

Teaching: A Moral Vocation

by Art Katz

Art Katz emphasizes the moral responsibility of teachers and the necessity of divine guidance in shaping students' character and values.

Scripture: Proverbs 22:6, Colossians 3:23, James 1:5

Topics: "Moral Responsibility in Education", "The Role of God in Teaching"

Description

Art Katz emphasizes the profound moral responsibility of teachers, drawing from his own experiences as both a Marxist and a Christian educator. He argues that teaching is not merely a profession but a calling that requires divine inspiration and moral grounding, as it shapes the character and future of students and, consequently, the nation. Katz stresses the importance of addressing ultimate questions of truth and morality in the classroom, asserting that without a moral foundation rooted in God, educators risk raising a generation devoid of ethical understanding. He challenges teachers to reflect on their own moral beliefs and the impact they have on their students, urging them to seek God's guidance in their vocation. Ultimately, Katz calls for a holistic approach to education that integrates spiritual and moral dimensions, recognizing the classroom as a mission field.

Transcript

I am happy to have this opportunity to share with you and I appreciate the fact that this is on your own time and that you would rather be home because I myself was a teacher for seven years, a history teacher in California. I was a Marxist radical for four years in the school system with the mindset that we need a revolution. I took a year's absence and when I came back to teaching, I was a Christian. I lost all my friends and became more radical than I had ever been as a Marxist, and this affected all that generation of students.

I taught for four years as an atheist, and the last three years as a believer. In fact, it was my experience as a teacher that drove me to God, because we Jews are very dedicated to the classroom, this social laboratory by which the world is to be changed. For us, teaching is more than a vocation or career; it is a calling, and when you take your calling seriously, it drives you to a new place. For me, that place was God, because I recognized my human limitation when I could not bring myself to assess a correct grade.

In America, we grade students with an A, B, C, D or F; F is failure; D is barely passing; C is acceptable; B is good; A is excellent. However, what is the difference between a C plus and a D minus? The difference between them can determine whether that student will receive a scholarship or even be able to go on to

college or university, and I had to make that decision. You can weigh everything - the written work, the great examinations, the notebooks and class attitude - but there is always an intangible factor in the student and his life that we as humans are not able to assess.

Therefore, I became painfully aware of my human limitation because, to assess a grade perfectly is to be like God, and that brought me to a crisis. Before I knew God, I could inspire and provoke great questions from my students - ultimate questions - but I could not answer them because you see, for me, teaching was more than a career or a vocation. Teaching touches the lives of students in those things that have to do with moral questions: questions of meaning and questions of value.

What is really true? What is really desirable? What is real? What is reality itself? Whether you are conscious of it or not, you are touching all of these questions every day, in one way or another; therefore, it is important that you become conscious of it and you need to ask yourself what do I consider moral, true, righteous and good? To be truly moral, one must be heedlessly ruthless against one's self-indulgence in favor of what is right, no matter what the cost or consequence to one's own comfort or that of others.

Why am I taking the pains to share this? Because I am in Albania and I do not know of another country where education is more critical for the nation than this country, where it will really affect the character of the nation. What the teacher considers moral and true will greatly affect the classroom, so you have a very great responsibility. You affect the nation and its future because what is a human being if he is not moral? Moreover, what is teaching if it has not a moral content?

Is it just dispensing information? Teaching is much more! Teaching affects the very character of the students! Therefore, the teacher has a great responsibility and needs to examine himself and ask, "What do I consider moral, and what is the source of that morality? How have I determined what is really good, what is really true and righteous? Which things in life are of higher value and to be desired?" And, "What is the purpose of life?" If teaching is a moral profession and if we are only disseminating information, or just communicating knowledge, we are falling short of our calling.

What makes education, education? The Latin meaning of that word is to draw out, not to put in, information, but to draw out the heart of the student, to draw out his own understanding so the information and understanding can become his own. I have done all kinds of hard physical work, but teaching is an exhausting profession. I was a merchant seaman, and I have dug with a jackhammer, but no work is more exhausting than to be a teacher. When I came home in the afternoon, I threw myself immediately on the bed; I was exhausted in my mind, in my spirit, in my soul.

Because the student has to make choices, make decisions, and weigh things out, teaching draws everything out of you, and it is for that reason that we need God. We need divine energy and inspiration. Now, if we find our teaching profession to be exhausting, we need to ask what the source of our energy is. From where do we derive our own understanding of the subject matter and how do we handle the material? Or counsel a student? How do we relate to our colleagues and administrators, and, what authority do we express?

True teaching requires God, but if we have given God only a minimal acknowledgment, or if we have not thought through for ourselves the question of God, how can we ourselves be moral? The issue of what is moral is the issue of God. We have to settle it one way or the other; either this issue of God is nonsense, or He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the nations and all that in them lies. The issue of God is the moral question and not to think that through - to have not made a decision for or against - leaves us as

teachers without a moral ground, and if we ourselves do not have a moral base, what do we communicate to our students but the kind of neutrality that is not immoral, but amoral.

We will no longer be providing our students an education, but a technology. I am Jewish and a Christian - not an easy thing for a Jew to come to because there is a history of Christian persecution of Jews - but I have found that the issue of God is the issue of Jesus Christ. How can I be a teacher of history and of documents and not have come to some conclusion myself about this document, the Bible? Who do I say that Jesus Christ is? Is He a madman who allows Jews to call Him 'my Lord and my God' and forgives their sins, and takes upon Himself all of the authority of God?

Is He a blasphemer, or rightfully an object of worship? It is one or the other, and if we are moral, we have an obligation to decide which. To leave the question unattended is to leave us without a moral base. The issue of what is moral is the issue of God, the issue of God is the issue of Jesus, and we have to resolve this. There are those of us who think ourselves to be Christians; we have come to the correct conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah, but we are not living as if he is Lord.

To us, His identity as Messiah is only a technical piece of information. We do not really consider Him in our daily lives or seek Him; we do not ask His will. We are living independent of God, and yet we are affecting and touching the souls of children - not just when they are with us, but what they receive from us affects all their future - and do you think you're wise enough to do that without consulting God?! If we call ourselves Christians, call Jesus "Lord", and we are not seeking God, consulting Him and praying for wisdom: "What shall I do, how shall I speak, how do I present my subject, how do I handle this crisis that has come up in the classroom?"

Not to consult him for the practical issues of teaching is to leave us without a moral ground and to raise up a generation without a moral foundation. How do we teach the history of a nation? Do we just present facts and require memorization of them, or do we require the students to assess what has taken place in history? I used to ask my students, "Was it right for the European settlers to take away the land of the American Indians?" I would present the idea that the Indians were there first, but since they were only hunters living in a primitive way, they did not appreciate the value of the minerals and the other resources that the Europeans could put to much better use to the advance of society and the world.

However, does that give them the right to appropriate the lands of a seemingly weaker people? History is not history unless we raise these questions, and that is what makes teaching exhausting. The student has to weigh things and make choices and decisions. In all my travels for 37 years in many nations, I have never seen a nation like this that is starting from scratch, so to speak, with most of its culture and history obscured or erased by fifty years of Communism with its arbitrary power that has robbed the people of even their personalities.

How the nation recovers, what shapes its character, and what its future becomes are being determined in the classroom by you, and because of this, you need to be mindful that a human being that is not moral is not human! It takes the power of God to be a man. A person who does not ask ultimate questions or seek ultimate meaning - what is true, what is right, what is good, how should I live, what's the purpose of my living - the person who doesn't ask these questions has lost his humanity.

And a nation made up of a people like that has lost its nationhood, so I cannot emphasize enough how critical education is to this nation. Will your class be a memorable experience for your students, a place where you will have led them through the subject matter into something transcendent that arises out of the

subject and leads them into deeper considerations? You need inspiration! You need wisdom! You need strength! You need grace! You need God! You need prayer, and you need to pray together for the great responsibility that is yours in establishing the whole environment, the whole atmosphere in which these students will pass day in and day out.

If it is only a job, only a means of personal security to serve your need of employment, and that is all it is, it is no longer moral - but immoral! Next to preaching, there is no greater vocation than teaching. The classroom is itself a mission field and your work requires the inspiration of God and the enablement of God as much as any missionary work in a foreign field. The entire youth section in my church in California came out of my secular classroom, because there, great issues were raised to them that only God could answer, and the power of God was present with me in that classroom.

I had more access to my students than their own parents, and issues of life and death were at stake. The apostle Paul frequently asked, "Who is sufficient for these things?" So I must ask you, are you sufficient for these things, without God? I do not want to minimize this nation or its culture, but here is something that we who live in the 21st century need to understand: is there a nation in the world that had a more brilliant culture than Germany? Who could match them for philosophy, for literature, for music, for art, for science?

Who has poets like Goethe, philosophers like Kant? We in America can begin to compare, but what happened to Germany in ten years? It became entirely pagan. It began by burning its books, and ended by burning men. The country with the deepest culture and civilization in the world annihilated its Jewish population. We need to respect culture, but it will not save us, and Germany is a textbook illustration of that fact. The two great institutions in a nation are the church and the school, and after its recent history, Albania needs new foundations on which to build a culture that respects life and gives meaning to life, that will not end by destroying men, and that is the task before you.

You might build an enjoyable culture, but you are going to need a culture with much greater dimension than that, one that comes from the Bible, from God Himself by His Spirit. This greater dimension needs to come into the world; it is not just for church on Sunday morning but it needs to be present in our classrooms. That is what I realized myself as a teacher, and God was there answering prayer, affecting the life of my students, and they themselves have had significant activities since.

I hope you understood the word 'moral'. I am not talking about morality as in the usual sense, but the moral quality and character that distinguishes what is human, a willingness to be ruthless against one's self because of what is right and ethical, no matter the cost, an integrity that invites trust. The German people were educated and had an advanced culture, but it was not moral. It could destroy life. We need to seek consciously to build a culture that is life affirming, and it will not come automatically even for those of us who call ourselves Christian.

In fact, it will come most likely with opposition. There is a requirement on us to seek God, and to invite and bring Him into our present situation. God never intended for there to be a secular and a sacred. The secular is sacred and we need to be conscious of that - that our vocation as teachers is a holy calling and for that, we need prayer, because these children's lives will affect their parents, and their parents in turn will affect the society. This is the point of inspiration, of input, but we need to do our part consciously.

Whatever your subject matter, you need to ask yourself, how does it lead to a transcended consideration of the issues of life? I became a history teacher not because I was interested in names, dates and places,

but because I wanted a subject that would open up large questions such as, "Is it right, what men have done in history? What would you have done if you had lived then? What makes that right and how do you know that?" These are the questions that can arise out of our subject and transform human beings, if we have sought the Lord.

Ask yourself, "How can I open up the subject to bring great questions to affect the life of my students?" Teaching is a moral profession, and a human being without morals is not human, however cultured he might be. Nazi Germany demonstrated that in their depraved indifference to the value of human life, energized with a supernatural force. We have an obligation to be radiant: a watered garden for the destitute that sings aloud, never languishing, and is full of His life. So, as I looked to the Lord for what to share with you today, I had no thought at all until this afternoon and I said to my brother, "The only word that I have is the word 'moral'."

That is the word for you to take into your conscious thought. What does that mean? What is the moral basis of my own life? What do I really consider to be true and real, and worth seeking? What is the purpose for human existence; do I see my own life in that purpose, and how will I communicate that to my students? Have I asked that from myself? How then shall I communicate it to my students? If the teacher herself is not consciously a moral personality, how shall she affect the moral issues of the lives of her students?

It will show through everywhere! In facing our students and their attitudes, it is only out of broken contrition in the deep knowledge of our own sin that we can brave their indignation and contempt for what they might see as our offensive arrogance. Even as I speak, there are those who indict me for selfish indifference, carelessness and insensitivity, and for being critical, judgmental, and uncompassionate! We all need to come before Him for forgiveness and mercy, embracing apostolic suffering and self-denial, and the prophetic obedience that invites further death to self.

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