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Off to See the Wizard

By Howard Good

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What defines somebody as educated? Is it getting a certain score on a standardized test? Is it passing through a prescribed curriculum? Is it being employable after graduation? If you listen to politicians and educational bureaucrats, you will probably think so. But who in his or her right mind wants to listen to politicians and bureaucrats? We need a better source of guidance in such important matters, and I nominate "The Wizard of Oz"—the Judy Garland movie, of course, not the original L. Frank Baum book.

It is my theory, based on almost yearly viewing of the movie since I was a kid, that the four companions who skip arm in arm down the Yellow Brick Road each represent a different essential aspect or goal of education. When you add what the Scarecrow wants (a brain) to what the Tin Man wants (a heart) to what the Lion wants (courage) to what Dorothy wants (a home), you end up with a fully educated person. There is even a kind of graduation ceremony near the end of the movie during which the Wizard hands out awards and recognitions: a diploma to the Scarecrow, a heart-shaped watch to the Tin Man, and so on.

Although brainless, the Scarecrow is still somehow smart enough to recognize the value of having a brain. He complains when he first meets Dorothy about the crows that come from miles around to eat in his field. "Oh," he moans, "I'm a failure because I haven't got a brain." But as useful as a brain would be in helping him do his job, that isn't the only reason he wants one. He also wants a brain so he can experience the joy of understanding. As he sings: "Gosh, it would be awful pleasin' / to reason out the reason / For things I can't explain."

The Scarecrow reminds us that the real purpose of education isn't so much to prepare students to make a living as to prepare them to make a life. Today, though, it increasingly seems that the only purpose of education is to prepare students to take tests—diagnostic tests, achievement tests, aptitude tests, state tests. What teacher wouldn't love to have a student who joyfully sings and dances, as the Scarecrow does, about "a chance of getting some brains"? But what student will feel much like singing and dancing if education becomes ever more synonymous with high-stakes testing? You don't have to be a wizard to see the threat to the joy of understanding in that.

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Even if it were true that harder and more frequent tests lead to bigger and better brains, I'm not sure that braininess should be considered the defining characteristic of an educated person. Brains can crack the genetic code of a virus, but can they be
trusted to use such fearful knowledge only for good? Brains can invent new forms of work and travel and communication, but can they alone determine what is worth doing, or seeing, or saying? Aristotle pointed out long ago something that we ourselves always seem in danger of forgetting. "Educating the mind," he observed, "without educating the heart is no education at all."

Which brings us to our hollow-chested friend, the Tin Man. Although the Wizard warns him, "Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable," he wants one anyway. Why? Because he is "presumin'" that he could be "kind-a human" if he "only had a heart." Having a brain buzzing with ideas and reasons is a fine thing, just not everything. A heart capable of registering the great emotions—love, devotion, pity—is also necessary.

Contemporary culture glamorizes technology and treats the human as outdated and inefficient, something to be overcome rather than respected. We are so dazzled by technological breakthroughs that we fail to notice this anti-human ideology, this weird form of self-alienation fostered and circulated by the very media that most profit from it. When we aren't hunkered down in front of our satellite TVs, we are hunkered down in front of our PCs; when we aren't answering our pagers, we are answering our cellphones; when we aren't listening to a CD, we are watching a DVD. We spend larger and larger amounts of time attached to machines of one sort or another. Despite the freedom that new technologies are supposed to afford us, we seem, with each technological advance, to become more, not less, robotic, turning ourselves into tin men—and women.

Few of us are likely to suddenly abandon our pagers and CD burners and Palm Pilots and go back to the garden. The problem, therefore, is how to keep the heart—traditionally seen as the seat not only of feeling, but also of judgment and moral wisdom—from getting lost in the clutter at the bottom of our cultural closet. Some schools try through so-called "character education," which draws on the ethos of the world’s major religions and the sayings of standard philosophers and writers. But can a daily quote from Confucius, or Abraham Lincoln, or Martin Luther King Jr. reverse the numbing effects of watching all those ass-shaking MTV videos or of playing all those ass-kicking video games? I tend to doubt it.

So what will? Perhaps introducing students to the plight of child soldiers and child workers around the world. If students can't relate too well to the teachings of ancient philosophers, perhaps they can relate better to the suffering of others their own age—to the more than 200,000 children, some as young as age 6, recruited to serve as soldiers in government and rebel armies. Or to the 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 forced to work for a living. The figures are enough to break your heart—2 million children killed in wars during the past decade, 50 million to 60 million working in hazardous conditions—but sometimes, as the Tin Man himself might say, the heart must break in order to grow.

It would require courage, the trait the Lion so desperately wants, to teach or even learn such stuff. For once students realize with their hearts as well as their heads that woven into trendy Gap clothes or molded into the latest Air Jordans may be the agony of children who work 14-hour days in sweatshops, no

trip to the mall will ever be the same careless fun again. The realization goes against the whole commercial flow of our culture, which submerges the actual, often intolerable conditions of production beneath bright, giddy waves of advertising. And yet, if education means anything, shouldn't it mean teaching students to be morally and intellectually courageous, to question the culture's frenzied faith in materialism and stake their identities on something more substantial than a bunch of brand names?

"Life," the writer Anais Nin once said, "shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage." School life is, by this measure, a dried-up, shrunken thing. In fact, schools as now constituted seem primarily designed to promote not courage or curiosity among students, but passiveness and conformity. A person with a somewhat skeptical turn of mind might even see character education, with its emphasis on old-fashioned virtues like responsibility and respect, as a device to render students more obedient to authority. Not that there aren't plenty of such devices already, from dress codes and drug tests to metal detectors at the doors and armed guards and surveillance cameras in the halls. The atmosphere at many schools, particularly many high schools, doesn't come close to addressing what may be students' greatest need: connection and community, a sense of belonging. Rather, the atmosphere adds to the aching emptiness, like horrible old Miss Gulch trying to take away Toto, Dorothy's one friend.

Dorothy is an orphan living on a dreary Kansas farm with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. Some years ago, the sociologist Peter L. Berger wrote a book called The Homeless Mind, whose central thesis was that modern society has left most of its members feeling like orphans. He noted that the traditions and affiliations—familial, occupational, ethnic, religious—from which people once drew a sense of belonging have been destroyed or degraded by the forces of modernization, with the result that the world has become a colder, darker, lonelier place. Recent statistics suggest that it is especially cold and dark and lonely for young people. One government survey found, for example, that nearly 3 million Americans ages 12 to 17 considered suicide in 2000, and that more than a third of those actually tried to kill themselves.

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As Dorothy discovers, you can go over the rainbow and still not escape your troubles, still not feel understood or appreciated by others. The anxieties that the poor girl suffered in black-and-white Kansas take even more terrifying form after she thumps down in the rockin', psychedelic Land of Oz. She must now contend with a wicked witch, crabby talking trees, and winged monkeys. No wonder she wants to get back home.

I often hear teachers and school administrators complaining about how tough their job has become. They say academic standards have never been so strict, or students so needy, or parents so uninvolved. They may be right, too; their situation may be unfair, though I can't help wondering whether they couldn't use a little of the Wizard in them. The Wizard is mostly blather, a con man with no special powers beyond his remarkable gift for obfuscation. Nonetheless, he sets Dorothy and her friends a task—"Bring me the
broomstick of the Witch of the West!"—and much to their own surprise, they accomplish it.

School should be more like that. Students should cross the threshold of a challenge and find on the other side, after a series of symbolic adventures, brains and heart and courage. It seems to me the only way we'll ever get home again.

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