

# *Preaching, Moral Vision, and the “Ministry” of Robert Coles*

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This article was first conceived as an introduction to the writings of Robert Coles, M.D., an unrelieved and enthusiastic recommendation of his work. What was intended was more comprehensive than “One New Book for the Preacher.” For to read Robert Coles is to be invited into the presence of wisdom, wisdom discovered in the words and lives of people he has researched since the early 1960’s, children and adults who have struggled for life and dignity in the most broken, dangerous, often violent, sometimes affluent, and usually oppressive places in recent history. It is likewise a wisdom hammered out in conversation with his wife, an English teacher, and with his own professional disciplines, child psychiatrist and social psychologist. But it is wisdom sifted also through the teachings and life of Jesus, the message of Scripture and the tradition of the faith, and through works of great literature. And he serves us with a uniquely personal vision which is at the same time comprehensive and universal, and implacably moral.

Such was the original intention for this article, but its purpose has evolved into an inquiry about the presence (or absence) of moral imagination and inspiration in the preaching and teaching of the church, specifically the mainline church - our churches, our preaching and teaching. The more deeply I delved into Coles, the more seriously I asked myself whether the preaching and teaching of the church can inspire and indeed equip people to live with confidence morally, not only in the service ministries of the church, important as they are, but also in their lives in the world, as lawyers, doctors, clerks, secretaries, and homemakers. In Coles we have no derivative, disconnected, analytical wisdom meant for academics and armchair philosophers. The beauty and bravery, sometimes the corruption and amorality he records, and upon which he reflects, have led him to ask questions about character and commitment, how character is shaped and formed, and why people make a moral choice when everything about their situation would excuse irresponsibility and even defeat. How do the poor have faith strong enough to move mountains? And what is the relationship between learning and moral imagination? This last question is most helpfully addressed in a semi-autobiographical account (*The Call of Stories*) in which he tells of his own love of literature and its origins (in his parents reading great novels aloud to one another) and of his (and his wife’s) use of literature as a guide to self-awareness and moral awakening. But even more importantly for our purposes, the years of his work (over forty books to his credit and goodness knows how many interviews) have made one already excessively learned, wise within himself.

In addition to my reading of Coles, the request of a church member helped

to fuel my concern about moral vision:

"While you're away this week, I hope you, and the others in your preaching group, will learn to preach sermons that leave me, at the end of them, knowing exactly what you want me to believe and what you want me to do," she said.

The wish was expressed by one of the more discerning of our congregation. She had tracked me down amid the clutter of greetings, questions (When does the social witness committee meet?) and complaints (I couldn't hear today, preacher. Is the sound system working?) that clog our lives each Sunday after worship. I listened carefully to her, for she is an active elder and no spiritual couch potato merely asking for a 'lift' to get her through the week. She administers a large public agency; she is a parent and spouse who with her husband has raised four productive children; she has served on an urban school board, and has put her life and resources at the service of people in need. Here amid the clutter was one true word I could turn over in my mind all afternoon as I travelled to the preaching seminar. Her wish has haunted me (and inspired my sermon preparation) ever since, but it came dramatically to mind as I began to reread Robert Coles in preparation for this article.

For is it not possible that out of the fear of being too judgmental, out of legitimate disdain for moralizing a text, out of a natural modesty which seeks to avoid too easy answers or make definitive claims (especially) where God is concerned, out of an overweening attachment to a permissive, relativistic age, out of our own need to be liked and to be inclusive, we have often sounded from the pulpit as though we had little of substance to proclaim? At the time this elder's request came as something of a homiletical awakening, that there were persons out there each Sunday, who actually expected, in addition to a decent exposition of Scripture, to be told, simply and forthrightly, what to believe and what to do. Or to clean it up slightly for professional purposes: what the Scriptures and tradition teach and how the believer is to act as a consequence. Theological certitude is wanted, not the subtle weighing of an issue back and forth until every shade of opinion is included. Moral direction is requested, not sociological analysis or prescription, which incidentally are two of Robert Coles' criticisms of the mainline preaching with which he is acquainted.

Our hearers certainly need sermons crafted as finely as we are capable of crafting them; they are always appreciative of a nod from the preacher in the direction of the literary structure of a text, and deft narrative touches. Most of them have come to accept lectionary preaching and even to enjoy our ringing of the changes each year from Advent to Pentecost. But they do not attend worship to experience grace and forgiveness (every week!) in the sermon. Hearers have become accustomed to the assurance of their forgiveness after the prayer of confession, and want their moral imaginations stirred by the preacher, for they have work to do each day that requires their moral discernment, their courage, and their loyalty. What signals do we send them that we understand? And what assistance can we be from the pulpit?

Our hearers do not need to be pastorally massaged, nor do they expect to be bloodied. They do not want, nor do they need, our opinions about their moral choices, but apparently they would be grateful if they could understand,

at the end of a sermon, precisely what the word of God and the collective wisdom of the church over the ages teach them about what they are to believe and what they are to do. I declare that her request came as a revelation. Never have I heard a homiletician put the task of preaching quite so succinctly.

And I was also reminded that our tradition, in one of the historic principles of church order declares that truth is in order to goodness,

and the great touchstone of truth is its tendency to promote holiness according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them' . . . . We are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.<sup>1</sup>

And here is precisely where Robert Coles is of great assistance, not merely as a source of sermon illustrations though we would be foolish to neglect that contribution, but most importantly because he worries these same issues all the time for the living of his days and ours. He wants to know how what is true serves what is good, and how people learn to be vulnerable and self-critical, and why they choose right over wrong, hope over despair, meaning over disintegration. He knows as well as any of us that there is no necessary correlation between high marks on IQ and SAT scores and the development of moral character, and that there is virtually no connection between integrity and a list of degrees from the best academic institutions. In fact he continually warns the perceptive reader that much learning and high intelligence can serve our tendencies to rationalization and inaction just as they can serve to enable and inspire moral living.

As a consequence all of Coles' teaching time at Harvard now (except for some supervision of hospital residents) is given over to the use of novels, poems, short stories, and essays to explore moral and religious questions with graduate students in law, business, and medicine, and in two undergraduate classes. They push together at the question of conduct: how ought I to live this life?<sup>2</sup>

In addition to Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, and Ralph Ellison, Coles also requires Dorothy Day, Thomas à Kempis, St. Augustine, and Bonhoeffer's prison letters. He writes:

To talk about those books (of the writers above) with students is to be brought face-to-face, yet again, with those moral challenges long ago put to mankind by a then relatively obscure rabbi, as he walked through Galilee. "It's a little harder, with Bonhoeffer in your head, to make the usual phony excuses to yourself," a student remarked in a paper two years ago, and I often remember his words as a challenge to all of us—that we try to become a little less likely to betray ourselves morally with our mind's various strategies.<sup>3</sup>

And with preaching which stirs conviction and moral vision, our hearers will be less likely to betray themselves, and their own best understanding of what is good, as they go about the living of their days. Robert Coles is a resource for preachers because he stirs up our capacity to think morally about the

professional and personal lives of church members, and about the large ethical issues which intersect global life. Yet he is delightfully free of ideology, and of moralizing, and of self-righteous flag-waving,

His reflection upon teaching strategies with literature betrays his concern for moral living and character formation. His recounting of conversations he has had, sometimes in great detail, with those persons he has studied and interviewed in the past, demonstrates that here is no detached researcher, but one who integrates his learning into the ingredients of hope, meaning, and moral conviction.

Here are the reactions of a ten-year-old migrant worker, already able to pick beans, tomatoes, low-lying oranges, and lemons. She is speaking about how seldom her parents attend church, and admits that she admires their hesitation because of the phoniness of so many of the preachers to whom such people are subjected. And she says:

My grandma goes to church all the time, and she gets me to go with her a lot. She saw that man preaching (the one her parents didn't like) and she didn't like him and she told us why: he's too much stuck on himself. My mother agreed. Grandma likes the ministers who make you want to cry, and not make you think how great you are. She says Jesus cried for everyone, and if you pay attention to Him, you can't help but cry for all the people, everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

She'd made her point, according to Coles, about suffering as so central an element in Christ's life, hence of the Christian faith. But he couldn't leave the conversation alone and pursued the discussion, given, he writes, the constraining imperatives of a professional life. So Coles asked: "Do you think we should really cry for *everyone, everywhere*, according to Jesus?" (his italics) In seconds the child gave this terse, unequivocal answer: "Yes, sir, I do." He had to push farther. "Well how about the growers—the ones who own all this?" His hand made a sweeping gesture over the fertile and extensive acreage. "Oh yes, them too."<sup>5</sup>

Coles said that he felt disbelief and even perhaps annoyance, and may have communicated that to the girl unintentionally. He was trying to find words to make a point about injustice to a ten year old, even the cruel inhumanity of her bitter, fragile existence. But "she must have sensed the turmoil of his own secular moral life" to which she spoke, before he could find the words: "*Especially* you have to cry for the rich, grandma says; They're in the worst trouble of all, Jesus told us." And the silence which followed her answer was broken only by the importunate demands of her dog, begging to be allowed to run outside where he might romp and play.<sup>6</sup>

When Coles discusses social problems or issues he gives them human faces, and sets them in the contours of relationships which communicate more powerfully and with more reality than any analytical construct or suggested solution. Writing of teenage pregnancy as a moral matter, he discusses the distance between the aspirations of these teenage pregnant girls and the assessments of the panoply of case workers and physicians who 'treat' them. He quotes one girl. After acknowledging that most persons in this situation are

hurt, moody, terribly vulnerable, shut off emotionally from just about everyone, especially their parents, so that the prospect of having a baby seems welcome; Coles remembers her words: "This baby will be a gift of God to me. There is no one in the world who cares about me, only God, and I feel Him looking at me sometimes, and He must have felt sorry for me, so He sent this baby to me."

Coles at once admits the psychological "weakness", even foolishness, of this argument to the case worker, who was told by the truant officer that the girl had skipped school and missed "sex education classes." So here is another ghetto youth "on her way," meaning that she will simply have one pregnancy after another. And then the case worker summoned up all his expertise, hoping that after this birth, sex education, or contraceptives, or even abortion would perhaps "work" for this girl. He was, in fact, emphatic: "What are we to do, let these kids drown in their own children? They are children themselves. They can't even take care of themselves, never mind one baby, never mind four or five more." And as for the wish of this girl for a child, there is clearly something terribly wrong with her.

Coles argues that what he sees at work among so many people, including himself, is a condescension, a failure of spiritual nerve, which causes them to patronize all these young women, if "not consigning them to the ranks of the moral *Lumpenproletariat*." They are offered contraception, sexual expression without pregnancy, which is a continuation of their desperate and often futile search for someone who will respect them. And afterwards, more sex education, psychological talk, and then "finally, abortion—meaning that to *their* death at an early age we are willing to add an even earlier termination of life."

Coles is very hard on such attitudes, which proliferate among newspaper editorialists and medical experts and psychologists, all the literate and intelligent people who simply want these girls and their babies out of the way. And yet, he remembers, Jesus offered great and humble love to such women—saw in their pain and loneliness something of his own.<sup>7</sup>

Where is the spiritual energy of our privileged young, and of our professional men and women—people who might offer to share themselves with these needy "others," these fellow human beings? . . . redemption is mediated through human spiritual love. . . .

Once in a ghetto of Atlanta I heard a young woman plead for "someone to talk to." She needed "counseling," we all thought. But she added this: "Someone to talk to, so I'll be able to find myself, and know what I believe, and what I mustn't do, because it's wrong."<sup>8</sup>

She said "wrong," writes Coles, not "costly," not "unnecessary," not "medically harmful," not "avoidable."<sup>9</sup>

There is the now famous story of Ruby Bridges, the six-year-old black child who serenely faced an angry vengeful mob day after day to integrate the New Orleans public schools in 1961. Coles was there with his research, and knew Ruby and her family. Ruby became an important mentor in his life, a little girl in an elementary school, totally boycotted by whites, with the mob screaming at her twice a day that they were going to kill her.

On one occasion, Ruby, surrounded by federal marshalls, stopped and faced the mob, silently opening and closing her mouth in their direction for a full minute. Through several subsequent interviews with Ruby, as well as through conversations with her teacher and parents, Coles discovered that Ruby had stopped to pray for the people in that mob. She had not had time to pray for them that morning before she left for school. Coles was dumbfounded, and he discovered what Ruby said in her prayer and why she prayed.

She prayed because the people needed praying for. Her parents and her minister had taught her the prayer she prayed, "because it was a good prayer to say in front of those people." And it went like this: "Please God, try to forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing." And she reasoned further with Coles, "Well, you see, when Jesus had that mob in front of him, that's what he said. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

I once used that story when I first came across it (in a much extended version in *The Princeton Review*) in a sermon on lectionary texts. In year A there is a Sunday when the Beatitudes are combined with the famous lines from the prophet Micah about doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly with God, and with the passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians which concerns God's using divine foolishness to counter human wisdom and divine weakness to counter human strength. With that extraordinary triumvirate of texts, and with brief introductory remarks, I simply told the story of Ruby Bridges. For in the Christian obedience of a six year old, protected every morning and every evening by seventy-two federal marshalls, God surely "chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. . . what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. . . (I Cor. 1:27-28).

In like manner God may use his servant, Robert Coles, and all of Coles' insights about human vulnerability, human pretension, and great moral courage to revitalize the imaginations of the servants of Scripture who regularly work to break open the word of God for the preaching of *good* news to those who wait upon God.

"When your sermon is finished, I want to know what to believe and what to do," she said. What the elder's need uncovers, even unwittingly, is the task before us in the 1990's: to rearm the church with moral conviction and moral dignity. We can already begin to see, as we pick and poke our way through the shards and brokenness of human waste and vainglory, of individualism seeking community, of materialism seeking an end to emptiness (all of them a legacy from the Reagan years) we can already begin to discern some contours of a truth which will lead to goodness, and which will give moral confidence and direction. For a guide for this decade, in addition to Scripture and the confessions, I can suggest no better than Robert Coles.

. . .the great touchstone of truth is its tendency to promote holiness according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them. . . .

Robert Coles has brought forth fruit—even unto one hundred fold.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Order*, The Presbyterian Church (USA), G-1.0304(4).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Coles *Harvard Diary*, *Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular*, (Crossroad: New York, 1989), 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96 - 98.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Agnes Scott Alumnae Magazine*, Fall 1989. page 12 ff.

Other works used: Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories*, Teaching and the Moral Imagination (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1989).

Robert Coles, with Jane Hollowell Coles, *Women of Crisis*, Lives of Struggle and Hope (Delacorte Press, 1978).