

PRO-LIFE, PRO-HEALTH, PRO-HAPPINESS

A PRACTICAL PROPOSAL BY CHRISTINE DE MARCELLUS VOLLMER

It is a cliché perhaps to say that the world is living a great transition, but it is true that almost every tenet held by our forebears has been put in doubt, and a great deal of history forgotten.

We are in fact still adjusting to the quantum changes in our world affected by the century of generalized and extremely bloody wars between the mid 1800's and mid 1900's.

The world is also trying to adjust to the huge technological changes brought about in one life-span by the inventions from 1900-2000, which took us from horse-drawn conveyance to space travel and internet.

All these changes have challenged the capacity of only 3 or 4 generations to absorb, to adjust and to mediate. Never before has humanity experienced changes on such a scale, and in so short a time span.

And yet, the human person has not changed at all. Every human being still wants- and needs- protection, nurturing, love, companionship, sympathy, and a sense of meaning.

Most of these needs require a loving family environment. A sense of meaning, as the great Viktor Frankl explained so well, requires the capacity to transcend our natural egotism in order to dedicate ourselves to persons or causes which go beyond our self-interest. Happiness, that most-desired of all conditions, requires this capacity because happiness is the "by-product," to use Frankl's term, of that sense of worth and meaning which comes from transcending self to go towards another.

The big task of our time is to teach once more how to do these things. We must cut through the barrage of messages inciting young people to consumerism, materialism and total selfishness. We must shed light once more on what values are needed in order to create a happy family, and show the logic of the virtues, which was obvious in the days when it was a household word that 'virtue is its own reward'.

The rural days which implicitly taught that effort was rewarded with plenty, that perseverance is indispensable to survival, are over and our new world must find other effective ways to teach the universal values.

Fatherhood, the main column of society for most of history, has been sidelined and the result is a growing situation of single mothers living in poverty, their sons joining gangs in the quest for male identification and belonging. Reliable statistics today indicate that the patterns of violent crime, school leaving, early pregnancy and drug use follow closely the absence of fathers.

It is puzzling that our time should so studiously shun the lessons of history, in spite of evidence that the human person has not changed, but is in the process of adapting to new circumstances created by the ever-present urge to exploration and innovation.

Practically all the social problems we face today have been faced by every civilization: the decline of moral norms, the surging of sexually transmitted disease, the decline of the family, decreasing birthrates, economic stagnation, and final invasion. The historian Glyn-Jones¹ has fully documented this well-known process in 4 great civilizations.

It is interesting to note that those civilizations in decline were identified by others less developed as abandoning their beliefs and their virtues. Their diseases, their lack of children and their infertility were seen as pathetic and incomprehensible weaknesses.

The key here of course in our time, as in former times, is the lack of an understanding of the universal values and their importance. Success has become the all-important goal, without a full understanding of what constitutes success or what are the elements which lead to success.

In most of the western world there is a consciousness that the academic standards of our grandparents have given way to a standardized mediocrity which leaves us well behind the Asians in every academic qualification. This is causing much thought as to how to renew standards without leaving a large part of the population behind in 'failure'.

What has not been sufficiently understood until now are the elements that lead to success. In a new, comprehensive study from the University of Pennsylvania², it has been shown that success is not the product of natural talent, nor of academic excellence, but is the product of certain traits of character; certain important values practiced until they become virtues. Chief among the 8 important traits were grit---- with its components of perseverance and resilience---, social intelligence and gratitude. These traits are values learned most easily during youth, and generally with the mediation of wise adults.

The traits of success, then, must be taught. The pursuit of happiness is a complex affair which includes learning the values which lead to success and learning how to transcend our natural egotism. These entail much practice, of these and other universal values, just as a football player must discipline himself in strength, speed, teamwork, fair play and so on, if he aspires to do well.

Our world leads us in the opposite direction, towards the anti-values: rather than transcending the self, we are encouraged to 'spoil' ourselves. Rather than respect of the most vulnerable, we are encouraged to discard inconvenient life.

The most urgent task in the world today is to restate and re-explain the logic and mechanics of values and virtues. Almost 3 generations have passed since the 1960's turmoil suspended the regular transmission of universal values in favour of systematic doubt and self-absorption. Sexual "rights" have crowded out the search for true and dependable love. Millions of young people are infected with STDs and STIs, without mentioning the millions more dying of HIV/AIDS. Violence and despair are the two great enemies of urban youth.

¹ Holding Up a Mirror: How civilizations decline, Anne Glyn-Jones, Century, 1996

² Duckworth and Peterson, 2007, Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals

In light of this tragic reality, a new experiment has been launched in South America, a young continent wracked by confusion as it tries to develop. This experiment is called ***Alive to the World*** and is a 12 year curriculum, with 12 text books for ages 6 to 18. These texts lead children and adolescents to understand the logic of values and how to live them. This logic is delivered through a fun and continually evolving story of a group of friends. It is not explained religiously, but meets the pupils of each year at their existential level, with the universal situations of all children and adolescents, and the resolution of those situations in a way which makes clear the values and the anti-values so that each one can visualize their own situation and its possible solutions.

Alive to the World is proving a huge success in some of the most difficult urban situations of 14 countries of South America. In Portuguese, with the name ***Caminhos de Vida***, it has just been launched in 5 states of Brazil, with certification by the Ministry of the State of Sao Paulo. Teacher manuals for each level provide stimulating and simple-to-follow objectives and activities. Teachers are finding that school violence diminishes quickly as children and adolescents start to visualize a better path; and school heads are reporting increased leadership and enthusiasm in their teachers. In the UK it is to be found in English at www.alivetotheworld.co.uk and Gracewing, Ltd.

The social and personal problems we see all about us and which are causing health problems both physical and mental should not be considered new phenomena: it is simply that the keys to healthy and happy attitudes have been forgotten.

Every human being, even the most debased, knows that loyalty is superior to betrayal, generosity to meanness; courage to cowardice, justice to unfairness, and all would rather be told the truth than lied to. This is the wonderful material with which we can work: the human person, in the image of God. What is needed is to find tools with which to show them how to live the values that they know are superior, but which in our confusing times they find almost impossible to apply.

We must not feel defeated, but have the courage to believe that a new generation can be formed in virtues to be strong and committed fathers and mothers of happy, healthy, pro-life families.

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