I Am the Master of My Fate, or Am I?

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In "Teaching with Integrity," Michael Katz has given an interesting analysis of integrity, but, more than that, he has invited us to explore the nature and place of virtue in our lives. Aristotle warned that a virtue taken too far could become a vice and advised a balance or mean in virtuous conduct. Katz has made a respectable Aristotelian move by suggesting humility as a way of coping with the self-deception that often accompanies the quest to preserve integrity.

The difficulties with virtue may be deeply embedded in our Western liberal emphasis on individual responsibility. When I was in elementary school, we were often required to memorize and recite poetry. Remember William Ernest Henley's "Invictus"?

> Out of the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods there be
> For my unconquerable soul.

And he finishes with the famous lines: "I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul." Henley, ill and crippled from childhood, is much to be admired for his courage and perseverance. But was he right in claiming so much responsibility for his own fate?

Katz uses Allison Williams's work to suggest that integrity may be a moral luxury of sorts. Those who lead protected lives are in a better position to maintain our integrity than those in less fortunate conditions. Yet tradition has long prescribed a form of moral education that calls on all students to develop moral virtues, and those virtues are supposed to serve us well in all of life's challenges. Indeed, that tradition has come close to expecting, even requiring, moral heroism. Recall what George Orwell said about his school days: "I was in a world where it was *not possible* for me to be good.…Life was more terrible, and I was more wicked, than I had imagined."[1] Still today, with little success, we continue to emphasize character education. We might do better to focus on changing social conditions so that it becomes *possible* for most kids to be good.[2]

Consider what we allow to happen to our young people who join the military right out of high school. We know, from centuries of experience, that soldiers in combat may lose their moral identity, and yet we do almost nothing to prepare them for this possibility. The psychiatrist Jonathan Shay has written eloquently on the trauma suffered by many Vietnam veterans. They suffer from what happened to them, but they suffer even more because of what they did. Forty years after that disastrous war, Shay is still treating men who may never recover. They have become what Simone Weil described as "a compromise between a man and a corpse."[3] Shay writes: "Primary prevention of combat trauma requires an end to the social

institution of war."[4] Recognizing that this may not happen for many years (if ever), he recommends attention to relational conditions that will support and encourage soldiers to recover most of their moral identity.

This is an important set of issues because, of course, the tragedy is being repeated today. We allow our young people to be assailed by moral contradictions: It is right to obey orders; it is wrong to inflict unnecessary pain. It is wrong to kill; it is right to kill the enemy. You are heroes; you are doing something morally wrong. We expect not only physical courage but, more difficult, moral heroism. And we throw them into a world where it is not possible to be good.

Is there anything we can do in schools to reduce the likelihood that students entering the military will lose their moral identity and character? We could study the mythologies of war and patriotism more honestly with our students. There are many wonderful books that would help students to understand the horrors that accompany warfare, how populations are manipulated to hate, how courageous people have worked to prevent war.[5] A popular American history text on my shelf — 1,158 pages long — has no mention in its index of pacifism, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, or even of peace. We cannot teach pacifism in our public schools and many of us would not want to do so, but we certainly should teach about it and encourage students to read more on it and debate the issues.[6] Our main focus should be on honest history (as nearly as that is possible) and the self-understanding that would permit students to maintain their integrity without resorting to self-deception. Nothing we can do in schools will eliminate combat trauma, but we might contribute to its reduction by preparing students for what they will face.

In education today, one might argue that we are engaged in massive self-deception. We go about saying, "All children can learn," but we do not explore honestly just what it is that all children can learn. We demand honesty from our students but tolerate corruption in our handling of test scores, the quality (integrity) of our courses, and the reporting of graduation rates.[7] Should we simply urge educators to be honest — to be moral heroes — or should we work to change the conditions that have corrupted us? Why do so many teachers and administrators engage in a form of pedagogical triage that neglects the most needy students? Why do we coerce students into algebra courses and then give them courses that bear little resemblance to algebra? Why do districts (and some whole states) report graduation rates that are clearly intended to deceive?

A few weeks ago, a *New York Times* story about education in a southern state reported that school superintendents had proudly announced that their districts would abandon nonacademic courses and prepare all students for college. Should we regard such talk as admirable idealism or as reprehensible self-deception? Many city schools cannot get their students through high school much less prepare them for college. Today we graduate a smaller percentage of students than we did in 1969–70, a traumatic year for our nation. I could go on in this vein for many pages, but there is no time for that, and it is depressing.

I'll finish by stating that there is just one sentence in Katz's essay with which I disagree. He writes: "Our ideals are not diminished by these failures to reach them." I guess that depends on what we mean by "ideal." If we establish for ourselves some high standard that virtually no one has ever reached, then that seems right — not failure but low aim is crime. However, if our ethical ideal is defined as it is in care theory, as a set of real memories of episodes and relations of caring and being cared for, then every failure to be guided by this ideal diminishes the ideal. It's not the end of us as moral subjects, but we have to work harder after such an incident to repair the breach we have caused.

I do agree totally with Katz's last statement — that "without caring relationships with others…the task of striving to be the best person we can be may, indeed, be a futile one." How good I can be depends, in part, on how you treat me.

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1. George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1946), 5 (emphasis in original).

2. I emphasize this point in Nel Noddings, *Educating Moral People* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

3. Simone Weil, "The Poem of Might," in *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Mt. Kisco, N.Y.: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), 158.

4. Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 197.

5. I include references to many of these works in Nel Noddings, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. A powerful new work praising pacifism is Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

7. See Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner, *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Education Press, 2007).