PS for 10/18/90

Turning School Desks into Psychiatrists' Couches

The fall school semester is in full swing but, instead of addressing the need to raise the 21-year-low of SAT scores, psychiatry has invaded the classroom and children are being inflicted with courses in "self-esteem" or "self-concept." Many Texas schools for example, are starting to use a psychotherapy course called "It's Up to Me," sponsored by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

Parents' first objection to this course is its numerous privacy-invading exercises. The child must complete sentences such as: "If I had 24 hours to live," "If I had a gun I would," "People can hurt my feelings most by," "I am hurt most easily when, "I am afraid to," "I am mistreated when."

The child is required to check which of a list of 36 ways he might react to "stress." These include: "smoke… hate myself… think about suicide… take drugs… shoplift… lie about things… drink… skip school… vandalism… stay away from my family… feel like running away… steal."

Very young children are asked the questions, Whom would you tell "that you had a scary dream… that there is a superstition that you have… that you once saw something you think you shouldn't have seen… and who is your best friend?"

Parents' second objection is that the course establishes a sort of pseudo-religion of "the power of self-concept," "human potential," and "tuning into yourself." "Spiritual wellness," defined as "a unifying force in strong relationships," is the theme of the course.

The class is required to engage in group recitals of such mantras as "I am me," "I own everything about me – my body, including everything it does," "Because I own all of me, I can become intimately acquainted with me… love me and be friendly with me in all my parts," "I own me, and therefore I can engineer me," "I am me and I am okay."

In a direct attack on religion, the course teaches children that the "origin of values" is their "own experience" (rather than, for example, God's law). As an example, the child is taught that "everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion about abortion."

Instead of presenting values as standards to live by, values are described as "dilemmas" and "value discussion items." Children are taught that "it's up to me" to decide: "is it all right to take drugs, is it OK to watch R-rated movies, is it OK to read pornographic magazines, is anything hurt if I steal little things, is it really important to go to church, do little white lies really hurt, should I respect what my parents say I do?"

Parents' third objection is that the course presents children with a "decision making process" which tells them they need not accept the authority or wisdom of their elders. Instead, the child is taught to use the following formula: "recognize a decision needs to be made, gather information, identify alternatives, examine potential alternatives, consider personal values and goals, make the decision, evaluate the outcome."

This process encourages children to believe they have the wisdom and maturity (which they do not) to make their own decisions about drugs, alcohol, sex, and other high-risk behavior; and the result is that they become easy prey for the drug peddlers and peer pressure. Absent from the course's decision-making process are such questions as is it wrong, is it illegal, is it contrary to what my parents have taught me?

Parents' fourth objection is to the guided imagery. The course includes such "trips" as "Close your eyes and take a journey in your mind to a mountaintop, a castle or some other imaginary place." The class makes up a "Time Line Floor Board" on which they identify the appropriate age for "first marijuana cigarette, begin smoking, midnight curfew, first can of beer, first kiss, first sip of wine, experience of being drunk."

Parents object to the depressing nature of many of the exercises. The children are asked: "Which would you least like to be: very poor, very sickly, or disfigured?" "Which would you rather be: an only child, the youngest child, the oldest child?"

Children are given a "lifeline exercise" which is a real downer. They are asked: "How long do you believe you will live? At what age do you think you'll die? Guess how many years you will live. Write your estimated date of death."

"It's Up to Me" is presented as a course to increase self-esteem and a positive self-image. That would be funny if it weren't such a tragic betrayal of trust by the schools. Psychotherapy does not belong in the public school classroom.