Happy is the child whose parents value the best possible education, who speak about it at home with interest and enthusiasm, and who encourage the child to take his part naturally in conversations about ideas. If the parents have not themselves had the privilege of good teaching, they must necessarily rely heavily upon the school to develop the intellectual powers of the child. If this reliance is sympathetic the child can go far, but if it is made uncomprehendingly, or even resentfully, the likelihood of the child's success is considerably diminished. In any event, the school can do no more for the child than the parents permit it to do. The teacher properly does not have absolute authority, but has only such authority over the child's training as is

delegated to him by the parents.

The obligation to teach, which rests upon every member of society in preparing the child for social living, is never an obligation to replace the parents against their wishes, unless the parents are unable to carry out this responsibility themselves. One of the reasons that Catholic schools have historically been entrusted by parents, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, with the education of their children is that the Church acknowledges and guarantees this duty and right of the parents — a fact which parents instinctively recognize and appreciate. One of the reasons that state-controlled schools have brought upon themselves severe criticism at specified times and places arises from their forcible pre-emption of the parents' place in the proper training of the young. The government, because it is a perfect society, organized for the temporal welfare, does have authority within its jurisdiction to require at least a minimum standard of culture, and should provide adequate instruction concerning civic responsibility and even military defense. Outside of these functions, which are peculiar to itself, the government's duty is to assist parents in providing good education for their children, but it must never subordinate parents to an unimportant position in the educational system, for the very natural reason that were it not for the parents, there would be no children, and no citizens to be educated.

One of the most serious difficulties confronting contemporary educators is the misunderstanding and mistrust which frequently arise in different communities between parents, church-controlled schools, and public, or government-controlled school systems. Here communication often breaks down, to the great detriment of the child, who, as he grows up, must take a respon-

sible place in the community, no less than in the family and the church. Leadership in pointing out a solution to the difficulty has not been lacking. Fifteen years ago Pope Pius XII said,

He who would have the star of peace shine out . . . should take care above all that the bond of trust and mutual help should be re-established between the family and the school, that bond which in other times gave such happy results, but which now has been replaced by mistrust where the school, influenced and controlled by the spirit of materialism, corrupts and destroys what the parents have instilled into the minds of the children.

For the government's part, the United States Supreme Court has taken the parents' side, not only in supporting private schools against a proposed state monopoly of education in Oregon,<sup>1</sup> but also in the flag salute case,<sup>2</sup> the New York released time case,<sup>3</sup> and even in the much criticized *McColum* decision,<sup>4</sup> invalidating an Illinois law concerning religious instruction under public school administration. Confronted with a mixed community life, where parents with all kinds of preferences and beliefs on spiritual as well as temporal matters must be treated with equal respect, the Court has taken a hands-off position on behalf of the government in religious education and has been content to leave education in secular matters where it finds it. Whether this decision in fact provides strong enough assistance to the great number of parents who are convinced that eternal values are even more important than temporal in the educational process of their children has not

<sup>1</sup> *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

<sup>2</sup> *Board of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

<sup>3</sup> *Zorach v. Clauson*, 343 U.S. 306 (1952).

<sup>4</sup> *McColum v. Board of Educ.*, 333 U.S. 203 (1948).

been conclusively determined. What has become increasingly clear is that the government-controlled school is a school of limited and not total jurisdiction over the education of the child. Inferentially it may be said that to the extent that the directors of the state-supported school systems recognize the priority parents have in the educational process, and devote their best efforts to assisting the parents in their task instead of presuming to supersede them in any degree, they will be able to make their purposes better understood, and thereby win ready cooperation from parents generally. To the extent that mutual understanding and cooperation is encouraged between parents and public school administrators, it may be anticipated that the tendency toward divisiveness in the community may be minimized.

In mentioning the enactment, administration, and interpretation of school laws, as well as laws for the regulation of community life generally, thought should be given to the matter of how legislators, lawyers, and judges may best be educated. Laws, of course, can be no better than the men who draft them. If better laws are desired, better-educated men are needed to enact and interpret them, and see to their observance. It is possible to use state force to secure obedience to legislative decrees for a time, at least, whether they are good or bad. In the long run, however, and especially in a democracy, only those laws will be willingly obeyed which the people are persuaded will operate for the common good. Persuasiveness in law, as in other forms of communication, implies that men are reasonable, intelligent, and capable of making their own judgments. In fact, democratic government is itself based on the assumption that reasonable men will accept at least minimum standards for conducting

public affairs, and will conform to what the majority agree upon as best for the time and circumstances. Most men obey laws that are enacted in a democracy, not out of fear of a policeman's stick, but because they participate in making the law by agreement, expressed or implied, with its purpose. If a law is arbitrary, however, they will at first protest, then try to have it amended or repealed, and, if unsuccessful, will ultimately ignore, disobey or resist it.

It is in the law schools of the country that the good lawyer must be tested before he can qualify for a position of leadership. What goes on in the law schools is, therefore, important to every member of the community, although few of these will be able to pass judgment upon the degree of excellence of the training which is actually given. What all are able to do, however, is to call for, encourage, and support excellent education in the law schools, instead of taking good law schools for granted, or even accepting mediocre preparation, on the plea that that is all the poor man can afford. The contrary is in fact the case. The poorer the man the better professional preparation he will need, and this should be more widely recognized. The better the education provided in the law schools, the better the laws regulating education in general, and the better the whole educational system is, the better community living can be. From what has already been said, it may be understood that the law schools, along with the rest of the educational system, have an exceedingly important function in the world-wide struggle to influence, if not to captivate, the minds of men.

On one side of the deepening struggle are ranged temporal rewards, material success, force and power; on the other, eternal values based on truth, justice and respect

for human personality. Fear is contrasted with confidence; abject slavery with liberty. Both sides, by their reliance upon the persuasiveness of mass communication, give implicit acknowledgement that each man is a very important person who has power to choose one side or the other. Neither has yet scored a decisive victory in the struggle, although preliminary skirmishes already seem to have been won and lost. Which will be the ultimate victor? The answer is obvious. That side will win which is more persuasive to the reasonable man. The more difficult question is, how will the reasonable man know the best side to choose; how can he be sure he is being told the truth; how can he verify the facts and determine the validity of the reasoning directed to his intelligence? Education alone provides the answer. Who will teach him truth; whom can he trust? First of all are his parents, whom he is generally pretty certain he can rely on; but beyond what they know, to whom can he go? To the general agreement of the better educated members of his community? But what if they do not know, or have been deceived? The default of the intellectuals in more than one country has led the people astray, it must be remembered. Ultimately he turns to those whose good works and whose obviously good intentions for his welfare have impressed him as sincere. And he will doubtless be brought back eventually to the Creator of his universe. He will find himself repeating again the age-old cry: "To Whom shall we turn, Oh Lord — Thou hast the words of eternal life." And the answer will come, as it did to his ancestors of old, from the sacred scriptures reverently handed down by parents from generation to generation, "I have not left you orphans. . . . Learn of me. . . . I am the Way. . . . Go and teach."