Values, Not Nuclear Family

I would rather make of him an able man than a learned man.
– Michel de Montaigne

by Ronny Noor

It is almost a common perception of teachers that the erosion of the nuclear family, the basic family structure of parents and offspring, has negatively affected the education of children in America.

I became keenly aware of it when some listeners expressed this belief after my presentation of a paper on ESL (English as a Second Language) writing to a gathering of Brownsville Independent School District teachers in the spring of 2008. While I agree that the nuclear family plays a role in the education of children, with the two parents providing them a stable home, it really does not play as important a role as the values we teach them. Otherwise, in a society like America, where the divorce rate hovers around 50%, half the high-school students would be dropouts. Fortunately, that is not the case. The national dropout rate is 30%. However, it is as high as 50% among certain minority groups. Here in the Rio Grande Valley, Texas, where the vast majority of the population (over 80%) is designated as Hispanic,

the fastest-growing community in America, the situation is more dire with 25% of the people having completed high school and 13% college although the divorce rate is not higher than the national average. So it will be wrong to claim that the erosion of the nuclear family has contributed to the high dropout rates in the country. This paper attempts to dispel that erroneous notion, maintaining that it is the values we teach our children which contribute to their success or failure later in life.

By values I mean principles that are important in our lives. And the greatest of all values is virtue, which, according to Aristotle, makes a person good and enables him to perform his task well. The ancient Greeks recognized its importance, praising the Persians, their arch-rivals, for teaching virtue to their children. "In that fine education that Xenophon attributes to the Persians," the Frenchman Montaigne writes, "we find that they taught their children virtue as other nations do letters" (104). Virtue to Persians was truthfulness, a quality also stressed by the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who said that it was natural for him to appreciate truth. But how do children understand truth if they cannot distinguish between right and wrong? "*Right*," according to Emerson, "means *straight; wrong* means *twisted*" (48). So true is *straight* and false is *twisted*, as good is *straight* and bad is *twisted*. Montaigne recognizes the importance of that ability to distinguish between *straight* and *twisted* when he says, "Let him be taught not so much the histories as how to judge them" (115). This is, in today's parlance, called critical thinking.

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Children do not need a nuclear family to learn such skills. An educated parent would suffice. By "educated" I do not mean a parent with a college degree but someone with the ability to discern, in Swedenborg's words, "what is true is true, and . . . what is false is false" (qtd. in Emerson 213), or what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. For example, one of my graduate students, a high-school teacher, once said that a student of hers had not done his reading assignment. So, out of concern for the boy's well-being, she called his parents. The boy's mother was on the phone. When the teacher told the woman that her son had not done the reading assignment and she should take care that he did in the future, she snapped out, "Well, I don't read. My husband doesn't read. How do you expect my son to read?" End of conversation.

This student was lucky enough to have a nuclear family. But what good is that family to him? In a highly industrialized society like America, what will a boy do without the ability to read well? His mother certainly did not know the *right* thing to do for the future prosperity of her son. What kind of a role model is she or her husband? "Men are what their mothers made them," said Emerson (366). But what would this mother make her son? That is the reason why a graduate student once observed, "If we want to educate the kids, we should educate their parents first."

That was an apt remark, because parents' values always exert some influence on children. Many parents are proud to exhibit the accomplishments of their offspring with bumper stickers like "My son is an honor student at Russell Elementary" or "My daughter is a STAR scholar." However, others are equally proud to declare, "My kid beat up your honor student" or even "My son slept with your honor roll daughter." Some are proud of brains, others of brawns. Not that there is anything wrong with it, except that the values the first set of parents will impart to their children are significantly different from those the second set will. The second set could very well be nuclear families,

but what values are their children going to inherit? It can get even worse.

Many of my students who are going through the teacher-training program often work as substitute teachers, for income as well as experience. One of them once asked her eighth graders what they would like to be in the future. Some said police officers, others fire fighters, still others—unbelievably!—drug dealers. It was a relatively small number that aspired to be drug dealers but nonetheless, why would young teenagers decide upon such an inglorious occupation?

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Does it have anything to do with nuclear or single-parent families? I do not think so. The values of these children come from the adults around them, especially those they hold dear and look up to, their parents. But even in a nuclear family, one parent may exert more influence on children than the other depending on whom they love more dearly or regard more highly. So a single-parent family should not be a disadvantage to a child's growth. The most famous example I know is that of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who admits in his *Confessions*, "I do not know how I learnt [*sic*] to read. I only remember my first books and their effect upon me; it is from my earliest reading that I date the unbroken consciousness of my own existence" (498). It is his father who read the books to this motherless child who, through this method, acquired "an extreme facility in reading and expressing [himself]" (499). And Rousseau did not need a nuclear family to be one of the greatest and most influential philosophers of all time. Let me elaborate on this point presenting two examples and comparing them to the one about the eighth graders I have provided above to show how adults around us or our immediate surroundings help shape our values.

When I was an undergraduate student at the Technical University of Berlin, Germany, my professor Dr. Lawrence Harding, an Ivy Leaguer from the East Coast, asked the class with a sweep of his eyes, "What do German children normally want to be?" Immediately a hand shot up in the air and soon the answer came, "*Wissenschaftler*." They wanted to be scholars or scientists.

A few years later I was a graduate student at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, taking care of freshman composition as a teaching associate. When I asked my students to write about their future goals, as a journal assignment, this is what one of them wrote: "I always wanted to be a businessman, because I'm a White middle-class kid."

These two examples and that of the substitute teacher's reveal something very important about the influence of the environment on children's values. German children dream of becoming scholars. A "White middle-class kid" from Oklahoma aspires to be a businessman. And the Hispanic youths in the Rio Grande Valley can only think of being police officers or fire fighters. (Let us, for the moment, leave the drug dealers aside.) What does it take to be a scholar? Usually a Ph.D. What does it take to be a businessman? No formal qualifications, but a college degree buys respect à la Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt. And what does it take to be a police officer or a fire fighter? A GED will do. I do not wish to demean the professions of police officers or fire fighters, who undeniably perform a laudable function in society. But who would be more inspired to go to college? Someone who wants to be a scholar or a businessman? Or someone who wants to

be a police officer or a fire fighter? We get these values from our families and the society around us, whether we come from a single-parent or nuclear family.

One may logically ask, "Well, I understand children wanting to be scholars or businessmen or police officers or fire fighters. But why drug dealers?" To find the answer to that question, let's look at the example of Manny. This student at Presidio High School comes from a middle-class Mexican-American family in southern Arizona, according to Mariella Espinoza-Herold. Manny believes "society in the United States, and in particular the media, promotes excessive materialism and immerses people in a race to obtain the 'American dream' ideal as quickly as possible. For some, drug dealing, the alternative to education, becomes an option to reach the dream" (44). As a Latino student, he feels alienated in school because he cannot relate to the school curriculum. This is what he has to say about his history class:

> Most of the time, it was more like: "The Indians slaughtered this person and that one," and I'd go "What?" "This is bull . . ." From then on, I didn't pay attention. I didn't care for the class. I knew already what the teacher was going to say. All we talked about was the White man's struggle and the White men did this, and the White men did that. It's like you know what? It's the twenty-first century; there's a lot more than Whites out there. (50)

According to Espinoza-Herold, Manny sees three ways to achieve the American dream: first, by "playing the game," which means just passing his classes but not learning anything; second, through drugs and crime (as some of his friends have resorted to with success); or third, through entrepreneurship and self-employment. Fortunately, Manny has decided, with the support of his family, to choose the third option because he is good at practical things, which will hopefully enable him to succeed in life.

Manny's example shows that by reading the history of America as it is now portrayed, we will not feel like an American. It will require the representation of all people in American history books, depicting their struggles and contributions. Otherwise, the high-school dropout rate of 50% among the minority students is not going to improve. And if it continues at the present rate among the fastest-growing community, designated as Hispanic, which at present constitutes 15.1% of the population but will grow to 29% by 2050, what will the future of the nation be? Add to this the 50% dropout rate among Afro-Americans, and the picture looks dismal to any serious observer. One of the problems Manny has faced in school is that he feels teachers push students to go to the university. But the university is not the only place where one can gain professional skills to be successful in life. They can be obtained in vocational schools, too. One can be an auto mechanic, an electrician, or a computer technician. According to the latest job market reports, the average salary of a college graduate in liberal arts is $33,258, while that of an auto service technician is $30,600, an electrician is $35,000, and a computer technician is $31,903. So those who do not attend college are not necessarily failures. Failure for the

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minority students comes from alienation as a result of stereotyping. "Either being Black or Mexican, you are a troublemaker or a drug dealer" (Espinoza-Herold 54). Referring to Manny, Espinoza-Herold writes, "The White adults at school appeared to ignore his academic potential, skills, and abilities. They convinced him, through looks and glances, that they viewed him as a dangerous influence and destined for academic failure" (54-55). She goes on to say, "Manny saw numerous Latinos drop out of school because they were perceived as troublemakers. As he described before, no Mexican-descent individuals were presented as role models" (55). The only class Manny loved was on Southwestern literature where he learned about his own background. "I don't care where some White people came from . . . They don't do nothing for me" (54). This is clearly the consequence of a lack of representation of the people of Manny's background in history or literature and a minority status that causes social alienation.

If they could read about successful people with their background, they could find role models in them. If schools do not help them learn about such people, at least the parents could teach them if they were knowledgeable. But the parents' ignorance is revealed by the very question they pose, according to some of my graduate students who are also schoolteachers, "What's there after high school?" A nuclear family of such adults is not going to help their children. Many people with a minority status feel so alienated from the society at large, that they can trust and identify only with those they consider their own. That makes them parochial and clannish. This has been brilliantly portrayed by William Faulkner in his famous story "Barn Burning." The protagonist of this story, Abner Snopes, feels alienated by the mainstream society. After he has been thrown out of the community by the Justice of the Peace for burning Harris's barn, he tells his son Sarty, "You're getting to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (501).

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This attitude is very common among those who are assigned a minority status. A few years back, one of my students spent at least an hour a week sitting in my office after class discussing her future plans. The young lady wanted to do many things to help the community, she said. "Why only the community?" I asked. "Why not humanity?"

After a moment of deliberation: "We're a minority."

Being near the border with Mexico, I get a good number of graduate and undergraduate students from the southern bank of the Rio Grande, which divides the two nations. I had had such discussions with them, too. But I had not found even one student who had such a narrow view of the world. Their role model was, among others, Octavio Paz, who was influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism; or García Márquez, whose "masters" were Faulkner, Hemingway, and Kafka. So I asked her, "Would you think like that if you were born on the other side of the border, in Mexico?"

Suddenly her eyebrows rose, eyes shone, and she replied, "Probably not."

"I bet you wouldn't," I said.

This is the result of social and cultural deprivation that occurs due to a minority status. Many in the minority community cannot think in terms of humanity, even

country, but community. If Manny were not a member of a minority group, he would not have to look for role models in people with his background, even if history or literature did not represent them. Because of his racial designation, he finds role models only in Mexican-American teachers. But what if he does not have them in class? If his world-view did not become so narrow or parochial as a result of a minority status, he could look for role models in successful individuals irrespective of their ethnic background, whether in philosophy, literature, science, business, sports, or any other field. It will not be unfair to say that society has failed Manny and the likes of him by not representing them adequately in history, by marginalizing them with a minority status, and by giving them "grief and attitudes for the way [they] dress, speak, or look" (Espinoza-Herold 55).

Charles Barkley . . . did not have his father around when he was growing up, he says. But his mother instilled in him the virtue of hard work, or industriousness, which ultimately helped him become successful in life doing his job well. This testifies to the fact that it is not the nuclear family but the values we teach our children that have a greater influence in life.

This situation is compounded by the media, which can have a pernicious effect on children. Success in life, according to the media, is accumulation of wealth. They portray the American way of life as "an economic system involving the constant purchase of consumer goods on credit to maintain a high standard of living involving the constant purchase" (Vidal 130). Children get caught up in this, says Manny, "because we see money on TV, we see the cars, the American dream, and it's like if we have to go drug dealing, do whatever we have to do to get those things" (Espinoza-Herold 44). Thus the media corrupt America's youth. If they cannot make it in life the right way, they will resort to the wrong way. In the absence of a Socrates in the media, it becomes incumbent upon parents to teach their children the right, or virtuous, way. When the philosopher Socrates was hauled to court for his trial before the citizens of Athens, he told his accuser Anytus: "You, my friend... are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honour [*sic*] and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? . . . I tell you that virtue is not given by money, but that from virtue comes money and every other good of man, public as well as private" (Plato 818). But how would nuclear families that have been seduced by the consumer society teach virtue to their children? How would they understand what Václav Havel, the famous playwright and former President of the Czech Republic, has to say?

> A person who has been seduced by the consumer value system, whose identity is dissolved in an amalgam of the accoutrements of mass civilization, and who has no roots in the order of being, no sense of responsibility for anything higher than his or her own personal survival, is a *demoralized* person. (62)

Can "demoralized" parents or nuclear families

teach virtue when they themselves cannot recognize truth? I think not. But a single parent who knows the difference between true and false, or good and bad, can teach virtue to his or her children. Take, for example, the retired basketball player Charles Barkley, who became one of the 50 greatest players in NBA history and was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. He did not have his father around when he was growing up, he says. But his mother instilled in him the virtue of hard work, or industriousness, which ultimately helped him become successful in life doing his job well. This testifies to the fact that it is not the nuclear family but the values we teach our children that have a greater influence in life.

It is true that many parents have endured unpleasant, even humiliating, experiences in youth. Manny's father, for example, as Espinoza-Herold reports, "was sent home or ordered to remain inside a classroom closet for speaking Spanish at school" (42) when he was going to Presidio High in the early 1960s. Consequently, he did not raise his son bilingually. He did not encourage him to speak Spanish because he did not want his son to go through the experience he had been subjected to.

However, there is no scientific evidence that bilingualism is detrimental to a student's academic success. Contrary to what some politicians and pundits claim, Spanish is not only spoken in barrios but also in the hallways of the highest seat of learning, by university presidents, professors, and scientists. Even presidential candidates in the 2008 election threw in a smattering of Spanish in their campaigns and advertised in Spanish. Nowadays if people call credit card companies, mortgage companies, or telephone companies, they are given a choice to speak in Spanish. In a global economy, it can be an advantage to speak more than one language. When colleges and universities across America are adding Chinese and Japanese language courses, why should it be wrong for children to speak Spanish, especially when Canadian researchers have found that bilinguals are better at language processing than monolinguals?

When colleges and universities across America are adding Chinese and Japanese language courses, why should it be wrong for children to speak Spanish, especially when Canadian researchers have found that bilinguals are better at language processing than monolinguals?

I have colleagues whose children are fluent in both English and Spanish. I also know a linguist, an immigrant from Germany, whose five-year-old daughter speaks English, Spanish, and German. An economics professor from India tells me that he, too, teaches his young son three languages, English, Spanish, and his native tongue, Bengali. These children will most likely enjoy an advantage over others in the future both academically and professionally, given all the trade pacts with foreign countries, especially to the south of the border, for example, NAFTA and CAFTA.

So although Manny's parents have done a commendable job by encouraging him to do something practical and positive instead of drug dealing, for Manny does not want to "play the game," it is also their ignorance that has contributed to their reluctance to encourage Manny to learn Spanish. They do not seem to know that education is forward-looking. Students are prepared for the future. That is why the French poet Paul Valéry declared at a graduation

ceremony: "*To see* is *to foresee*" (274). If Manny had learned Spanish, it could be an advantage for him not only in business but also in higher education if he chose to pursue it.

For example, in graduate school I had an officemate – she was also a teaching associate like me – whose mother was a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican and father an English-speaking American. However, that beautiful young woman had never bothered to pick up Spanish. But she had to learn it when she was required to show evidence of working knowledge of two modern languages other than English for her doctorate. She could have spared herself all that time and money if she had acquired her mother's native language as a child. For that reason parents should encourage their children to gain knowledge of a second language instead of suppressing it because "knowledge is a good drug," says the very perceptive Montaigne (104).

I will say it is the best drug because knowledge is always good. It helps us perform our job well. Hence, it is a virtue in the Aristotelian sense. The great German poet Wolfgang von Goethe knew the benefit of this virtue. That is why he asked all Germans to gain knowledge of foreign languages so that foreigners in their country would not vex them and the Germans would feel at home everywhere abroad. For such insight, children need a knowledgeable father or mother, not an ignorant nuclear family.

If parents cannot teach their children proper values because of their ignorance, the children cannot learn. So by the end of elementary school, according to the sociolinguist William Labov, they are likely to show a turn for the worse due to peer pressure. Their peers do not value education. How can they? They are all in the same boat. They cannot relate to what they read in school because of their lack of schema, because of their inadequate representation in literature or history, and because of their alienation that comes from a minority status. Not by *reading* the history of America, but by *feeling* they are part of the American culture, they will be American. That not being the case at present, they drop out of school and try to fulfill the American dream portrayed by the philistine media any way they can, legal or illegal, virtuous or felonious. This situation cannot be remedied by a nuclear family but by a change in our "tendentious" and "sectarian" nature (to use Gore Vidal's words) that divides people; a change in the school curricula to include the struggles, contributions, as well as misdeeds of all people; and a change in the way children are raised.

If a child is fortunate enough to have an educated (not necessarily "degreed") nuclear family, that's fine. If not, it should not be the end of the world for him. An educated single parent is good enough; in fact, better than an uneducated nuclear family because he or she can teach values that are good and beneficial to a child or virtues so that the child can discern true from false, good from bad, and *straight* from *twisted*. Then the children of America, from whatever background, can choose the right path in life and contribute positively to the society, to a culture they can call their own. Otherwise, a 50% dropout rate in the fastest-growing community in the nation, which will account for almost a third of the population around the year 2050, is sure to corrode the social fabric and make it difficult for America to compete in the world.

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