

# **Education and the Measure of All Things**

**By**

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This morning's message is the first in a series of sermons I intend to offer about every other week for the next several months, which I then intend to use as the basis of a book on the topic of ending evil. For our purposes, I'm calling it the, "Measure of All Things" series, based upon the ancient words of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek philosopher, Protagoras, who caused much controversy in his day by saying, "Humanity is the measure of all things." More recently, following the horror of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, social psychologist, Erich Fromm, in his quest to understand how such a horror could have happened, wrote an "inquiry into the psychology of ethics," in which he takes Protagoras' statement seriously by also claiming humanity should be the measure of all ethics. "Materially," he said, "it is based on the principle that what is 'good' is what is good for [humanity] and 'evil' what is detrimental to [humanity]." <sup>1</sup>

Such a statement might cause many of us to cringe, just as it did when the Greeks heard Protagoras say it 2500 years ago. This is because, by and large, we have a negative view of human nature. We think an ethic based only upon what we think is good for ourselves will lead to precisely the kind of world we live in today, a world of grave economic, racial, gender, and national inequality, a world in which more than half its countries are led by authoritarian dictators, and a world with the most destructive technologies in human history, resulting in the continuing and renewed threat of nuclear war and the environmental apocalypse we call Global Warming. In light of all this, it seems easy to conclude the world's major religions got it right, that human nature is innately sinful, as we've been taught in the west, and that human desire causes suffering, as Eastern religion claims, and that we need their external teachings and forces to keep us from utterly acting in our own interests and destroying everyone and everything in the process. For this reason, as Sigmund Freud once said, "civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task." <sup>2</sup>

Fromm would argue our problem is not human nature, however, but the very "regulations, institutions, and commands" meant to suppress it, including religious institutions that constantly remind us how bad we are, that we can't trust ourselves, that we must control our human urges, and that only they can save us from ourselves because we are innately flawed, selfish, destructive beings. Fromm presents us with a far more favorable view of our humanity, a humanity we not feel ashamed of or being afraid of. His is not a humanity that must be constrained and controlled by society and its norms, but freed from their burden, and be allowed to fully develop and express itself. For unlike our regulations, institutions, and commands, which are the true root and cause of injustice and inhumanity, unfettered humanity is rooted in love and relationship to ourselves, others, and our environment. Our humanity is not the problem, it is the solution, while the solutions society imposes upon us,

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<sup>1</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 7.

in its need to restrain individuality, which can only be fully expressed through freedom and respect, are the real cause of most our problems.

[F]or the principle that good is what is good for [humanity] does not imply that [human] nature is such that egotism or isolation are good for [humanity]. It does not mean that [humanity's] purpose can be fulfilled in a state of unrelatedness to the world outside... In fact, as many advocates of humanistic ethics have suggested, it is one of the characteristics of human nature that [humanity] finds [its] fulfillment and happiness only in relatedness to and solidarity with [its] fellow [human beings]. However, to love one's neighbor is not a phenomenon transcending [humanity]; it is something inherent in and radiating from [it]. Love is not a higher power which descends upon [us] nor a duty which is imposed upon [us]; it is [our] own [human] power by which [we] relate [ourselves] to the world and [make] it truly [our] own.<sup>3</sup>

It is with this affirming view our humanity in mind that Fromm calls upon us, not to change humanity for the good of society, but to transform society for the good of humanity. Everything we do as a people must be based upon this principle, "*the sole criterion of ethical value*," he says, "*being [human] welfare*,"<sup>4</sup> including the reformation of our regulations, institutions, and laws to insure every person has the right and opportunities to achieve their fullest potential. "The first and foremost of these conditions," he says, "is that the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities..."<sup>5</sup>

Upon pondering these words, which have inspired my soul, I've begun imaging how the world might be different if we made human wellbeing and fulfillment the focus of all we do. What would it be like if this were the measure of all things, that by which we determine the purpose and success of our politics, economics, healthcare, business, journalism, criminal justice, foreign affairs, the military, religion, the use of natural resources and our relationship to the Earth, and so many other areas of human society? Over the next few weeks and months I hope to imagine just this, beginning today with the problem of education.

As I see it, there are three obstacles preventing education from being foundational to the successful unfolding of every person. Firstly, public education is shamefully underfunded. Secondly, the exploding costs of higher education puts it out reach for many, or else indentures college graduates to banks for loans that are difficult for most to repay. And, thirdly, all education, Kindergarten through College, is increasingly becoming no more than a means to someday getting a job, rather than a means to becoming a whole human being.

Budget cutbacks in recent years have impacted public schools so badly that educators around the country have been forced to start engaging in statewide teacher strikes and protests, beginning in West Virginia where teachers demanded better wages, more affordable health benefits, legal protections for their Union, an end to the expansion of charter schools, and defeating a plan to eliminate their seniority system. There was another in Oklahoma, where there have been reports of teachers depending of charity just to eat,

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<sup>3</sup> Fromm, *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

where some schools are without heat or air-conditioning, or librarians, and where students use textbooks that are falling apart in classes that are overcrowded. Some schools are only open four days a week to save money. The teacher's strike in Kentucky occurred after its Governor announced he intended to eliminate their pension plan, in a State where teachers still don't get to participate in the Social Security system. This is because the Social Security Act initially excluded state and local workers since the Federal Government doesn't have the right to tax them. State laws have mostly been amended since then to accommodate them, but there remain 15 states representing about a million teachers who don't pay into Social Security and, thus, can't rely upon it in their retirement. In Colorado, where the average teacher's salary is almost \$14,000 below the national average, educators went on strike to protest underfunded schools and the scaling back of their benefits, among a list of other grievances. In Arizona they went on strike demanding education funding be returned to its pre-recession levels and that teacher salaries be brought on par with the national average.

These are extreme examples of what's going on just in the U.S., the, so called, wealthiest nation on Earth. But in the new paradigm of human fulfillment, human wellbeing can no longer be measured by the success or failure of one nation, or one group of people. It must be based upon the welfare of all human beings. Fortunately, the members of the United Nations, representing 206 of 260 countries and states around the world, have already agreed that Education is a human right. Here's what our International Covenant says about it;

[E]ducation is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. Education has a vital role in empowering women, safeguarding children from exploitative and hazardous labor and sexual exploitation, promoting human rights and democracy, protecting the environment, and controlling population growth. Increasingly, education is recognized as one of the best financial investments States can make. But the importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence.

These sentiments most certainly express an ethic in which human welfare and fulfillment is central. Under the UN agreement, its member states, including the United States, are obligated to undertake steps to assure such education exists in their domains; that measures are taken to guarantee the right to education is available to every individual in the shortest possible time using the maximum available resources; to use those resources effectively; and to make certain there are no obstacles preventing anyone, especially marginalized groups, from accessing quality education.

This all sounds great, and, knowing our international heart is in the right place on the matter of education, is reason for hope. But, alas, the most recent UN report, from September last year, states that, "A total of 263 million children and young people remain out of school, including 61 million children of primary school age. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia account for over 70 per cent of the global population that is out of school at the primary and

secondary levels of education.”<sup>6</sup> Those among the demographics whose right to education is most violated include, as you might expect, poor children, rural children, minority children, girl children, indigenous children, and children with disabilities. During the next 15 years, as part of its Sustainable Development Plan, the UN hopes to, in its words, “focus on eliminating discrimination and promoting equity and inclusion to identify and address the barriers in bringing the right to education to the world’s remaining eligible learners who are not in school.”<sup>7</sup> But right now, including the United States, most countries don’t have the political or economic will to prevent a global system of child neglect when it comes to education.

700-billion of the recently passed 1.3 trillion-dollar U.S. budget, more than 50 percent of it, will go to military spending, while education funding has been reduced by 9 billion, to 59 billion, about 6 percent of the budget, and eliminates 30 programs. This is so even though, in recent years, we’ve learned the Military is unable to account for how it has spent trillions of dollars. Clearly, the education of children is neither a national nor a global priority.

Since I graduated from college in 1986, furthermore, the cost of Higher Education has risen almost 550-percent,<sup>8</sup> twice as fast as medical costs have risen, making it almost five times more expensive than it was back then. According to a recent article in *Forbes* magazine, two-thirds of students graduating from American colleges and universities are graduating with some level of debt... the average borrower will graduate \$26,600 in the red,”<sup>9</sup> representing a trillion dollars in federal student loan debt, about 6 percent of our national debt. The average loan will end up costing a graduate closer to 40 thousand by the time its paid back in ten years, if it’s paid back. This is a big “if” considering growth in wages and income has remained mostly flat, unless you’re a CEO, since 1980.

To my mind, it’s time for us all to begin wondering if we’ve reached the break-even point, and if a college degree still justifies its tremendous expense. When young people graduate with debt they may default on because salaries haven’t risen with the costs of higher education, and they can’t afford to pay their bills on what they make, let alone make their lone payments, it’s time to rethink and reframe what’s happening here. Since college degrees are still required to find work—the unemployment rate for college graduates is 2.2 percent, compared to 5.3 percent for those with only high school diplomas, and 7.7 percent for those with less than a high school degree<sup>10</sup>—and since most graduates are indebted to the banking industry in order to find work, we have a situation we could call indentured servitude and extortion, wherein young people must pay a percentage of their subsistence income just for the right to work and eke out a meager living.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/303/24/PDF/N1730324.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bestvalueschools.com/understanding-the-rising-costs-of-higher-education/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/specialfeatures/2013/08/07/how-the-college-debt-is-crippling-students-parents-and-the-economy/#4edd3de92e17>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/unemployment-rate-2-point-5-percent-for-college-grads-7-point-7-percent-for-high-school-dropouts-january-2017.htm>

And this brings me to the third issue I see with education today, that it has become too closely linked with employment to begin with. While higher education has always helped determine the course a graduate's career might take, it has, traditionally, been about shaping well-rounded individuals by exposing them to a Liberal Arts education, by exposing them, that is, to a variety of disciplines. It wasn't about producing good employees, but birthing openminded people. Getting a good job is the promise, often an empty promise, of the exploding "for-profit" college industry, which has, in turn, forced, so-called, "non-profit" colleges to follow their lead by deemphasizing Liberal Arts in favor of career-oriented education.

Even more troubling, as far as I'm concerned, is that this trend is increasingly becoming the primary emphasis of public education too. The acronym STEM, which stands for science, technology, engineering, and math, represent the US Government's emphasis upon teaching these skills from preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, so, as the Obama Administration put it, kids will, "have the chance to reach their full potential."<sup>11</sup> While these areas can be rewarding and meaningful and important for those drawn to them, they are no less so than the fields of art, and history, and literature, and music, and philosophy might be for others. Reducing the emphasis of public education and human potential to just four technical areas suggests its purpose it to make good employees, not whole people. To truly give our kids a chance to reach their full potential, their education must be broadly based and adequately funded.

As I play with the idea of what this might look like, with human wellbeing as our measuring stick, I imagine all nations, ours included, that spend more on books than bombs, more on teachers than technology, and more on students than student loans. In short, I imagine a world of countries that make education the cornerstone of what they do, the foundation of their future, by using it to empower the children of the world to truly achieve their fullest potential. Of course this means exposing them to science, technology, engineering, and math, as much as it means opening their minds to art, history, music, philosophy, and so much more. It means, as Fromm, says, seeing them not as a means to somebody else's end, but as an end in themselves, as beings who should not only have a right to education, but a right to blossom and discover and become.

When it comes to higher education, I envision requiring and offering a two-year, liberal arts education as part of the publicly supported education system. This means, after graduating from high school, young people continue their education by being exposed to a world of ideas, with the intention of opening their minds to many possibilities, to diversity, and to finding a path that's right for them. Once that path is found, they can continue their education through a partnership between Universities and Employers offering classes and hands on learning in the field, so students end up with practical skills, experience, and contacts in the areas of their choice. The expense for this can be shared by the public universities and the companies and organizations benefiting from having young people interning with them during their education.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ed.gov/stem>

Most importantly, we must shift our paradigm, as the United Nations has already done, to recognize that education is a human right that exists, not merely as a hoop to jump through to qualify for work—as a means to someone else’s end—but as a necessary tool for helping us develop our own humanity. Because, again, as our International Covenant already recognizes, “the importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence.”