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Becoming Moral: The Test of Leadership

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In order to catch the immediacy of a challenge to moral educational leadership, let us begin with a composite case drawn from repeated accounts of actual principals and superintendents struggling with moral issues embedded in state and national school reform policies. The case presents a kind of morality play, a dramatic art form of moral education in which you are asked to place yourself within the unfolding narrative and wrestle in your imagination with the responsibilities that seem to be embedded in the situation. I will suggest that you step out of the play from time to time to sort through your reflections and gain some conceptual clarity about your own moral landscape.

Al Auther, a thirty-six-year-old white man, is beginning the third year of his first principalship at Roosevelt Middle School. He has spent the first two years getting to know the school community well, sizing up and making allies on the staff in the school district office; reviewing student records; adapting curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate state curriculum guidelines; reviewing the school's performance against the guidelines of *Turning Points*, the national blueprint for improving middle schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), and attempting to identify the major problems facing the school.

Al's school has a student population of 890 in grades five through eight, with a decidedly multicultural mix of students.

Thirty percent of the students are lower-middle-class whites, most of whose parents have a high school education and are engaged in the service industry, the trades, or small business endeavors. Fourteen percent of the students are African American, many of whom come from what are locally referred to as "the projects"—public housing for low-income families and those on public assistance. Haitian American students make up an additional 7 percent of the student body, and Jamaican American students make up another 4 percent. Recent arrivals from Cambodia and Malaysia make up 5 and 4 percent, respectively; those from Brazil currently constitute 3 percent of the student body. The remainder of the students are grouped as Hispanics, although they can be broken down into subgroups: 18 percent Puerto Rican Americans, 6 percent Mexican Americans, 6 percent Dominican Americans, 3 percent Nicaraguan Americans. Almost all of the Puerto Rican American youngsters are bilingual when they enter middle school, although half of those students are academically on the margin due to frequent migrating between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States and changes of residences and school districts. Roughly half of the other Hispanic students have arrived in the United States within the last two years and have achieved varying levels of English proficiency. Some of the Haitian American students are bilingual when they arrive at middle school, and the Jamaican American students are normally quite proficient in English, having grown up in a former British colony. The Cambodian and Malaysian students appear to be struggling the most in their efforts to master English, especially conversational English. Furthermore, the Malaysian students are strict Muslims and tend to keep to themselves in their tightly knit community. Of the 890 students, 517 qualify for free lunches.

Fourteen percent of the student body is classified as having moderate to severe disabilities. Although the school practices inclusion of most of these students in a regular classroom, special education teachers still work primarily in pullout programs for specific academic assistance. Al has noticed that a disproportionate percent-

age of the students with moderate disabilities are African American and Mexican American students. He spoke with the special education teachers about reviewing some of their cases, but nothing has changed in one and a half years. He tried to provide some common planning time for the special education and general education teachers to talk about strategies for their special needs children, but they tended to retain a rather compartmentalized view of their responsibilities. Although some of the more severely challenged students have full-time teacher aides assigned to them, none of the aides has had any specialized professional training in dealing with specific disabilities. Neither, for that matter, have any of the general education teachers.

The school district, heavily dependent on state financial assistance because of the low tax base in the district, struggles to maintain a competitive teacher salary scale. Every year, however, young and promising teachers are lost to more affluent school communities, resulting in a relatively bifurcated teaching body of older teachers who have remained in the district and younger teachers right out of university, few of whom have come from diverse communities. Due to recent cutbacks in state assistance, the school system has had to enlarge the average class size from twenty-five to twenty-nine in order to maintain a balanced budget.

When Al Auther arrived as the new principal, his school was considered a low-performing school. Sixty-one percent of the student body was rated as failing or needing assistance on the language arts exam; 57 percent of the student body was rated as failing on the mathematics exam. The district had mandated that the school hold after-school and Saturday morning classes for those low-performing students. Those who needed still further assistance (students who failed the state tests a second time) were required to attend four weeks of summer school. However, the district staffed all of these remediation programs with volunteer teachers on a first come, first served basis. The veteran teachers, who were more familiar with how the system worked, tended to get these extra paying jobs.

The system provided these remediation teachers with no additional professional development that might help them diagnose specific areas in need of remediation or that might train them in alternative teaching or motivational strategies for underperforming students. The remediation classes averaged twenty-five students per class, and Al's visits to these classrooms revealed the same old, same old: teacher-directed pedagogy, worksheets, textbook-dominated instruction, and decontextualized curriculum units. Furthermore, Al had some evidence that many of the Mexican American students' difficulties stemmed from problems with the language of instruction and of the textbook. When he called these weaknesses in the remediation programs to the attention of the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, he was shrugged off with the comment that the district had no additional professional development money available and that state funds for supporting these remediation programs were practically nonexistent.

The situation with special education students was even more desperate. Neither special education teachers nor general education teachers with inclusion students had received any professional development on how to prepare special needs children for the state exams. While the state made provisions for these students to have longer amounts of time to take the tests and, in some cases, have teachers interpret the questions for them, the funding needed to prepare special education and general education teachers for the basic work of mapping the instruction of special needs students to the state curriculum standards simply was not available. Al had asked the central office supervisor for special education whether additional funds could be squeezed from other parts of the district's budget for this purpose but was told by a sympathetic but frustrated veteran of the special education wars that she had already made that effort at several central office budget reviews. All of the district's professional development funds were being spent on workshops for general education teachers in order to map their pedagogy to the

state curriculum standards for the general education population of students. Thus, the special education students as well as many of the second-language learners, who together made up the majority of those students at risk of failing the state exams, seemed to be denied, at least indirectly, a genuine opportunity to learn the material they were to be tested on.

During Al's first two years on the job, the school's record on the state exams had improved slightly, but the percentage of failing students hadn't changed, even though the raw scores of the failing students mirrored the slight improvement of the rest of the school. The school's improvement, however, was basically a reflection of the slight improvement of most schools in the state, a fact attributable, in all likelihood, to the increased familiarity of students and teachers with the testing protocols.

Al is growing increasingly uneasy with this situation. One of the provisions of the state policies on school reform stick in his mind. The state has said that the student accountability for passing high-stakes exams has to be matched by the school's provision of an adequate opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on. In other words, the state has said that it would be unfair to fail students on state tests and to penalize them for such failures by holding them back in the same grade or refusing to grant them a diploma if the schools have not provided these students with sufficient opportunity to learn the material needed to pass the test. The phrase, "opportunity to learn," however, has never been specifically defined, nor is there any special funding provision in the school reform law or implementation guidelines to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on. When Al spoke to other principals in the district, they seemed to believe that the remedial classes and summer school classes were adequate mechanisms to ensure that students had sufficient opportunities to learn. They pointed to the improvement in student scores within the district. One of the veteran principals had commented: "We may

not agree with the high-stakes testing policies, but it's not our responsibility to fix policy. Our job is to implement policy as best we can."

Reflection on the Case

How would you respond if you were the principal of Roosevelt Middle School? What would you define as your professional responsibilities in this situation? What would you define as your moral responsibilities in this situation? To further examine the issues raised in this exercise, after you have written down some of your initial responses to these questions, discuss them with a colleague to see how your thoughts compare with his or hers.

After this reflection, return to the narrative. Place yourself again in the role of the principal as he struggles to come to terms with the situation. You may or may not respond in real life the way you find the principal responding. You may want to write your initial responses in a notebook, paralleling the conversations and reflections that follow. On the other hand, you might want to let yourself identify with the character in the narrative, follow the train of thinking and feeling as the case continues to unfold, and later sort out where you would have diverged from Al.

The Play Continues

Al is increasingly bothered by his situation. There seems to be something immoral about punishing students who are failing the state tests, but he can't quite identify the nature of the problem. He decides to seek out Professor Margaret Wissen, one of the professors in the graduate program where he earned his master's degree in educational administration. He is fortunate to have kept up a friendship with her since he graduated, by attending yearly alumni gatherings and an occasional seminar the department conducts for

alumni on leadership topics. He manages to set up an appointment with his former professor. What follows is a summary of how the conversation went.

Conversation with Professor Wissen

After exchanging pleasantries, Al explains his situation and his unease with it. Professor Wissen responds, "First, I'd like you to try to articulate your feelings about the situation. You need to clarify the sources of your unease, which may suggest something about why you feel that your leadership is at stake."

That suggestion leads Al to stumble through a somewhat labyrinthine explanation of a deep-seated unease about his responsibility to all of the students who are at risk of failing the state tests. As the principal, he is supposed to care for all of the children in the school, especially those whose life circumstances make success in their studies problematic. Al knows from his own school experience, as well as from his study of early adolescent development, that plenty of kids have the native ability to do well in school but for any number of reasons are not doing well and are unnecessarily punished in various ways by the school and by society for not doing well. Being judged lazy and uncooperative by authorities in schools only drives these youngsters to increased disengagement from their studies. As for special needs children, their handicapping condition often leads to unfair and culturally biased judgments about their intelligence. Most of the special education staff at the school are knowledgeable and caring professionals. They have been patiently working to unlock the learning potential in their students, but each child needs a carefully developed, individual education plan. The state tests, which many of the general education students are also failing, have so raised the bar for special needs children that some will only be able to succeed with carefully reconstructed curricula and pedagogies and testing accommodations for which no one in

the district has expertise. Even that improvement might well fail to bring some of the more severely impaired students up to the passing score.

Al continues his halting scouring of his feelings and comes up against a strong reaction to this situation. "Yes! I can name it now: it is an *intolerable* situation. I simply cannot let this go on and face myself in the mirror and call myself an educator.

"Something deep inside me is at stake.

"On the other hand, what can I do? As principal, my hands are tied by budgetary limitations, by the legal obligations to implement the testing of the students, by the mandates of the superintendent and the school board to improve the test results. Other principals advised me on how to improve test results by putting our limited resources behind those students whose scores are closest to the passing mark. This, of course, would almost guarantee that the students most in need would not pass the test. That type of response is, well, so blatantly cynical; it violates my integrity as an educator."

Margaret Wissen responds: "Continue to probe what you mean by 'your responsibility.' Why are you responsible to these students at risk of failure?"

Al responds right away: "I'm an educator. I have a responsibility to see that my kids get a meaningful education—all of them, not just the smart ones. That's my profession and my promise to society, to these kids and their parents. That's why I went to university, to learn how to provide all kids with a meaningful education. I'm certified by the state to do just that. That's my professional responsibility!"

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Stay with that feeling about your professional responsibility. You are no longer a teacher. You are an administrator. You studied school administration and educational leadership with us.

AL: Okay, so I'm supposed to know how organizations work, how to change ineffective structural and cultural elements that will alter the directions of my school, how the various parts of the cur-

riculum are aligned with state standards, how school culture locks people into seeing things one way, how our mental models victimize us. I'm supposed to understand something about a more sophisticated pedagogy that brings kids toward second-order thinking, that teaches for genuine understanding. Yes. And that's simply added to my frustration. The state testing policy places impossible expectations on our staff and most of the students. I don't know how to change this situation, yet I feel responsible for changing it.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Okay, that's your professional responsibility. Anything else?

AL: Isn't that enough?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: No. Take a closer look at the kids. What do you see, and how do you feel about what you see?

Al slowly parades a line of students in his imagination, looking closely into their eyes. Many of them simply pass in front of his gaze as strangers, unknown and unrecognizable. Among the students he does recognize, he sees fear and also something like defiance and something like resilience. He senses a yearning and a hope in their tentative smiles. He sees the care with which their proud parents dress them.

He responds: "I see lots of kids whom I simply don't know. Others I see as real human beings, child humans who want a chance to grow up and taste life fully, express themselves, give and receive love, invent things, make useful and beautiful things. I see kids who want to be a somebody, not a nobody; kids who want to belong, to have a chance to participate in adult life. Among them I see human beings whose life paths will all too quickly branch off into dead ends, and I see others moving toward a broad expanse filled with possibilities. I guess I feel responsible to them as human beings, as one of them, and one of them in a position to turn them toward more promising possibilities."

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Stay with those images, Al. You seem to be saying that your responsibility is grounded in your humanity. You feel that your integrity as a human being is being challenged by the plight of the children in your school. Your sense of responsibility flows out of your instinctive response to the sacredness of other human beings. You are especially moved by the fragility of the young.

AL: Did I say that?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: More or less. That's an important foundation for articulating where your sense of moral obligation starts: our common fate, destiny, journey as human beings. We know that we have a basic responsibility to one another as human beings. That is often expressed negatively in the principle "Do no harm." Now, let's look at another part of the moral landscape you are exploring. What kind of an institution is your school? What purpose does it serve?

AL: I'm not sure I get you. If you mean that it's a public school, then its purpose is to serve public ends. I guess that means that the education kids receive is not just any kind of education, but an education pointing them toward and equipping them for adult responsibilities in society. And not just any kind of society, but a democratic society in the twenty-first century, a society that is undergoing the stresses and strains of unmet challenges at home and a messy journey of playing a part in some kind of new international political alignment. And that would mean preparing them to be good citizens and productive workers, and good parents and neighbors—stuff like that. Is that what you're getting at?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Sounds like you remember *something* from your courses with us. Keep going with that train of thinking. If it serves public ends, to whom is it accountable?

AL: To the public, I guess, and to the public broadly conceived: those who elect the government, including the school board . . .

and those who make school policy and who hire school administrators.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: So what does that make you?

AL: A public servant?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Okay. Are the kids in your school part of that public broadly conceived?

AL: Sure. I mean they technically are citizens with rights, as well as clients being served by this public institution.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: So . . . ?

AL: Well, that means that as citizens, children have rights under the law, and under the state and federal constitutions. That's where school law comes in. . . . I'm beginning to see where this is heading. You're suggesting that this situation might be ripe for a lawsuit?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: I don't think it is quite ripe at present, because the states have left the "opportunity to learn" condition vague and undefined. However, legal and political pressure might be applied to demand that they define the phrase. But what about you? Does this line of thought apply to you, to your position of leadership?

AL: I've already explored that angle. I'm legally responsible for executing the state testing policy. Failure to do this could result in my dismissal.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Yet trying to fulfill this legal responsibility leaves you with a deep sense that this testing policy is morally intolerable for you to implement, at least as it applies to some second-language students and special needs children. Besides your sense of professional responsibility to these children and your sense of human responsibility, are you also able to ground your sense of responsibility in something else?

AL: If I lead a public institution, then I'm legally bound to protect the rights of children. Is that it?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Do you belong to the public, broadly conceived, that the public schools serve?

AL: Yes. As a citizen I vote for the school board and other elected state and federal officials.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: In your role as school administrator, do you surrender your rights as a citizen?

AL: No. I can vote in school board elections. I guess I would feel some constraints about publicly criticizing a member of the school board in an election campaign and publicly supporting that member's opponent. That places me in an ambiguous position, though, doesn't it?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Look beyond your rights to vote and your rights to support opposition candidates in school board elections. Look at your status as a citizen who also happens to be a public servant.

AL: Are you suggesting that as a public servant, I am somehow fulfilling my citizenship responsibilities in the work that I do? I've never looked at my work that way.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Al, you are the state in action every day that you go to work. Think about that.

Look, I have to get ready for a department meeting in ten minutes. I think we need to continue our conversation. This has been a wonderful conversation. I'm proud of you, Al. You are looking beneath the surface of your job. Your concern about this opportunity-to-learn issue has hooked into something very central to who you are as a person and who you are as a professional. As you can see, you are wrestling with this, not only because it presents specific technical, administrative, and pedagogical challenges but also because you sense that some basic moral issues are embedded in the

resolution of the situation. The moral disquiet you are experiencing won't go away, so you'll need to clarify and resolve that. Take some time to reflect on all that we have talked about, and look particularly into this last point, because I think you need to arrive at greater clarity about your role as a citizen–public servant. I'm going to loan you my copy of a book by Terry Cooper called *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration*. I think it may be helpful.

Al thanks Professor Wissen for her help and agrees to see her at this time next week.

Further Reflection on the Case

Let's step back from the drama and look at the various responses of the players in the case: the assistant superintendent, the superintendent, the other principals in the district, and Professor Wissen. Can we say that the superintendent, the central office officials, and the district principals who were consulted see the implementation of the state testing policy as presenting any moral problems? Rather, it would appear that they all perceived that they have a political and legal obligation to implement the policy. That doesn't mean that they agree fully with its impact on all the students and teachers in the school system. Given the limited resources that the district has to devote to preparing students and teachers for the tests, they probably take the long view that things will get sorted out over time through the students' and teachers' growing familiarity with the tests, through year after year of gradually providing training for the staff in mapping their lessons to the state curriculum guidelines, through the gradual lowering of the passing score on the exam to accommodate the majority of students who otherwise, by being held back a grade, could paralyze the system or force it into bankruptcy. Their responses, in short, were to make the best accommodation to the state school reform policies that their limited political and financial resources and their administrative dexterity would

allow. Their response was bureaucratic, legalistic, and pragmatic. They don't seem to have been disturbed by any moral misgivings about their roles and responsibilities. Their responsibilities were to provide services to the children of the community as efficiently as the resources provided them would allow.

Professor Wissen was very helpful. First, she encouraged Al to think through the feelings and intellectual contradictions he was experiencing. In so doing, she was signaling to the principal that the response had to emerge out of that reflection rather than simply be provided by the professor's expertise. She helped Al arrive at a clear judgment: "This is intolerable." This judgment of the situation enables Al to see that the situation is a moral challenge, a moral challenge to the principal as a professional who is responsible for cultivating the best learning environment possible for *all* the children, a moral challenge to the principal as a human being who is responsible for doing no harm to other human beings. Toward the end of the conversation, Professor Wissen pushed Al to explore another source of moral responsibility, something having to do with his role as a citizen-administrator, a principal who as a citizen was responsible for seeing that the public institution—the school—he was administering served the citizens in the ways the institution was intended to serve. The conversation ended before Al arrived at any clarity about this source of moral responsibility.

As you prepare to re-enter the drama, check your notes and reflect on your clarity about the issues so far.

Return to the Drama

Al is busy for the rest of the week. Besides a series of classroom supervisory cycles and budget committee meetings, he has promised his wife that he will help paint the upstairs bedrooms of their house on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. Saturday provides the first opportunity for reflection on his conversation

with Margaret Wissen, and for reading the Cooper book on the ethics of citizenship.

Al writes his reflections on the conversation of the previous Monday, then turns to the book by Terry Cooper, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration* (1991). As he reads through the book, he begins to see what Professor Wissen was driving at. Al paraphrases his insights from the text as follows:

- Citizenship carries with it an obligation to consider the well-being of the polity as a whole.
- The administrator of the public's business is not primarily a technician, not most essentially a specialist in some policy area. The most fundamental role of the public administrator is that of citizen. As a citizen, his or her specialty is the common good.
- The ethical identity of the public administrator should be that of the citizen who is employed "by us" and who works "for us"; a kind of professional citizen ordained to do the work that we, as part of a complex, large-scale political community, are unable to undertake ourselves. The public administrator is the state in action, the state the people want to work on their behalf and on behalf of the common good.
- The biggest issue for public administrators is legitimacy. Their legitimacy comes from the people whom they serve. They are instruments of self-governance by the people, with obligations to the people's well-being.
- The first obligation of the public administrator is to uphold the practice of citizenship, while the second obligation is to support and preserve the particular institution that he or she has been mandated by the citizenry to serve.
- Civic virtue of the modern sort involves free individuals who from time to time voluntarily forgo their self-interest for the common good. The public willingness of all citizens to uphold the common good is what guarantees the freedom of individuals to pursue their self-interest.

- The pursuit of self-interest takes place within a community. Self-interested individuals are dependent on a community to allow and support their pursuit of self-interest, for the common relationships within the community assure individuals that contracts will be honored, loyalties fulfilled, obligations carried out. The exercise of self-interest by free individuals depends on the virtue of everyone else in the community, and therefore it is in their interest to also be virtuous.
- The common good is the preservation of those common relationships that hold people together in bonds of trust, respect, and mutual affection, without which public freedoms become impossible, if not destructive of the community that supports them. Both individual autonomy and community are necessary for each other, and the fulfillment of either cannot be had without a common civic virtue committing the individual and the community to preserving the common relationships within the community.
- Moral responsibility is the element of character that maintains a link between the inner values of the individual and his or her specific commitments within the complex social life of the modern world. The moral person defines his or her identity by those values and translates the moral qualities of the self into specific choices in the role he or she is called on to perform in specific circumstances.
- Public administration that involves citizens in some form of coproduction of the work is better because it stimulates and supports community in the very production of the work. This kind of coproduction enhances the legitimacy and authority of the public administrator, because it is grounded in participation by and for the community.

As Al reviews his notes on Cooper's book, he can see more clearly the point that Professor Wissen was trying to clarify. His moral responsibility as principal of Roosevelt Middle School extends

beyond the professional aspect of his position in the school to the common humanity he shares with his students and also to his civic responsibility to seek their common good as fellow citizens.

Al arrives the following Monday afternoon for the continuation of his conversation with Margaret Wissen. He thanks her for suggesting the Cooper book, telling her that it helped to open his eyes to a whole dimension of moral responsibility—the civic virtue required of the citizen-administrator—in his leadership role as principal.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: You wouldn't have understood the book if you weren't already wrestling with the issues. The answers were latent in your deeply felt unease. You just didn't have the vocabulary and the conceptual frameworks to name and organize the strands of your concerns and formulate a response to this situation. In our administration courses here, I don't think we do a very good job of addressing this lack of vocabulary and conceptual frameworks that would help our students address the deeper moral dimensions of situations they encounter on the job.

Let's see if we can summarize what you've managed to clarify for yourself. You began with a certain frustration that as an educator and an educational leader you could not find a way to respond to a situation that you intuitively understood as unjust. You came to see that the situation was not simply an unjust application of a policy, but an unjust policy. Your critique, therefore, was structural, for the policy disadvantaged not just this or that student, but whole groups of students whose life situations were not taken into account by the policy. It was like earlier policies or practices that disadvantaged women—not simply this or that woman, but all women—simply because they were women. The injustice of their situation was structural; therefore, the whole structural arrangement had to be critiqued. You see this testing policy as structurally flawed, too. It is unjust policy from an education perspective and unjust policy from

a human perspective. And now you are seeing it as unjust from a civic perspective, because it ignores the need of some groups of students to achieve and enjoy the relationships within the democratic community that they are entitled to, the achievement of which are dependent on their school achievements.

AL: I wish I had a tape recorder so I could capture what you're saying. Your words are ringing bells inside of me.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Well, good. Now, let's go back to your initial feeling of unease with the situation. You had a vague feeling of being obligated to respond to the situation, but you didn't see how to respond, especially after your initial requests for help from the district administrators led nowhere. We've begun to clarify some of the sources of your responsibility, but there are some unanswered questions remaining. Why, for example, did you intuitively respond this way, but other administrators did not? What was at stake for you if you did not find a way to respond?

AL: I don't know. I guess I've always had a sense of needing somehow to be true to myself. When I'm not true to myself, my gut tells me that I am taking the easy way out. I'm no different than anyone else in my ability to rationalize choices that I'm not entirely comfortable with. But I stay uncomfortable with those choices sometimes, because it's as though I've compromised an important part of who I am. Sometimes I end up not liking myself for the choices I make. And those experiences tell me to follow my gut the next time. Well, after a lot of experiences of dumb choices, your resolve to maintain some solid sense of integrity starts to strengthen; at least that's what seems to have happened to me.

When I took this job as principal, I wanted to make a difference in the lives of kids. That was a kind of personal mission for me. That was somehow connected to the fulfillment of who I want to be. I'm not going to be governor of this state or even, probably, a superintendent. Being a good principal, however, was something

I thought I could do. It would be my personal way of making a contribution—my way, however insignificant in the big picture, of making history. Wow, I'd better shut up before I get carried away. Does this make any sense to you?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: It makes a lot of sense to me. We rarely share these thoughts with one another, because we are easily embarrassed by appearing to be a goody-goody. What you seem to be saying is that you have developed a clearer picture of who you are, and you know it right away when you are true to that self and when you disappoint that self. I call that picture of who we are our sense of our authentic self. As we mature toward full adulthood, we learn from trial and error, from the way others respond to us and the way our own inner voice responds, that we want to be someone real, not someone fake, not someone who puts on an act for the audience. We experience ourselves as human beings filled with possibilities.

Becoming responsible is a growth process. Through the way we are raised at home, through our education in school, and through our interactions in the general culture, we are shaped to act according to approved patterns, for reasons provided by adults and other authorities. Gradually, though, we come to prefer to be more self-directed, less passive, more original than conventional, less a mimic of the culture than a person who enacts the culture. We become responsible by assuming responsibility. We assume responsibility for our humanity, for being and acting with others as the true "me."

We assume the responsibilities of citizenship by entering into our various social relationships responsibly, by respecting others for who they are and enabling them to be themselves.

When you took the principal's job, you assumed the responsibilities of the office, even though you had only a generalized notion of what they might be. Now you are much clearer about what those responsibilities might be. And you are exploring the idea of taking on the responsibilities of the job in a way that the job description hardly hinted at.

When you talked about your learning to be responsible and how your gut spoke to you when you were not true to yourself, you seemed to be referring to the two sides of moral responsibility. We are responsible, on the one hand, to avoid the bad, and your gut kept announcing that to you. On the other hand, we are also responsible to do the good. Being minimally responsible means we avoid doing the bad directly—directly causing harm to others. Being maximally responsible, however, means trying to do the good. Your initial efforts to deal with the testing policy was to prevent the harm it could do to two distinct groups of students. And you need to continue to do that. But you also need to look more at your leadership responsibility to do the good.

I listen to you and I get the sense of a person whose authenticity is on the line. Because you know who you are, you know that in this set of circumstances you have a moral responsibility. You have a responsibility to the kids, to be sure. But you also have a responsibility to yourself. To back off, to go with the flow would be a denial of your obligation to yourself to be the person you are. So let yourself recognize that. Be present to yourself being present to yourself. Appreciate who you are, and let that authentic self name your responsibilities in this situation. Let that authentic self energize your humanity, your professional instincts, and your civic virtue.

AL: I don't know what to say. I'm getting choked up with some very strong emotions right now. Your words have gone right through me . . . no, not through me, but to the center of me. Frankly, I feel afraid, because your words have suddenly placed me on a path I'm not sure I can handle or endure.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: I'm glad to hear that you belong to the human race. Those feelings are to be expected. But remember, it was your sense of authenticity that led you to follow where this situation was leading you. Trust yourself, Al. But realize that this sense of responsibility doesn't mean that you have to go out and fling yourself against the ramparts of injustice, impaling yourself in the

process. You're a human being, not a world savior. You have certain things you may be able to do; you are working with a situation that may be amenable to modifications, perhaps not tomorrow morning, but over time. What you are responsible for is what is possible for you to do, you and all the others whose efforts you might enlist. Remember what Cooper says about coproduction of the services you are asked to administer. That may be the key to making an effective response to this situation.

AL: What would you suggest I do, then?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: I'd suggest that you go off by yourself for some further reflection. It doesn't have to be only the weekend when you do your serious reflection. That's part of doing your job, so you can do it during your work hours. The key to your responses will flow out of being fully present to the situation and all of its component parts—those you have identified and those that are more implicit in the situation. By being present, I mean bringing your authenticity right up close to the people involved in this—the kids, certainly, as well as their teachers, their parents, the superintendent and his staff, and the school board. Be present to the institutional constraints and possibilities in the situation, to the structures and process that get in the way, to the cultural attitudes that get in the way, to the political interests that need to be addressed. But be present to the deep ideals and values that may be latent in the situation, values and ideals that may be latent in many of the players in this drama. Most of the time we miss out on what is possible in challenging situations because we are not fully present to the people, the organizational levers of change, and the ideals and values already there in people waiting to be awakened and energized.

Al checks his watch and sees that he'll have to cut the conversation short in order to get home for an early dinner before parent-teacher conferences start in the evening. He thanks Professor Wissen for the great help she's giving him and asks whether they

can continue the conversation the next week. They agree to meet the following Monday. As Al prepares to depart, Margaret Wissen again offers encouragement and suggests that Al continue to reflect on the issues during the week.

During the week, Al reviews his reading of Terry Cooper's book on the ethic of citizenship. He once again notes the point that Cooper makes about the public administrator's responsibility to the ultimate common good of the people, even while he or she pursues the specific common good that is served by the public institution he or she leads. Al chews on that thought: "So while you focus on the institutional common good that is served by schools—cultivating a high-quality learning environment—you should simultaneously promote the ultimate common good—sustaining and improving the relationships among the people that are essential for a democratic civil society. For me that means avoiding harming the teaching-learning situation through my administrative activity, as well as avoiding harming the relationships that bind the democratic community together. It seems that the high-stakes testing is harming both the ultimate common good and the institutional good of teaching and learning."

When Al meets with Margaret Wissen the following Monday, he begins with his review of Cooper's thinking and how that is convincing him that as a citizen as well as an educator, he has a responsibility to resist the harmful effects of the high-stakes testing agenda, especially on his second-language and special needs students.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Well, let's put our thinking caps on again and get down to work. Let's focus more precisely on your commitment to be responsible. Last week we concluded that on a more minimal level, we are responsible for avoiding the bad, doing no harm. But we also agreed that especially for those who would lead, moral leadership was more about being responsible to do the good. As citizen-administrators, we are to seek the ultimate common good of the people—as you've just said, to sustain and promote the

relationships that are essential to their functioning as a democratic community—even while we pursue the particular good that our public institution offers the people. Basically, the people of our commonwealth have said that education is a good that should be enjoyed by all the people, not just those who can afford to pay tutors or tuition for private schools. A free democratic society needs to have all of its people educated so that they can participate in the political and economic life of the community. That's an instance of distributive justice, in which a public good, education, is made equally available to all the citizens. As you suggest, the whole polity as well as individual groups suffer when equal opportunity to learn the common curriculum is denied to some. Okay so far? Is this more or less where we've arrived?

AL: Okay so far. This is really helpful. I'm amazed at how much clearer the issue is for me.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Now we need to apply these general conclusions to the case at hand—students' opportunity to learn the material they will be tested on. What are some things that come to mind?

AL: Well, there is the problem that the tests don't test all of the things that are important for kids to learn.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Can you elaborate on that?

AL: Well, if we are to teach kids how to be good citizens and how to be good human beings, as well as how to understand and serve the world, the tests don't test for the first two kinds of learning, and they don't even cover large parts of the third. The tests focus primarily on reading comprehension, writing skills, and mathematics comprehension. They implicitly test logical thinking, cognitive organization of arguments and explanations, problem solving, and the mastery of technical vocabulary. I'm not saying that these elements are unimportant. In many ways, they represent fundamental building blocks in constructing the intelligibility of the

world. But the tests don't cover any of the important issues facing us today, nor do they touch on anything to do with human tragedies in history or any of the subtler forms of human courage in history . . .

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Let me interrupt you. I'm convinced; the tests are of limited use in assessing all that is actually taught and learned in your school. Yet student results on tests are publicized as the full measure of the school's work.

AL: Yes, and for me to acquiesce in that distortion is irresponsible.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: But let me ask you, do the tests provide *some* useful information?

AL: Yes, of course.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: And what are you doing with that information?

AL: That's part of what's bothering me. The information is being used to label some . . . no, *many* kids as failures. And they're not failures in my mind. They haven't had a fair chance to learn the material. We haven't had enough time, nor have we figured out how to teach the material in a variety of ways so that they can grasp it and use it to pass the test. For some of my kids, the tests themselves are problematic because they can't comprehend the language of the tests. Even if they know the answers, they may not have sufficient time to write their answers correctly, because they are translating their thinking into a language they are not comfortable with.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Okay. These are arguments in support of your responsibility to do no harm. The tests actually harm some kids because they put these kids at an unfair disadvantage compared with the general education kids who belong to the dominant language community.

For the moment, put aside the issues about the harm that tests cause. I want you to look now at the proactive side of your respon-

sibility: your responsibility to seek the good, to seek a higher level of excellence in the good that schools do. Look at the opportunity-to-learn issue from that perspective.

AL: Well, isn't my resisting harm something I can do proactively as a leader? As leaders we have to speak out against unfair policies.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: All right. Assume you are successful in resisting the imposition of the tests. No, rather let us say that you are successful in getting the state to hold off the high-stakes consequences of no promotion and no graduation. Let's say, even, that the state holds off on using the failing and passing categories and only reports the raw scores of the students' test results. That would relieve the harmful effects of the tests, wouldn't it?

AL: Sure . . . but the same kids would still be subjected to tests that only assess a fraction of what they have learned or to tests on material they had not yet had sufficient time to learn.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Al, listen to me. I'm asking you to put aside your wanting to protect kids from being harmed by the tests. Look at the opportunity-to-learn issue from a different perspective. Has the opportunity-to-learn clause in the law made any difference in the way you lead your school?

AL: Well, . . . yes. It has alerted me to our collective responsibility as a staff to work harder with our underachieving kids. The problem is, the district isn't putting resources behind the effort.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Look at *your* responsibility to do good. Address the opportunity-to-learn issue as your responsibility, as well as the district's. Be present to that.

AL: Hmmmm. . . . Oh! . . . Okay, I'm beginning to get it. I've been focusing on all the reasons why high-stakes testing is wrong, and then I blamed the district for not opposing the high-stakes consequences of the tests for special education and second-language

kids. And then I blamed the school board and the district officials for not providing staff development resources. And I was doing next to nothing myself to address my . . . no, *our* responsibility as well for doing our part to improve their opportunity to learn. I was waiting for someone else to solve a problem that I was at least partially responsible for—responsible for through inaction, through not being proactive and seeking to gather whatever resources we could muster. Hmmm. We've got at least two special education teachers who have been quite inventive in working with their kids. I could use them as resources for the other teachers. And the Brazilian parents have shown us some helpful ways to get parents from their community together to work more closely with the school. There's probably leadership in the parent community that we haven't begun to tap. And there are probably lots of organizational arrangements, changes in daily and weekly schedules that could be tried. . . . Gosh, the moral leadership agenda was staring me right in the face, and I didn't see it. How come?

PROFESSOR WISSEN: I suspect it's because we are socialized to think of our moral responsibilities as avoiding being bad, like harming or hurting other people or breaking the rules. We tend not to think of our responsibilities to do good, because that is so indefinite. How do we know when we've done enough? Most of the time we know when we've been bad because we've been raised to recognize specific things as being bad. If we are raised in a racist or sexist environment, we do not see behaviors or attitudes that cause hurt and harm to people who are racially different or of the opposite sex. Now that we've been sensitized to the hurt that racist and sexist behaviors and attitudes cause, we avoid them or at least suppress them. But no one has taught us the opposite virtues, how to be actively antiracist or antisexist—see, we don't even have words that express such virtues positively. Perhaps *respect* or *empathy* or *caring* could be applied, but we still don't know how to enact those verbs appropriately because we haven't worked out all the tacit under-

standings and nuances of gesture and tone that one can assume in situations of familiarity. We have a ways to go before we are at ease with people of other races and with the opposite sex and they with us, due to the sorry history of our past relationships, the residue of which remains in significant ways in the present. When I read many of the cases used in textbooks about moral leadership, they deal with messes created because people in the cases have not been proactively seeking the good, seeking to create environments where the messes don't happen because the conditions that generate them have been removed and conditions that foster more humane and meaningful relationships are in place.

Another thing is that we tend not to think of our responsibility to do good in structural terms; rather, doing good is defined as how I relate to a specific person in a specific situation. The institutional arrangements are simply there; they define the institutional realities. The leadership responsibility to do good clearly involves specific interpersonal events, but it primarily means using institutional resources to improve opportunities, to open up new possibilities for people. When you were able to get past your responsibility of preventing harm to specific groups of students, you began to open up to your responsibility to do good, not simply by being nicer to these kids—although that is a good place to start—but by exploring how to use institutional resources to improve the good that schools are supposed to be providing—namely, quality learning for all kids. You began to see the issue as institutionally embedded; the moral leadership response is to make the institution more culturally responsive and more pedagogically inventive.

AL: Yes. . . . Yes! And you're suggesting that I should have seen the teachers' inability to be pedagogically inventive as a symptom of a larger institutional problem. Our institution is set up to privilege the dominant culture and to blame those of other cultures for their failures to adapt quickly. The curriculum is set up that way, the grading and promotion system is set up that way, the length of class

periods, the semester assessments, the report card formats—they tacitly favor one group and punish other groups for not being adequately homogenized. I'm beginning to see that the opportunity-to-learn issue should have alerted me to the institutional arthritis that we have allowed to constrict our teaching and learning agenda, keeping it within familiar and comfortable pedagogies and organizational arrangements.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Amen to that! We have the same problem at this university, Al. You are beginning to be present to this issue in a wholly new way, aren't you? Previously you were present to the issue from the perspective of your responsibility to do no harm. Now you are present to it from the perspective of your responsibility to do good. The problem is that from this perspective, you can imagine many possible institutional changes. Which is best, and how many changes should you make? Here is where you have to marry the virtue of responsibility with your civic virtue. There are many, many discretionary decisions in front of you. As an educator, as an educational leader, you're going to have plenty of ideas, some based on the research literature, some based on instinct. But . . .

AL: So this is where Cooper's notion of coproduction comes in, right? Because the school is a public institution that serves the people, I should find ways to involve the people in producing a response to the opportunity-to-learn issue. Maybe I should say *responses*, since the issue is so complex.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: Yes, good point. Think of the word *responsibility*. One way of interpreting the term is that it means response-ability—the ability to respond. That has two senses. One is the ability to respond to a judge who asks why you did such and such; your response reveals how culpable you are for your action. But the other sense refers to the ability to make a response to a moral challenge. Stay present to the issue from the perspective of the teachers and their responsibilities, the parents and their respon-

sibilities, the students and their responsibilities, and the district authorities and their responsibilities.

AL: My mind is racing ahead now, and all kinds of possibilities are spilling out, like a waterfall.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: All right. Now it's time to slow down. You'll need to spend some time alone with a notepad. Write out all the ideas as they flow out, then look for patterns and organize them into some rational strategy. Then you'll have to subject your strategy to reality tests—those tough questions that the skeptics will pose. Then you'll have to look at whom you want to share these ideas with and how to structure some working groups. That's all in front of you. But for the moment, let's step back and look at how our conversation has been moving. Before, when you were focused primarily on your responsibility for doing no harm, you were blaming others for the problem. Once we turned toward your responsibility for doing good, what happened?

AL: I'm more in touch with myself as an educator. I'm generating ideas about teaching and learning. I'm doing more of what I think I know how to do. You were right to remind me about the human and civic aspects of learning, because I was falling into the pattern of thinking exclusively about learning the academic curriculum. I have to be more present to the human curriculum and to the civic curriculum, not only as important elements in their own right but as important contributors to and enrichers of the academic curriculum. By looking at the good I can do, I'm tapping much more into my sense of leadership. Talking in this way is more satisfying, although I'm also getting a sense of the huge task ahead of me.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: That's such an important lesson we have to learn—to keep looking at the good we can do. That's what we want to be responsible for. And, as you suggest, that's where we find ourselves.

AL: I'm going to need some time to absorb all of this. This conversation has been so helpful. I can't thank you enough.

PROFESSOR WISSEN: The conversation has been good for me as well. I think I've got some fresh ideas that need to be integrated into the content of my courses and into the discussions I have with other members of the faculty here. You are right to take some time to absorb this and to think your way through to some workable strategies. You don't have to come back to see me, because the answers to your questions are already out there in front of you. I'll be happy to continue to play your Socrates, but you soon may be so busy leading your school community that you won't have time for or even need my tiresome questions. You'll be getting educated through the feedback of the people and through the results of your leadership.

Analysis of the Conversation

As we step back out of the case, we should ask how it reveals, through the dialogue and reflection of the two parties, an emerging pattern of what might be called an ethics of responsibility. Can we also see a pattern that we might call an ethics of authenticity?

Write down your own reflections. If you were the principal, what would you have learned from the conversations with Professor Wissen? After you have engaged in your own analysis of the challenges Al faces, we will move on to a systematic ethical analysis in the next three chapters.

But what about Al? What does he do? He continues to find his way toward responsible educational leadership. We will return to Al in Chapter Five; you will be in a better position to appreciate his journey after reading the next three chapters.