

Review Essay

The Call of Robert Coles

Louis P. Masur

The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1989.

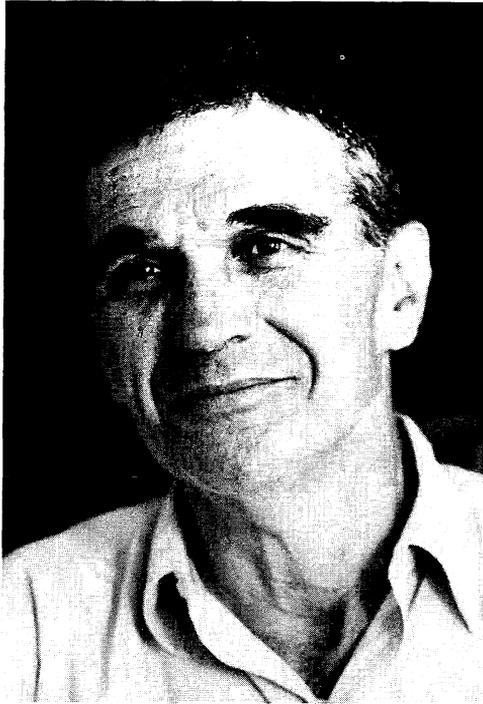
The Spiritual Life of Children. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1990.

The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. 1993.

Robert Coles has a story to tell. He has just finished discussing Charles Baxter's "Gryphon," a tale about a quirky substitute teacher who, for several days, frees a group of fourth graders from the deadening routine of memorizing facts and reciting tables. What follows is an exact transcript of what Coles has to say. I include it because understanding Coles's work hinges on capturing his precise language, on hearing him. For all his dozens of books and hundreds of articles, he is an inspirational orator:

Whenever I read this story I remember an experience I had when I was a student taking organic chemistry. Chem 2 it was called then. I think it's Chem 20 now. It's the same lousy miserable year. We used to have to prepare stuff in the lab. And isn't it strange in my old age I can remember experiment #13—the preparation of triphenocarbanol. Now you might ask why

the hell I remember triphenocarbons preparation. One week it took us to prepare that stuff. One week. With the zinc oxide foil that we put, and getting it started and all the other stuff and finally we came down to two layers. And all the glass that I'd used to break. And my father would get the bills and say, 'Why are the breakage bills almost as big as the tuition bills?' Two layers and one week's work and like a dope and a fool. I worked beside a guy named Bill Regan who is now an ophthalmologist. And we shared inadequacies together, resentments and envy and jealousy of all the wizzes who were going to, as you know, get into all the medical schools that would keep us out. It came down to the final separation flask and the two layers and I said, 'Bill, I've forgotten which layer is the one I want.' I couldn't trace my way back. And he said, 'I think it's the bottom one.' And I said I'd ask the section man. And I asked the section leader which of the two layers I should save. He said which do you think. I said I think it's that one. And he said it's your experiment. So I separated them, pouring one into the flask and like a dope violating what they told us at the very beginning of the year, pouring the other one down the drain. And as soon as he saw it go down the drain, he started laughing that section man. I lost my mind. I picked up the separation flask and I smashed it down on the floor and I turned to him and I said, 'Fuck you buddy.' A great moment at Harvard let me tell you. And he looked at me and I thought there goes medical school along with the goddamned solution. And Bill said to me you better apologize to him. I said I'm sick of this, finally sick of it. It was February and cold and snow and I walked out and walked around and I remember going into what at the time they used to call the Germanic Museum. It's now that 10 million dollar redecorated job over there. Ten million dollars to redecorate that place. Phillips Brooks House is trying to raise a million dollars for its endowment fund. Anyway I went in there. There was an organist named E. Power Biggs. I remember sitting there thinking about what my parents were going to say. You know what I was thinking. I went to see Perry Miller who was my advisor and I told him about this. And he said listen, if you can figure out now, if you can figure out now what some of us are like, if you can remember this, then it is worth it. I thought to myself it's nice that he's saying that but he's not going to be applying to medical school. But boy, I remember what he said and it was good to have him there saying it. . . . What a struggle all this is.



Robert Coles, author of *The Call of Service*. Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin, Micah Marty.

Stories within stories. A story delivered by a teacher who, in his acclaimed work *The Call of Stories*, has scrutinized how stories capture “the unfolding of a lived life.” It is a typical Colesian moment delivered to several hundred attentive Harvard undergraduates and assorted auditors in his course “The Literature of Social Reflection.” The syllabus for that course is included in *The Call of Service*, a companion to the earlier volume. To unpack that story is to begin to reckon with Coles’s message, a message he has been discovering and delivering for more than three decades. Coming in the second week of the semester, the story notifies the students that we are all the same here: I too have struggled and continue to struggle. I share your concerns. I am like you. And that means, whether you know it or not, you are like me. The story also encapsulates the themes of the course: It is about human understanding. It is about identification with the other. It is about the inadequacies of education, even (or especially) at Harvard. It is about social and individual priorities. It is about the lines of connection between past and present. And it is about teachers being students and stories being teachers.

To see Coles, in his khaki pants riding high above the ankle, his tattered blue oxford shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbow, his coat cast to the floor beside him

wherever he stands, to see him is to imagine a man secure with himself and his place, a man knowing no other way, born to be what he is. But that is only a convenient fiction. Like the rest of us, Coles groped and hesitated on the way to his calling. And he still struggles with the only questions worth struggling over, the questions he first heard as a boy when on a visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts his mother translated for him the lines written at the bottom of Gauguin's massive Tahitian triptych: "where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?"

Coles did not set out in life to answer those questions for himself. Our histories are linear only in retrospect, only after we transform contingency into certainty, accident into inevitability. Had it not been for Perry Miller, Coles might not have sent his senior thesis to William Carlos Williams. Had it not been for Williams, he would not have applied to medical school, nor would he have likely been admitted. Had it not been for the military draft of physicians, he would not have been stationed in the South and commuting to New Orleans for his own analysis when he witnessed a fight over desegregation that helped change the way he saw the world. Had it not been for Erik Erickson, he might have failed to put aside professional vocabularies and priorities. Had it not been for a Radcliffe coed named Jane Hallowell, whom he later married, he might never have learned how to listen to those around him. Had it not been for the urging of poet and editor Peter Davison, he might never have written his first book. And had it not been for Ruby or Junior or a hundred other children—patients, subjects, and friends—he might never have found his life's work. Coles is willing to see a certain amount of fate in this, but he is no determinist or reductionist. He knows that pure chance counts as much as honest effort. There is choice in this life, choice to see or look away, choice to listen or go deaf, choice to immerse or withdraw. For Coles, at some shrouded moment, the choice became a continual effort to realize everyday a line from Williams's poem *Paterson*, a line Coles first wrote about at Harvard college in 1950: "Outside/ outside myself/ there is a world. . ."

With mentors such as these—Miller, Williams, and Erickson not to mention Dorothy Day, Anna Freud, and other notables—it is difficult not to envy Coles' trajectory. Who among us would not also wish the opportunity to accompany Dr. Williams as he made his daily rounds to his New Jersey patients, to join Dorothy Day as she prepared and served soup to the poor of New York, to engage Anna Freud in discussion about the very subject of mentoring as the afternoons in New Haven grew short? All of us would welcome these encounters, but what would we do with them, where would they take us in our own attempt to lead moral lives of usefulness and service? Would we even make the attempt to realize, in Day's words, that "there is a call to us, a call to service—that we join with others to try to make things better in this world." Coles witnessed from others, beginning with his parents, how to give to others and discovered the connections between giving and getting. He learned that mentoring was "as one person handing another along until the moment that allows both of them together to envision possibilities hitherto out of sight."

Coles envisioned those possibilities, entered the world outside himself, in stages, like a swimmer who first dips his toe, then splashes his chest, and finally decides to dive in. Early on, Williams explained “I try to put myself in the shoes of others,” and all his life Coles has discovered how difficult that is to do. In his first interview with Ruby Bridges, the six-year old girl who everyday was escorted past a hooting mob into an empty New Orleans classroom, Coles wore jacket and bow tie, clutched a tape recorder, and carried the assumptions and questions of the psychiatric profession. Over time, he became less burdened. He participated rather than observed. He engaged rather than recorded. He shared rather than raided. After weeks of watching as Ruby drew her day at school, Coles sat beside her at the kitchen table and also drew pictures. And because he gave himself, the children gave back, gave back what it meant to be children besieged, children marginalized, children in crisis. The lesson Coles learned in Louisiana in 1960 is a lesson he has been compelled to relearn and rethink ever since. In 1988, a nine-year-old named Ruth Ann who attended public school in Cambridge, Massachusetts asked Coles “why you come over here to us. We thought, he must be busy with his regular life, so why does he take time out to come visit here, when he could be someplace else that’s more important.” The answers to Ruth Ann’s question are written in Coles’ life work.

If you read in a certain way the books that have come directly out of his work with children—the five volumes that comprise the “Children of Crisis” series and the two volumes on the moral and political life of children—you begin to get outside yourself. Be careful for it is easy to let these volumes elude you. If you bring to them a professional preoccupation with research design and technical vocabulary, you will sneer. If you bring to them an intellectual obsession with easily summarized theses and arguments, you will frown. If you bring to them a compulsion to read every word and remember every point, you will become numb. Rather, you must listen and not read, think and not study. These volumes give voice to children, a largely unheard of act. Haven’t we all on occasion told our kids to shut up? Don’t we typically listen with one ear? Isn’t it easier to pretend that their lives are simple and uncomplicated and non-philosophical, that they have no real problems—the way we wish our lives were? Only in the last century have some artists found ways to allow children to speak: one thinks of Lewis Hine’s photographs or Jim Henson’s creations. Coles aims deeper still. He is listening for the stories children tell about their own lives, listening for how children shape and understand their experiences.

In the final volume of his “Children of Crisis” series, Coles addresses directly a subject that lurks throughout his earlier volumes on children and is a central theme in his other writings—the subject of faith. It seems that in writing *The Spiritual Life of Children* he has at last come to terms with the dual inheritance provided by his parents. Coles has told the story about going to church as a child with his family, only his father sat outside in the car reading the *New York Times* while his mother drove the children to piety. That meant having to navigate his

way between the duelling attitudes of religion as superstition versus religion as truth, of skepticism versus belief. The scientist in Coles went to medical school while the minister in Coles found a set of mentors to help cultivate his religious instincts. Not only his undergraduate advisor Perry Miller, who had written the two most important books on New England Puritanism, but Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Dorothy Day. He found mentors as well through the literature he has examined time and again: the writings of George Bernanos, Flannery O'Connor, James Agee, Leo Tolstoy, and many others including Walker Percy, to whom *The Spiritual Life of Children* is dedicated.

Coles's life-long focus on moral and spiritual life has little to do with organized, institutional religion, though clearly he recognizes the critical role of these institutions in the lives of children. He is less concerned with how children learn religion than with the stories Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, and Jewish children have to tell. He draws no conclusions, provides no morals, and offers no judgments except to chastise himself for not listening carefully enough to those (mostly aged eight to twelve) with whom he is speaking. As with all of his work, he wants to draw our attention to the obvious but neglected point that children have religious beliefs. And he simply wants the reader to join him in listening to the concerns and formulations of these "informants."

The stories I find most engaging in the book are those to which I can connect, those that draw me back to my own childhood religious experiences. I suspect other readers had a similar reaction and that helps explain why the book made the best-seller lists in 1990. The chapter titled "Jewish Righteousness" is representative of the work as a whole. Coles talks with several young Jews from Brookline, Massachusetts, and a few others in Israel. They are an articulate group, thinking hard about what God expects of them and how they can best live up to the laws and rules they are studying. One boy, approaching his Bar Mitzvah, reflects on what his rabbi means when he implores his congregation to "learn how to shake your fists." It means, he concludes, to fight for justice, "to be fair and honest, and to think of others, not just yourself." This is precisely the kind of talk that swells Coles's soul, and time and again the volume presents the most inspiring side of religious belief, the side that commands us to live ethical lives filled with moral passion. Coles concludes that most Jewish children exhibit a "desire to live intimately, even now, with the past of their people, and their interest in the fate of others less lucky than they"; that most of them evidence "a continuity of righteousness, thousands of years old, constantly nourished in family after family, synagogue after synagogue: covenantal and prophetic Judaism become an ethical endowment of one child after another."

Coles is so intent on recovering the enlarging side of religion that even atheism is alchemized into the glitter of belief. In a chapter called "Secular Soul-Searching" he explores the paradox that those who have the least faith often become the most faithful. There are problems with such an angle of vision. The darker side of religious belief, the side that feeds into sanctimony and overt

prejudice, is almost nowhere to be found here. As a Bar Mitzvah student at a conservative synagogue, I too was educated in Jewish righteousness. But I was also educated with a lack of tolerance for other religions and schooled to see anti-semitism all around me. I have often wondered about the connection between certain personality traits and the cultural aspects of my religious life as a child: my restlessness, my feelings of inadequacy, my anxiety over well-being. Perhaps it is unfair to ask Coles to probe these questions, but he should at least acknowledge them. Coles has captured one aspect of the religious life of children, but he has not considered what role that religious life plays in the shaping of their moral lives as adults. Nor has he paused long enough over that side of religion that constricts the soul as much as liberates it, scares us away from creating communities of mutual understanding and instead fosters a destructive egotism that elevates the individual and his clan over all others.

In devoting himself to the presence of religion in everyday life, in seeking to reclaim our moral lives from overgrown churches, Coles is reminiscent of his ancestral neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Do your work and I shall know you," proclaimed the Concord philosopher who also sought an authentic, healing spirituality apart from the iciness of organized religion. This axiom, from the essay "Self-Reliance," applies with special force to Coles. Whatever the hardships of his work, he has continued with it regardless of the cycles of public validation. To be sure he has won big-shot awards (a Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur Foundation grant), but he is also dismissed and resented by any number of critics. Academized, specialized professionals snort when one of their kind attracts a public audience, publishes in popular periodicals, denounces the self-importance of the tribe, and punctures the myths of neutral, detached scholarship. For these critics Coles's work is not scientific enough, not psychiatric enough. The old dichotomies, planted in a post-Cartesian world and nurtured in Ivy-league isolation, are trotted out: hard versus soft, factual versus impressionistic, objective versus subjective. Coles sees these barbs for what they are, evidence of the false pride and excessive egotism of academics and other intellectuals. Still, Coles has not given up on his university and medical school colleagues. Like the central character in Tobias Wolff's "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," another story Coles assigns to his students, he tells them to "mend your lives. . . . Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly."

When Coles delivers this kind of message, or allows characters in stories, novels, essays and poems to deliver it for him, it further inflames his critics. Now, they feel, he is not only attacking their standards, but their character as well. Who does he think he is, a saint, a saviour, a guru? Isn't his message fatuous and condescending? Why should we be made to feel guilty for the way we conduct ourselves? They quickly point to what they see as the contradictions in Coles's life. If he cares so deeply about the outcast, why does he drive a BMW? Why does he live in comfort in Concord and teach in mahogany classrooms in Cambridge? Why doesn't he abandon good restaurants and clean hotels for life in the shelters

and the streets? This is the facile criticism so often directed at those who would have us rethink our priorities and create a life that carries us away from our inward preoccupations and careerist goals. Since we cannot have moral perfection, we must settle for moral paralysis. It is a logic that appeals to many people, a logic that prevents them from escaping the prison of self-absorption by hearing and helping others.

This is not to say Coles can be excused from all criticism. His protestations notwithstanding, he remains a Harvard insider, relating easily to the sons and daughters of America's privileged classes, believing that he can help reshape society by influencing those who may one day come into positions of influence. Coles's belief in social transformation through individual transformation is not unique with him. All of this nation's great preachers, religious or secular, have started from a similar position. In many ways Coles represents the twentieth-century continuation of the Emersonian tradition in America, but with one important reversal. If Emerson stressed finding ones self through solitude, Coles stresses finding ones self through participation. For Emerson, one helped the world by changing within; for Coles, one changes within by helping the world. In Coles's hands, Emerson's "do your work" means not only the intellectual work of locating oneself morally but the social work of helping others. Coles is part of a cultural lineage, one he identifies as including Emerson, Thoreau, Williams, and James, that seeks to connect "moral ideas to the lived life," to link "stories and service." "Stories," Coles explains, "are a means of glimpsing and comprehending the world. . . . Service is a means of putting to use what has been learned, for in the daily events designated as service, all sorts of stories are encountered and experienced."

This fusion of individualism and voluntarism, a fusion that connects Coles back to the moral reformers of the 1830s and 1840s, many of them also products of the Harvard environment, is sometimes challenged as being too idealistic: it denies the structures of power that sustain poverty and inequality in the first place and against which soup kitchens and big brother programs do little at all. Nothing less than a political and social reordering, these critics insist, can challenge the hierarchies of a liberal capitalist society, and moral voluntarism such as Coles's at best is neutral and at worst inadvertently reinforces the dominant order.

Whatever the limitations of Coles's political analysis, the acuity of his social vision compensates for it. He knows that revolutionaries are some of the worst offenders against the dignity and humanity of mankind. He knows that if progress exists it does so not as an abstract equation but as a dynamic relationship between individuals. He knows that words have power, that thoughts are actions. "No ideas but in things," proclaimed Williams in *Paterson*, but Coles' work illustrates that ideas too can be things. He knows how to make us uneasy with ourselves and that is the first sign that he is right: we've grown blind and deaf and paralyzed all the time waiting instead of doing, hiding instead of locating.

It is not always easy to do, to give, to get outside ourselves. For Coles,

teaching is a special kind of service, a special calling. Just as the cruelty of that section leader all those decades ago nearly shattered a young student, the generosity of that professor helped save him. Teachers have a power and an influence that all too frequently goes unexamined by those who teach. Coles has time and again been compelled to evaluate why it is he does what he does and the results of such self-evaluation have made him a more understanding teacher and student, a more effective activist.

Toward the end of *The Call of Service*, Coles tells a story about when he was an undergraduate tutoring an eleven-year old named Billy in English and math. For the first time, but by no means the last, Coles was asked a question by his student: "Why do you come here?" The tutor fell silent, unable to find any words. After a few moments, Billy said "well, I guess I shouldn't ask." Returning to campus, Coles told his adviser Perry Miller about Billy's question. Miller helped him understand: "there's a moral asymmetry that takes hold of us teachers rather too commonly—we think of ourselves as offering service to others, giving them our best, and forget what's in it for ourselves, the service that we're receiving from our students."

The next time Coles met with Billy he understood the answer to the question: "I said I liked coming to that school, liked leaving the place where I lived (a college dormitory filled with talkative, aspiring, and not always humble young men), and I liked, especially, stopping on my way back to that world for some strong coffee and some Italian pastry at a nearby eating place." Billy smiled. And as Coles has reflected on that smile he has come to realize that Billy "was telling me indirectly that he hadn't wanted some long-winded, introspective *apologia* from me, or some big-deal analysis and explanation. He wanted only a sign that I was a human being, flawed and even voiceless, like others, like him, and capable of plenty of confusion, as he knew he was, and, yes, as hungry in my own way as he was."

What a struggle all this is, a struggle to understand others, understand oneself, and to be understood. But if we work at it, sometimes, through all the uncertainty and despair, we can taste the rich coffee and creamy pastry and we can smile.