

Naturally good

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From our flat, we can often hear the happy chirping and singing of a 3-year-old girl of the Wee family. Her doting young father, a 1st-generation migrant from Malaysia, is an industrious and intelligent construction supervisor. When the 3-year-old meets my wife, Ratna, they are at once chatty. Once, the observant girl asked her why we don't water the plastic flowers growing in our pots: they would dry up!

I'll be 70 on my next birthday and have seen so many of my classmates, students and friends aging, even dying. This is a time when we perceive children growing up very fast, and I often wonder how a child, like our neighbour's, will grow up. Since I'm a concerned religion-watcher, such questions often arise to me:

Concern

How religious will she be? What religion will she follow? Will she fall for one of those religious cults that infest a rich urban society like Singapore? Will she be molested by a priest or pastor? Will she be raped by a lama or a sensei? If she does survive all this, and do well in her career, will she convert to a socially dominant religion and be different? Such thoughts just fly across my mind in moment of concern.

In significant ways, I must conclude, after decades of close observation, that religion tend to be toxic. It is not even a necessary evil. Religion is the **shadow** cast by our variety of lacks:

- A lack of understanding what culture does to us.
- A material lack worsened by the belief that religion or magic can fill this lack.
- An intellectual lack in understanding the true nature of beliefs and rituals.
- A psychological lack in self-affirmation so that we are dependent on some higher power here and hereafter.
- A spiritual lack in the naivety that money can buy practically anything, even heaven.
- A fundamental lack in seeing that religion is merely another means of material advancement.

Good and love

Such problems will take generations, if not centuries, to correct. I'm right now concerned with a practical reality. How can I help prevent our neighbour's child, our generation, from those mishaps and similar ones?

Firstly, we understand that **goodness** is **not** the same thing as religion. While religion is a set of beliefs, ritual practices and tribal control, goodness is an **attitude** we learn, ideally since young. As parents, we humanize our children by **loving** them: we show our healthy concern for them while allowing them to discover their own genius. We let them wisely make decisions that they will live even after us.

The 5 values

We humanize our children and charge by teaching them

- (1) that **life** makes all things meaningful and possible; hence, it is most sacred;
- (2) that **industry** brings its due rewards of what we need and can have for a good life;
- (3) that **respect** is accepting others as they are, that it is all right to say **no**;
- (4) that **truth** timely told with love is healing and necessary for wholesome growth; and
- (5) that **the mind** is our most precious asset to be guarded from all unwholesomeness.

Potential for good

We seriously need to correct the misperception that **schooling** is about success and having. We must understand that **education** is about bringing out what is true, good and beautiful in us. We will always have enough wealth and support for our human needs, but never enough for human wants and selfishness.

We have to educate our young that **love** comes only from giving; we can never ask for it. We can never have love: we must **be** love to give it; only then we will receive it. Marriage and partnership is not about right pairing and partnership alone. Love is about living and learning together, a life-long discovery of one another, our humanity. Marriage may bring bodies together, but it is the warm hearts that melds two minds together.

Quest for wisdom

When we are troubled by what we **have not**, we must ask what our real needs are. When we are burdened by what we **are** or **are not**, we must seek to understand how we think and feel.

Having much, knowing much, being much, will surely weigh heavily on us so that we lose ourselves in them. When we work to see how our wealth, knowledge and greatness can help others, especially those who need them, these things become tools for making friends and founding our family and life on friendship and love that enrich our ambience, community and world.

Wisdom is freedom

Should we be lacking any such training, then we are likely to gravitate to those aspects of **religion** that are the shapes and shadows of our human lacks. Darkness attracts darkness. Our eyes then adjust to that blindness. Even the slightest light blinds us. This is religion.

Hence, our human tasks are to inspire others to see the value of and respect for **life, work, love, truth** and **wisdom**. Religion is too narrow and lame to teach our children such vital values. Our tasks as parents and teachers, then, is to cultivate our children and charges so that they become **naturally** good in these basic human and spiritual values.

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