

T H E  
CLOSING  
O F T H E  
AMERICAN  
MIND

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Allan Bloom

SIMON AND SCHUSTER NEW YORK

from the moral education that was supposed to be the family's special responsibility in this democracy. Actually, the moral teaching was the religious teaching. There was no abstract doctrine. The things one was supposed to do, the sense that the world supported them and punished disobedience, were all incarnated in the Biblical stories.

The loss of the gripping inner life vouchsafed those who were nurtured by the Bible must be primarily attributed not to our schools or political life, but to the family, which, with all its rights to privacy, has proved unable to maintain any content of its own. The dreariness of the family's spiritual landscape passes belief. It is as monochrome and unrelated to those who pass through it as are the barren steppes frequented by nomads who take their mere subsistence and move on. The delicate fabric of the civilization into which the successive generations are woven has unraveled, and children are raised, not educated.

I am speaking here not of the unhappy, broken homes that are such a prominent part of American life, but the relatively happy ones, where husband and wife like each other and care about their children, very often unselfishly devoting the best parts of their lives to them. But they have nothing to give their children in the way of a vision of the world, of high models of action or profound sense of connection with others. The family requires the most delicate mixture of nature and convention, of human and divine, to subsist and perform its function. Its base is merely bodily reproduction, but its purpose is the formation of civilized human beings.

In teaching a language and providing names for all things, it transmits an interpretation of the order of the whole of things. It feeds on books, in which the little polity—the family—believes, which tell about right and wrong, good and bad and explain why they are so. The family requires a certain authority and wisdom about the ways of the heavens and of men. The parents must have knowledge of what has happened in the past, and prescriptions for what ought to be, in order to resist the philistinism or the wickedness of the present.

Ritual and ceremony are now often said to be necessary for the family, and they are now lacking. The family, however, has to be a sacred unity believing in the permanence of what it teaches, if its ritual and ceremony are to express and transmit the wonder of the moral law, which it alone is capable of transmitting and which makes it special in a world devoted to the humanly, all too humanly, useful. When that belief disappears, as it has, the family has, at best, a

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 transitory togetherness. People sup together, play together, travel together, but they do not think together. Hardly any homes have any intellectual life whatsoever, let alone one that informs the vital interests of life. Educational TV marks the high tide for family intellectual life.

The cause of this decay of the family's traditional role as the transmitter of tradition is the same as that of the decay of the humanities: nobody believes that the old books do, or even could, contain the truth.

So books have become, at best, "culture," i.e., boring. As Tocqueville put it, in a democracy tradition is nothing more than information. With the "information explosion," tradition has become superfluous. As soon as tradition has come to be recognized as tradition, it is dead, something to which lip service is paid in the vain hope of edifying the kids. In the

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 United States, practically speaking, the Bible was the only common culture, one that united simple and sophisticated, rich and poor, young and old, and—as the very model for a vision of the order of the whole of things, as well as the key to the rest of Western art, the greatest works of which were in one way or another responsive to the Bible—provided access to the seriousness of books. With its gradual and inevitable disappearance, the very idea of such a total book and the possibility and necessity of world-explanation is disappearing. And fathers and mothers

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 have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise—as priests, prophets or philosophers are wise. Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine.

Contrary to what is commonly thought, without the book even the idea of the order of the whole is lost.

Parents do not have the legal or moral authority they had in the Old World. They lack self-confidence as educators of their children, generously believing that they will be better than their parents, not only in well-being, but in moral, bodily and intellectual virtue. There is always a more or less open belief in progress, which means the past appears poor and contemptible. The future, which is open-ended, cannot be prescribed to by parents, and it eclipses the past which they know to be inferior.

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 Along with the constant newness of everything and the ceaseless moving from place to place, first radio, then television, have assaulted and overturned the privacy of the home, the real American privacy, which permitted the development of a higher and more independent life within democratic society. Parents can no longer control the atmosphere of the

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 home and have even lost the will to do so. With great subtlety and energy, television enters not only the room, but also the tastes of old and young alike, appealing to the immediately pleasant and subverting whatever does not conform to it. Nietzsche said the newspaper had replaced the prayer in the life of the modern bourgeois, meaning that the busy, the cheap, the ephemeral, had usurped all that remained of the eternal in his daily life. Now television has replaced the newspaper. It is not so much the low quality of the fare provided that is troubling. It is much more the difficulty of imagining any order of taste, any way of life with pleasures and learning that naturally fit the lives of the family's members, keeping itself distinct from the popular culture and resisting the visions of what is admirable and interesting with which they are bombarded from within the household itself.

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 The improved education of the vastly expanded middle class in the last half-century has also weakened the family's authority. Almost everyone in the middle class has a college degree, and most have an advanced degree of some kind. Those of us who can look back to the humble stations of our parents or grandparents, who never saw the inside of an institution of higher learning, can have cause for self-congratulation. But—inevitably but—the impression that our general populace is better educated depends on an ambiguity in the meaning of the word education, or a fudging of the distinction between liberal and technical education. A highly trained computer specialist need not have had any more learning about morals, politics or religion than the most ignorant of persons. All to the contrary, his narrow education, with the prejudices and the pride accompanying it, and its literature which comes to be and passes away in a day and uncritically accepts the premises of current wisdom, can cut him off from the liberal learning that simpler folk used to absorb from a variety of traditional sources. It is not evident to me that someone whose regular reading consists of *Time*, *Playboy* and *Scientific American* has any profounder wisdom about the world than the rural schoolboy of yore with his McGuffey's reader. When a youngster like Lincoln sought to educate himself, the immediately available obvious things for him to learn were the Bible, Shakespeare and Euclid. Was he really worse off than those who try to find their way through the technical smorgasbord of the current school system, with its utter inability to distinguish between important and unimportant in any way other than by the demands of the market?

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15 My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it, not only what was specifically ritual, found their origin in the Bible's commandments, and their explanation in the Bible's stories and the commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the deeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes. My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. Their simple faith and practices linked them to great scholars and thinkers who dealt with the same material, not from outside or from an alien perspective, but believing as they did, while simply going deeper and providing guidance. There was a respect for real learning, because it had a felt connection with their lives. This is what a community and a history mean, a common experience inviting high and low into a single body of belief.

I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are M.D.s or Ph.D.s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but cliches, superficialities, the material of satire.

16 I am not saying anything so trite as that life is fuller when people have myths to live by. I mean rather that a life based on the Book is closer to the truth, that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to the real nature of things. Without the great revelations, epics and philosophies as part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished.

17 The moral education that is today supposed to be the great responsibility of the family cannot exist if it cannot present to the imagination of the young a vision of a moral cosmos and of the rewards and punishments for good and evil, sublime speeches that accompany and interpret deeds, protagonists and antagonists in the drama of moral choice, a sense of the stakes involved in such choice, and the despair that results when the world is "disenchanted." Otherwise, education becomes the vain attempt to give children "values." Beyond the fact that parents do not know what they believe, and surely do not have the self-confidence to tell

their children much more than that they want them to be happy and fulfill whatever potential they may have, values are such pallid things. What are they and how are they communicated? The courses in "value-clarification" springing up in schools are supposed to provide models for parents and get children to talk about abortion, sexism or the arms race, issues the significance of which they cannot possibly understand. Such education is little more than propaganda, and propaganda that does not work, because the opinions or values arrived at are will-o'-the-wisps, insubstantial, without ground in experience or passion, which are the bases of moral reasoning. Such "values" will inevitably change as public opinion changes. The new moral education has none of the genius that engenders moral instinct or second nature, the prerequisite not only of character but also of thought. Actually, the family's moral training now comes down to inculcating the bare minima of social behavior, not lying or stealing, and produces university students who can say nothing more about the ground of their moral action than "If I did that to him, he could do it to me"—an explanation which does not even satisfy those who utter it.

This gradual stilling of the old political and religious echoes in the souls of the young accounts for the difference between the students I knew at the beginning of my teaching career and those I face now. The loss of the books has made them narrower and flatter. Narrower because they lack what is most necessary, a real basis for discontent with the present and awareness that there are alternatives to it. They are both more contented with what is and despairing of ever escaping from it. The longing for the beyond has been attenuated. The very models of admiration and contempt have vanished. Flatter, because without interpretations of things, without the poetry or the imagination's activity, their souls are like mirrors, not of nature, but of what is around. The refinement of the mind's eye that permits it to see the delicate distinctions among men, among their deeds and their motives, and constitutes real taste, is impossible without the assistance of literature in the grand style.

18 So there is less soil in which university teaching can take root, less of the enthusiasm and curiosity of young Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*, whose *eros* makes him imagine that there are splendid satisfactions in store for him about which he does not wish to be fooled and for knowledge of which he seeks a teacher. It is much more difficult today to attach the classic books to any experience or felt need the students have.