GARDENING THE MIND AS A WAY FORWARD TOWARDS RESTORING OUR NATIONAL DIGNITY

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Introduction
I will want to start this discourse by requesting you to consider being at the receiving end of these unpalatable everyday encounter in Nigeria.

- You are patiently waiting in a queue at a petrol station to fill your tank and some crazy individual jumps the queue and shunts his car into the petrol filling bay;
- A man in a moving bus who had just finished eating banana throws the peels out of the bus window and it lands on you;
- You have just dismissed from work on one of such very busy evenings when commuter vehicles appear scarce and you have been in a queue only for people on sighting the bus to start scrambling for space and in the course of this push you down.

Obviously these unacceptable things happen every day of our life in Nigeria. Again let me present you with some posers;

Who amongst you would like to be robbed or kidnapped?
Would you like to be insulted or humiliated for no reason (or even for a reason)?
Would you like to have your child murdered?
Would you like to be killed for your religious or cultural beliefs?
Would you like to be lied to or cheated by your friend or partner?
Would you like to be unfairly treated?

If you wish any of the above then your head needs to be re-examined; if you wish none of the above, then I guess you reason correctly. We do not wish any of these because we consider them to be reprehensible behaviours. Humans have a thinking faculty which conveys to us the sense of right or wrong. Morality is an ultimate personal compass of wrong and right. Moral is what make societies exist by reinforcing fairness among its members. Most people do wrong because their thought-processes were not developed to know virtues and values.

It is therefore most apt that in this era of moral degeneracy in which the Federal Government has launched CHANGE BEGINS WITH ME initiative your Association has chosen to interrogate the moral compass of our society.

Defining the topic
Societal values shape our perception of what is right or wrong. The state at which we find man and his social conditions at any point defines the state of the moral intercourse of the society. To that extent the moral decadence in the Nigerian society is responsible for our numerous social crisis. Moral education is an important aspect
of critical thought which helps people understand themselves, their community and their relationships with others. Understanding these fundamentals require a certain framework of thought. Scholars have shown that the framework for moral development in humans go in stages, just like physical growth. The human mind, is that conscionable part of man that controls intellectual faculty and defines the sense of wrong and right. It is associated with the thought process that reasons, thinks, wills, perceives and judges. Gardening the mind therefore means tending the mind of man to direct and shape man’s intercourse and conduct in good moral integrity. Unlike ethics which derives from social system, morality derives from the individual-internal disposition of the individual. Again unlike ethics which is governed by religion, culture, professional and legal guidelines, morality transcends religious and cultural norms.

**What are these moral principles?**

Behaviour towards self, towards others and towards the state is guided by explicit fundamental principles. Morality and moral development are sometimes defined in terms of objective norms and established standards of behaviors. This view of morality often provides the basic structure for character education programs, where a set of virtues (such as honesty, kindness, courage, determination, etc.) are identified and promoted.

All through history, moral values have continued to define human society, so much so that even professional societies and organizations have invented and adopted some aspects of the moral principles to guide their conduct. Medical graduates at their induction into clinical practice are administered the Hippocratic Oath. The Rotary Club International have theirs summarized in the Four Way Test,

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build goodwill and better friendship?
- Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

As far back as *October 22, 1925* Mahatma Ghandi published his seven dangers to human virtues (also called seven social sins) in his weekly newspaper, Young India. They are

- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Business without ethics
- Science without humanity
- Religion without sacrifice
- Politics without principle

Dr Kent Keith in 2003 appear to have captured all the moral values in what he called *The Universal Moral Code*. It is a list of basic, universal ideas about how he thinks we
should live and how we should treat others. The code is divided into two complementary parts; the don’ts (do no harm) and the dos (do good).

Do no harm (the don’ts)
• Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.
• Do not lie.
• Do not steal.
• Do not cheat.
• Do not falsely accuse others.
• Do not commit adultery
• Do not commit incest.
• Do not physically or verbally abuse others.
• Do not murder.
• Do not destroy the natural environment upon which all life depends.

Do good (the dos)
• Do to others what you will like them to do to you.
• Be honest and fair.
• Be generous.
• Be faithful to your family and friends.
• Take care of your children when they are young.
• Take care of your parents when they are old.
• Take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.
• Be kind to strangers.
• Respect all life.
• Protect the natural environment upon which all life depends.

These positive moral characteristics do not appear spontaneously (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998), as earlier noted, the framework for moral development in humans go in stages, just like physical growth. However, unlike physical growth, moral growth does not happen without some input from parents and the catalyzing influence of education. School involvement is especially important in light of the fact that “many children are not taught much about ethics and honesty at home. (Of course parents are no longer available to the family to do their parenting job, the neoliberal economy has totally redefined the family setting).

Worse still, Callahan (2004) noted that many parents may be caught up in the cheating culture themselves thereby setting bad examples for their children. Many educators are aware of the cultural moral crisis and have argued on the need to promote ethical development in the classroom (Callahan, 2004; Halverson, 2004).

Modernity has imposed a lot of burden on our ethical values. These challenges arise from
Globalization and import of alien culture which has invaded our value system; The global neo-colonial economy or liberal or market economy, where virtually everything is monetized; and Technology

**How do we garden the mind?**

Education is recognized widely as a vehicle for the overall development of man and his society. The relationship between education and human development has been established so much so that education is now globally accepted as a key development index.

Education and religion have often gone hand-in-hand in history. Early schools in the West were associated with monasteries and missions; in the East pupils went to madrasas (specific type of religious schools for the study of Islamic religion). This arrangement was disrupted with the rise of nation states, with governments separating religion from education.

The propriety of separating religion from education remains an issue knowing that educational training is inextricably linked to moral values and character development. This appreciation of the central role of moral values and character underlies the traditional pronouncements at university graduations conferring degrees on those “who have been found worthy in character and learning”.

Ultimately parents want to help their children grow, not just prepare them for work. Titter (1984) presented schools as a socializing tool of society, with an effort on the norm, values, and behaviour of students, preparing them for adult culture. Contrary to the perception of many governments that the only task of schools is to prepare children for professional life, it is a trite fact that all education is focused not just on training people for employment but on the formation of the whole person. It is widely acknowledged by teachers and character formators that the best time to bend the mind of man is at the very young age. Indeed, Rousseau had noted that

> “people … are amenable only when they are young; in old age they become incorrigible. Once (bad habits) and customs are established and prejudices ingrained, it is dangerous and futile enterprise to try to reform them; …” (Rousseau -trans. By Betts, p. 80).

It is an argument that has dominated the public space that society should invest more on the young and properly educate them to differentiate rights from wrongs before they become adults. Early childhood education should address the moral development of the child, especially the caring and compassionate aspects of morality.

Developmentalists, such as Kohlberg (1984), propose that the process of attaining moral maturity occurs over time if conditions are favorable for such growth. They
also believe that a child’s moral maturity is directly related to the way he/she thinks about concepts such as justice, rights, equality, and human welfare. Through a variety of social interactions, children over time come to develop their own understandings of these concepts. Thus, their sense of “goodness” is constructed through their own thinking about their experiences and through dialogue with others about what these experiences mean (Nucci, 2001). Coles (1986), in his book, *The Moral Life of Children*, submitted that “It is a mistake to think of morality as a set of external standards that adults somehow foist upon an unknowing or unwilling child…”

Indeed, according to the constructivist theory of development, these central aspects of moral functioning cannot be given to children – but they can be fostered. The point to be made here is that character education is not just a form of indoctrination in which absolutes of a moral action are instilled by rehearsals. Kohn (1997) proposed that character education should involve children in actively assessing certain behaviors against real situations and allowing them to make moral judgments accordingly. This supports the earlier proposition of Piaget (1965), that children construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world through interactions with the environment and that such knowledge includes children’s understandings about what is right and what is wrong. That’s why we have to be careful what our children do, whom they associate with, the television program they watch.

Educational systems derive their values from their philosophy. Our educational philosophy is the development of young people with strong morals, values, and positive attitudes which will result in producing strong leaders and responsible citizens. Unfortunately, our schools have jettisoned this reasonable mandate and all we do is READ-LEARN-WRITE. Today our educational mantra emphasizes success. We want to be successful doctor, lawyer, engineer, surveyor, architect, businessman, etc. Meanwhile we do not aspire to be good human beings? The schools might teach our young ones reading, writing and verbal aptitude, mathematics, quantitative aptitude and computer skills, but if we fail to teach them the golden rule, if we neglect to teach them to love, to care for themselves and for others and to be compassionate, we have really not given them all they need for fulfilling their potential and achieving a sense of joy and satisfaction in their lives? If textbook knowledge makes one a good person, why the dislocation in moral values in our society today one may ask? What accounts for sexual harassment and abuses in schools and the rest of society; for the intolerable corruption by authorities and bureaucrats, rape, murder, kidnap, conspiracy and many other vices perpetrated by highly educated and intellectual people?

Being a “good” person, involves more than having the cognitive understanding of what is right and what is wrong, it includes such other moral functioning like empathy, conscience, and altruism (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998).

Someone recently sent me a WhatsApp message that tells a stunning story; a young man called the producer of a phone-in thank you programme and announced that he picked a computer bag containing a computer and the sum of one hundred thousand
naira (N100,000). He reported that the identity card of the owner which he found inside the bag read Maximus Okoro. The producer interrupted immediately and said ooh you are such a nice guy so you want to return the money and the computer, the guy replied for where? I be mugu? I just wan make you play the music God win by Koredo Bello to thank him for me.

Following several years of profligacy and deprivation, Nigeria has systematically succeeded in turning its youths into political thugs and touts. The youths ordinarily should be the vanguard for positive change and moral reawakening but they have been made to lose their sense of self-worth. Today our value system has been heavily distorted. The way we all worship money over and above character is disgusting. In virtually every sphere of our life including our respective churches and traditional institutions the language is the same. Even our local minstrel music have become eulogies for the rich and the criminals; one which embarrassingly reeks out a litany of names of ‘ndibaluogalanyananwa’ (translation “those who acquired riches at a very young age”) became an anthem to which we all danced to during social gatherings without any protest. We have systematically destroyed the mindset and creativity of our youths. The violence we all see today is the outcrop of years of debauchery. It is a protest against the evil we have entrenched in the system. I say we because Frantz Fannon warned that to cooperate with injustice and wrong makes the oppressed as guilty as the oppressor. It is obvious that we are not getting it right any longer. The older citizens are always bemoaning the lack of moral value among our youths; but we are all to be blamed; we contributed and still contribute to the moral decadence in our society through our personal failings to live by example and by our collective timidity in letting our government excise those aspects of our educational curriculum that provide avenues for the propagation of moral values through stories, history, and moral instructions. I stand to argue that the abolition of moral instruction and history from our school curriculum is largely responsible for Nigeria’s moral crisis.

The primary goals of education should be twofold- to gain knowledge and to acquire moral values. Both are very desirous in preparing our children to be good parents and citizens in society. Even moral values are considered more important than knowledge and that is why Ghandhi considers “knowledge without character” a danger to human virtue.

I will want us to reflect on one of the greatest educational mandate ever issued, the letter of Abraham Lincoln to his son’s teacher:

**Dear Teacher,**

*My son starts school today. It is all going to be strange and new to him for a while and I wish you would treat him gently. It is an adventure that might take him across continents.*
All adventures that probably include wars, tragedy and sorrow. To live this life will require faith, love and courage.

So dear Teacher, will you please take him by his hand and teach him things he will have to know, teaching him — but gently, if you can, teach him that for every enemy, there is a friend. He will have to know that all men are not just, that all men are not true. But teach him also that for every scoundrel there is a hero, that for every crooked politician, there is a dedicated leader.

Teach him if you can that 10 centsearned is of far more value than a dollar found. In school, teacher, it is far more honorable to fail than to cheat. Teach him to learn how to gracefully lose, and enjoy winning when he does win.

Teach him to be gentle with gentle people, tough with tough people. Steer him away from envy if you can and teach him the secret of quiet laughter. Teach him if you can – how to laugh when he is sad, teach him there is no shame in tears. Teach him there can be glory in failure and despair in success. Teach him to scoff at cynics.

Teach him if you can the wonders of books, but also give time to ponder the extreme mystery of birds in the sky, bees in the sun and flowers on a green hill. Teach him to have faith in his own ideas, even if everyone tells him they are wrong.

Try to give my son the strength not to follow the crowd when everyone else is doing it. Teach him to listen to everyone, but teach him also to filter all that he hears on a screen of truth and take only the good that comes through.

Teach him to sell his talents and brains to the highest bidder but never to put a price tag on his heart and soul. Let him have the courage to be impatient, let him have the patient to be brave. Teach him to have sublime faith in himself, because then he will always have sublime faith in mankind, in God.

The moral lessons Lincoln seeks from the Teacher for his son are enormous;

- In the second paragraph of the letter, he wants his son to be taught that “for every enemy, there is a friend; for every scoundrel, there is a hero; for every crooked politician, there is a dedicated leader”. By the above examples, he wants his son to learn the moral lesson not to be disheartened by every bad happening, since there is always an equally or more strong good force to win over it. This can give him hope in life.

- In the third paragraph, he wants his son to learn that, “10 centsearned is of far more value than a dollar found, and that it is far more honorable to fail than to cheat”. Here he specifies the importance of not how much is earned, but how he earns it and admonishes that one should be joyous in failing than cheating to win. The moral lesson to be learnt is to enjoy success achieved by dint of hard-work rather than just seeking to succeed by all means for the pride of it.
In the fourth one, he wants his son to be taught how to deal with different types of people and with different situations (an essential skill for modern life) and more importantly he wants him to win himself of envy.

The fifth paragraph is a demand that he should be taught that books are repository of knowledge but he should also learn to appreciate nature, so that he does not end up as a cynic who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.

In paragraph six, Lincoln mentions the importance of teaching his son to be firm and be guided by his appreciation of moral values rather than sheepishly following the crowd. He also want his son to learn to listen to everyone but not to be influenced by what he hears without putting them on a moral scale.

The moral lesson of the seventh paragraph is awesome, he wants his son to be able to distinguish between an institution and what is being institutionalized; he wants him to know that talents and skill may be for sale but not heart and soul. He wants his son to be taught the twin virtue of courage and patience. Most importantly he wants him to learn to love himself for it is only in doing that he can learn to love others and God.

These awesome insights of Mr. Lincoln’s letter, show the path to those who desire to teach the children moral values. We have greatly misconceived or misrepresented our philosophy of education from which our values derive; if we desire to restore our national dignity, we must build a just and civil society, and moral education is the key. I therefore task you as you interrogate the moral education compass of Nigeria at this conference to seek for a narrative that will restore our national dignity. For me the re-introduction of moral instructions and history in our schools’ curriculum is an essential path we must tow. I wish you well.

References

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