

On Becoming a Real Person

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The focus of this essay is "the impact upon students' lives of an encompassing world view." Right away some important questions come to mind.

Question 1: Why would students have an interest in developing an encompassing world view? Why not aim at something more modest, like a *comfortable view*, or opt for something yuppie such as *a room with a view*. In my youth our version of confronting the vast problems of the global village was to sit around in circles with other concerned Christians and sing *Kum Ba Ya* until everyone felt really mellow and positive about life. Evangelism was telling other people that with Jesus' help they too could sing *Kum Ba Ya* and glow inwardly like the rest of us. Being among the elect was really a piece of cake. Are today's students too good for our old time religion?

Question 2: What is an encompassing world view anyway? It sounds like something that is really important to have, such as a space-based defense system or breath mints on a date. It must be big, because it's about *THE WORLD*. No, even bigger than big, because it *EMCOMPASSES* the world. I checked the Oxford-English Dictionary under *encompassing world view* and was offered this definition:

"BIG; no, REALLY BIG; from the Latin gargantium, meaning "the big picture."

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But what is *the big picture*, and who developed it once they got it on film? We want students to have this *big picture*. In fact, we believe that they need it to be well-educated, well-rounded persons. But where do you go to get it? How will you be able to recognize it if you have never seen it before? And most important, who gets to decide which view of the world is *truly* encompassing?

I do, of course, because I was one of the important people asked to write on this subject, and I was given valuable space to express my valuable ideas to people I don't even know. What's more, I'll be paid huge sums of money. So you had better read this article carefully, or I'll threaten to write another article soon.

Question 3: If I do not answer any of my own questions, and if I continue to make acerbic little statements that are meant to pass for humor, will I still be paid?

Well, let's find out. Let's begin with the observation that anyone who has more brain activity than a jellyfish also has an encompassing world view. Think about it. Any world view is by definition someone's view of the world, and *world* by definition includes everything in that person's viewpoint. You just can't get more encompassing (or circular) than that. Mother Theresa, Manuel Noriega, you, your Aunt Jessie, and anyone else you'd like to add to this list all have lived out of some basic assumptions about the world and our place in it.

The truth is, however, that our particular views of the world may not correspond to what the world really is. What we assume to be encompassing (i.e., *honest, realistic, open-minded, or a reflection of the way things really are*) may not be so encompassing after all. Mother Theresa and Manuel Noriega look at the same

world, but what each one sees is quite different. One thinks the world should be healed by love. The other thinks we should inhale it through our nostrils.

But let's not talk about Mother Theresa and Manuel Noriega. Let's talk about you and me. In fact, let's talk practical philosophy.

All of us who emerge from the womb of adolescence into the world of adulthood bring with us the outline of a philosophy of life. This philosophy of life is actually a total view of the meaning of existence. It is an operative faith that defines what life will be for us and what our lives will be for others.

Woven into this philosophy of life is a set of basic beliefs that have come to us through our parents, the media, religion, friends, our social environment, and our own perceptions of messages and events around us (i.e., our adolescent development is influenced by just about anything you can think of, except the Tennessee snail darter). By the time adulthood arrives, we all have some fairly *fixed* notions about human nature, personal relationships, and the meaning of existence in this universe. Our personal belief systems may be healthy or unhealthy, fulfilling or unfulfilling, just or unjust; but we all live out of our basic beliefs. These basic beliefs form the substance of our personal philosophy of life.

The idea of an encompassing world view touches directly upon this matter of one's life philosophy. An encompassing world view is not so much a quantity of known facts about the world as it is an attitude or orientation toward life. The opposite of an encompassing world view is a narrow, restrictive, and closed-minded point of view. So *encompassing* actually refers to a *way* of confronting the world in all its mystery, marvel, and madness. And this *way* is a willingness to be open to life, to see the world as it really is, and to enter imaginatively into the

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experiences and perspectives of others. An encompassing world view is an adventure into life. There are many wonders to behold, much good to do, and much wisdom to be gained for those brave enough and trusting enough to embark on the adventure.

The virtues of honesty, humility, authenticity, and courage are involved. If these virtues are not essential to our philosophy of life, then we cannot be genuinely open to any points of view or experiences that are significantly different from our own. We become closed up in ourselves, assiduously protecting our own set of beliefs through an act of *bad faith*. To live in *good faith* is to be authentic and honest with one's own self and thus with others. The distance between bad faith and good faith is traversed only by an act of authentic courage. That is why I refer to an encompassing world view as a mode of existence in the world rather than as a quantity of knowledge about the world.

One particular personal experience comes to mind that illustrates the need we all have to broaden our horizons and develop a more encompassing world view. When I was 20 years old, I served as the student-pastor of a small Baptist church in West Virginia. One Sunday morning, following the suggested ideas of a popular text on simple sermons, I railed unsparingly against Roman Catholicism in vitriolic terms that perhaps would have been appropriate only during the darker days of the Spanish Inquisition. Eastern Orthodoxy would easily have been added to my nefarious list, but no one had ever told me about the 11th century church schism between East and West. The sermon easily qualified as simple.

I really didn't know much about Roman Catholicism, mind you, except the following insidious facts: (i) their general manager was a guy called *the Pope* (no relation to the poet Alexander Pope), (ii) they

called preachers *Father* rather than something more egalitarian like *Brother Billy Ray Bob*, (iii) they ate fish religiously on Friday, (iv) they frequently went to *Mass* where a guy in a strange hat spoke Latin, and (v) they had statues of the Virgin Mary. I wasn't sure if they sprinkled chicken blood on tombstones in some secret satanic ritual, but the combination of fish on Friday, statues of the Virgin Mary, and those strange hats seemed suspicious enough to make me wonder just what they did at *Mass*. It certainly seemed to justify anything I might say about Catholics from the pulpit.

To be honest, I knew more good jokes about priests than I knew facts about Roman Catholicism. Somewhere along the way, however, I had developed the suspicion that Catholicism was almost as bad as communism and was legitimate kindling for my inflammatory rhetoric. There was no need to learn anything more about Catholics, I assumed, since their faith was grounded in falsehood. And anyway, when you're a preacher, the really important thing is not fact but decibels. You can be blind, unsparing, and convincing -- all at the same time -- if you know how to yell in the right places. Or so it seems, looking back.

I really don't recall any particular persons teaching me those attitudes or filling my head with those notions about Catholics, but I learned them early in life and held staunchly to them right up until the week after preaching this particular sermon.

Now I come to the point of the story. (Remember, I get paid by the word.) Sitting in the congregation that morning was an uncle of mine whom I had never met. He was travelling through town on the way to visit his oldest son. Being a devout Christian as well as a blood relative, he stopped by the local Baptist church to worship and to hear his young nephew preach. After the service he introduced himself as my uncle, told me

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how pleased he was to see me, wished me well in my future, and continued his journey. In a gentle manner, he did pause to correct a few inaccurate statements about Catholics that he heard in my sermon.

Only later that week did I discover that he was a devout Roman Catholic. I also learned something about what Roman Catholics really believe. The revelation was devastating for me. More was involved here than a few historical inaccuracies. Something of my own character was at stake. I had knowingly spoken in ignorance and had violated several of the most fundamental human values--integrity, honesty, and fairness being three of them.

A belated apology to my uncle restored some sense of peace in this matter. But there also emerged from this experience an inner resolve never again to speak so inauthentically. I learned to evaluate my own beliefs, to discern the truth before speaking in agreement or disagreement, and to revise whatever false beliefs and attitudes did not fit the facts of my experience or the intuitions of my heart. I learned above all that the world is much broader than my particular experience of it, and that if I did not broaden my view of life, I would commit further humiliating acts of stupidity. Humility, honesty, integrity, open-mindedness, and fairness to others were painfully-learned lessons.

Unless I miss my guess, you could easily substitute one of your own personal anecdotes in the space above. What we don't accept by faith, we usually learn from experience. When we live with too narrow a view of life, we cannot avoid doing harm to ourselves and others. Much of the alienation that estranges human beings from one another is rooted precisely in a view of life that is too narrow and restrictive. An encompassing world view allows room for other people to solicit

understanding and a fair hearing for ideas and experiences that are of great personal value to them. We want other people to understand us, but are we willing to understand others? We need others to bear with us in our inconsistencies and blindnesses, but do we extend that same tolerance to others? We want people to be open-minded and willing to change their views when we tell them what we believe the truth is. But are we open-minded and willing to change some of our own ideas about life? *Do unto others . . .*

My world view reveals more about me and the kind of person I choose to be than it reveals about the world itself. I see only as much of the world as I want to see. So do you. William James was right to say that "If your heart does not want a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in it." His contrast between the desires of the head and the desires of the heart are consistent with personal experience. Whatever our reasons, we usually see only as much of life as we are willing to see.

This selective way of viewing the world occurs, in part, because we are bound to our beliefs by strong emotional attachments that are not easily severed. Throughout our adolescent development we internalize beliefs and attitudes about life that have not yet been tested by experience. Much of this we do because we want to be accepted and affirmed by those whose attention we most highly prize. And it is usually only in the midst of personal crisis and at the cost of inward suffering that we let go of bad beliefs and revise our personal perception of reality.

The development of an encompassing world view, therefore, is an essential dimension of the growth process. The sign of a healthy, well-integrated personality is a person's willingness to be open to new ideas and to allow one's own life philosophy to be

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shaped by an honest appraisal of life. Such personal growth does not occur without its share of inward dissonance and anxiety. To grow as a person is to embark on a wondrous but also a perilous adventure. One will encounter new ideas, enter unfamiliar territory, face new challenges, and wrestle with ideas that are not readily understood. But maturity is the willingness to live with ambiguity. And wisdom is found only by the brave.

Psychological maturity is not the only reason that students should be encouraged to develop an encompassing world view. The subtle, alienating effects of ethnocentrism and provincialism are two other prominent reasons. *Ethnocentrism* is the tendency of persons in one ethnic group to look at life only from the perspective of their own particular needs and interests and without due consideration for the legitimate interests of others. Every ethnic group does this in one form or another. In America white anglo-saxons have just managed to do it better than everyone else. *Provincialism*, on the other hand, is more of an equal opportunity *ism* in that it connotes any individual or social group that is narrow-minded or that places its interests above those of everyone else.

Living in St. Augustine, Florida -- the nation's oldest continuous European settlement in North America and a community rich in Spanish influence -- I am reminded almost daily of the subtle ways that ethnocentric and provincial attitudes can close us off from a genuinely encompassing view of the world. My introduction to American History up through high school left me well acquainted with stories of the Jamestown settlement, the pilgrims' progress, and the origins of the thirteen colonies. I learned very little about the Spanish, however, even though they were the first European settlers in America and played a

dominant role in our earliest history. One main reason for this, of course, is that American history has traditionally been written from a British historical perspective which, during the 17th-19th centuries, did not reflect kindly on the Spanish or on their presence in the New World. Historic antipathies between the British and the Spanish continued to have an impact on the writing of American history long after British and Spanish influence in the U. S. had waned. My education in American history was influenced by the residual effects of that antipathy.

More than an accurate portrayal of history is at stake for us today. The changing shape of our world as we head into the 21st century requires of us an increasing capacity to rise above our differences and view life more comprehensively. Within two decades, approximately 40 percent of the U. S. workforce will be minorities. In the next century one-third of our nation's citizens will have an ethnic origin other than white anglo-saxon. In some colleges and universities in California *minority* students already comprise the majority of the student population. What will the word *minority* mean in our society in the next twenty years? How will our social policies change? How will we manage the plurality of interests and needs in a way that creates social cohesiveness and responds adequately to the legitimate needs of all? Without a more encompassing world view, we will not emerge as a stable and coherent *body politic*. An honest appraisal of our differences is essential to our social well-being.

Voices from the Third World also call us to view life more comprehensively. Presently 75% of the world's population is found in the Third World. Fifty years from now, at the present rate of population growth, that figure will increase to 93%. Yet the people in this overburdened *world* have access to only a

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fraction of the world's available resources and enjoy few of the basic goods that help to make us human. Egregious regional problems such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, the lack of basic human services, social unrest, and the militarization of the economy need to be confronted. But the ability of wealthier nations to offer real assistance hinges on our willingness to set self-interest aside and undertake a more realistic and honest appraisal of Third World problems.

Social unrest in Central America is a case in point. One who is familiar with the history of Central America knows that poverty, illiteracy, hunger, unemployment, and social unrest in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua have deep historical roots that can be traced back to the days of European conquest. Racial prejudice and the political and social marginalization of indigenous peoples are two of the more enduring problems that have hindered peace in the region. Foreign economic and military interests in Central America since the mid-19th century have also played a prominent role. The notion that problems in Central America are somehow primarily the result of recent Soviet influence in our hemisphere is terribly short-sighted and helps to explain the failure of U. S. foreign policy in Central America. One cannot hope to work for an effective and lasting peace in this region of the world without first making a sincere effort to understand how these problems have emerged and why they persist. This effort to understand is itself part of what is meant by an encompassing world view. Without such a view, we will continue to expend dollars, bullets, and human lives in a futile effort to terminate problems that are not really understood.

Religion is another subject for which a more encompassing perspective is almost inescapable these

days. Having taught for six years at a Baptist-affiliated university, I am deeply sensitive to the concerns of students who take classes in religion and study their faith from primarily a scholarly rather than a devotional viewpoint. Scholarship requires some measure of emotional detachment, critical objectivity, and the serious consideration of alternative viewpoint. Devotion involves loyalty, passionate commitment, and obedience even in the midst of doubt. How can a practicing believer undertake a serious scholarly study of religion without at the same time being disloyal to the demands of faith? This dilemma is probably the greatest obstacle for college students who bring a deep, practical piety into a religion class.

Students introduced to the major world religions have brusquely inquired of me more than once, "How can these people (of other faith traditions) believe this stuff?" Somewhere in Saudi Arabia a Muslim student asks the same question about Christians, and in India a Hindu asks the same question about Jews, and pretty soon a lot of devout people filled with holy zeal begin dividing the world into *those of us who have the truth* (the good guys) and *all of those cross-eyed cretins who live in ignorance* (the bad guys).

The solution to this dilemma is not the blanket acceptance of any and every competing truth-claim. Equally unacceptable is the arrogant assumption that everyone outside one's own circle of faith is utterly devoid of truth. The first solution renders truth meaningless; the second renders truth irrelevant. Either way, we end up passing a judgement upon people that we have no right and are in no privileged position to make. Either way we widen the gulf that alienates members of the human family. A serious student of comparative religion -- a student who is also a practicing believer -- must be led to discover that the

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experience of an absolute claim within one's own religious tradition does not render impossible an honest and fair dialogue with devout believers from different religious traditions. Similar discoveries must be made by students who undertake a serious study of biblical literature, ethical issues, historical theology, or church history.

Among the prominent virtues in the Christian way of life are found honesty, fairness, a commitment to treat others the way we wish to be treated ourselves, and a sincere effort not to evaluate the speck in someone else's eye without first removing the log that obstructs our own vision. The Christian view of life is not terribly difficult to understand, but it is difficult to practice. We sometimes expend so much energy fighting battles over this doctrine or that doctrine, as if the attainment of doctrinal purity is life's highest good. Christianity is basically a way of life--a way of waking up each day to face the wonder and madness of creation. I cannot think of any place in the Gospels where Jesus sits down with his disciples and tells them that there are ten different doctrines to which they must assent before they can qualify as his disciples. I can think of numerous places in the Gospels where Jesus says such things as *follow me*, *love your neighbor as you love yourself*, *judge not that you be not judged*, and *go and sin no more*. How one lives in the midst of others is the only reliable clue to what one honestly believes. If a defense of orthodox dogma requires us to sacrifice our virtue, one must ask what practical value the dogma possesses.

Again we come back to a point made earlier: The matter of an encompassing world view is really a matter of deciding what kind of life you will choose to live. If honesty, integrity, authenticity, open-mindedness, fairness, and courage are not at the center of our life

commitments, not all the doctrinal disputes in the world will draw us one step closer to a life worth living.

One of the most important aims of a liberal arts education is to assist students in the development of a realistic, responsible, and healthy world view. Good educators, teachers, and ministers engage in a process of intellectual midwifery, participating actively in the birthing of people who grasp the nature of their world and who enter creatively into it.

As one who has taught in the humanities, it seems clear to me that true learning occurs not when students master an array of factual data or the manipulation of mathematical formulas, but when they are led wisely upon intellectual adventures that open up new possibilities for their experience of themselves and of their place within the global family. Genuine education is an intensely personal experience, mainly because the most important learning experiences move us at the foundations of our existence. All of us aim for the good life. We want to know what it is to live well. It's not the *meaning of life* but the *experience of life* that we're after. Those who are wise know that we cannot experience life unless we are willing to grow as persons and make our home in the global village. Those who work within the educational system have a unique opportunity to be facilitators in this process. What we gain in the end is our humanity.

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