

Idoltrous Ideas in Our Society Talk to Teachers Beginning of the School Year
August, 2004 (Need to counter with the Christian idea of the human person)

There are philosophies that prevent us as a culture from working together. The first is **individualism. It goes back to Thomas Hobbes.** The second one really relates to Darwin. Now we all know that life evolves in the sense that it develops over a long period of time; there is no doubt about this. But there is an element within the **Darwinist interpretation that everything happens by chance**, that eliminates the idea of purpose—there is no purpose, even though oddly enough many of the evolutionists when they write talk about evolution itself as if it planned something. For example, the other day I read a scientist who said that evolution developed emotions so that people could make decisions faster than they would be able to think about them. Well, besides the fact that emotions came first—poor thinking—that’s a very unusual statement because it’s **personifying evolution as if evolution is a thinking, intelligent being, but that’s exactly what Darwin denied.** He denied that evolution is purposeful, that evolution is guided, that evolution is conscious. **He said it’s purely a mechanical result of chance.** He also mentioned two other things which everyone knows can’t be right—we don’t have to go into that.

But the result of this is a view that many people have in our culture, even though they don’t know where it comes from, is that everything is just a matter of chance, everything is a matter of luck. And if you see the inordinate concern for luck today and gambling and lotteries, well, if everything is chance, that makes perfect sense—everything is luck. There is such a thing as chance that plays a role in life, but it’s not all chance. So this idea **militates against a more sane and ordered way of living and it also breaks down the uniqueness of the human being.** And that’s why many people write, **as if the human being is just a chance variation on a general theme which is life.** Well, it is true all life is altogether—mystics always said that. Mystics in all religious traditions have always realized that all life is one, all of creation is one—that’s all very true, but that doesn’t mean that human beings are just a chance variation on the theme of living beings.

A third idolatry, if you want to call it that, very false idea, is that human beings are just blank slates. Now this idea has fallen out of vogue recently, but it was begun a little before World War I by a man named Watson who started the school of psychology called **“Behaviorism.”** After World War II it was promoted by a man named Skinner, **B.F. Skinner.** For a long time this became a very, very popular idea, that **human beings, children, are just blank slates; you can make anything you want out of them.** This exaggerated the role of the environment. But, you know what? I think sometimes our parents have this idea, that they can make anything they want out of their children. Their children are advanced in math! Well, but they are really not. Oh, yes, they will be, because I’m going to make them! That is wrong, but that’s a prejudice that many people have, this idea, well, you can do whatever you want with children; you can make them musicians or you can make them whatever—that’s simply false. Luckily that’s not very popular today among scientific people.

Another false idea comes from **Rousseau**, who wrote a book called *Emile* during the period of the Enlightenment after the French Revolution. Somehow Rousseau became regarded in France as the premier educator, the man that was the great expert on children. The fact is he had three children and he gave them all away to orphanages because he didn't have time to rear them. And this is in a time when orphanages were very poorly run and most orphans died at a very early age because they weren't cared for. And yet he gave them all away because he didn't have time because he was too busy writing about how to rear children, and his famous book, *Emile*. But **Rousseau's point was that children are naturally good**, not simply fundamentally good, but totally good, **and only are corrupted or warped by the environment around them. The Christian view is children have a great potential for good and evil, and they are influenced by their environment, but that doesn't mean that all evil comes from the environment. It can come from themselves and their own choices**—but not according to Rousseau.

Now this was then championed by certain sociologists during the 1920's, especially Mead. Did you ever hear of her? **Margaret Mead** went to New Guinea and other islands. She wrote about these primitive tribes, but what she said was not true at all. She wrote about how they were just **peaceful people because civilization hadn't touched them**. And they lived in this wonderful world where there were never any problems. Just everyone got along wonderfully. The truth is that primitive areas are more murderous; there are more murders per capita in New Guinea than in New York City, and there is a great deal of violence in primitive societies. Why did she write that? No one knows why she did, but **she influenced generations of people with this idea. And it's a false idea**.

So human beings are good, yes, but we are flawed. And **the greatest flaw is our egoism, our capacity for self-centeredness**. This does not come from the world around us—quite the opposite. We are born with the capacity, and this is what, of course, in our tradition we call “**original sin**.” **Human beings live in dialogue with the world around them, and we are influenced by it—that's for sure, but also we influence the world**. This is true also of modern studies of genetics: the environment actually triggers certain genes to operate and turns off other genes. But meanwhile genes are actually, through people, influencing the environment. So it's back and forth. Human beings are the one being that actually, if you want to put it this way, evolves individually, reacts individually, in this sense with the world. Through what? Free will. I'm not speaking here about social action; I'm just talking about **free will and our decisions directly affect the world around us. We affect our environment and our environment affects us**.

Now the worst of all is really the idea that human beings are just consumers. This basically comes from the writings of **Sigmund Freud**. And in a way even the political ideas of Hobbes have been displaced by this idea, that when it gets down to it human beings are just here to consume, to consume pleasures, to be fed and to buy—that's why we exist. Now this idea, of course, is **completely lacking in any spiritual dimension**, but it is the idea that took off in the 1920's and **became basically the political and the economic model upon which the leaders of this country operate**. Some of the Supreme Court leaders—I'm thinking of Oliver Wendell Homes, but there are others—were more influenced by Darwin, actually, in their very materialistic non spiritual vision of human life. But it was really Freud that influenced most through the leaders, especially

business leaders, who saw in this an **opportunity to get their businesses going**—well, if people are here to consume, let's give them something to consume. And the whole focus was **away from being productive**, which even in Hobbes was the goal: to be a productive person, a productive individual; now it's being a consuming individual. And this has really become the dominant idea of Western culture. I am sure that part of the reason for 9/11 was this idea. I mean the people in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East who felt that the United States is a poison on the world were thinking about this, that **we are exporting this consumer mentality throughout the world, which is actually a degradation of our true dignity as human beings.**

So the twentieth century now has become a dehumanizing trap of loneliness and alienation as society and its values have evaporated and the whole movement of populations away from cities into bedroom communities where people don't even know their neighbors, where they commute for long distances to work, they live far from home—the **worker has become really a tool easily expendable.** People are fired, jobs eliminated at the drop of a hat. **So how can people have a good sense of who they are? And how can they have a sense of belonging? To what do they belong?** They don't belong to their communities where they live because they don't even know anybody. They don't belong to the place where they work because they know they could be dropped tomorrow. They have given loyalty only to have it thrown back in their faces.

Television and the internet only further alienate people because there is no real contact. It gives the illusion of contact with no real contact. **People need people. Even a faith community has to exist in community.** But community is pushing away, and people are left more and more alone. And there is no drug in the United States that is more often prescribed than anti-depressants. An enormous amount—enormous—amount of anti-depressants are taken in the United States every year. And now certain **trends like working at home**—that's only going to further separate people from the sort of commonality that working together with others gives. People are touting the idea of the global village, but global village is not on a human scale. The global village is no home for anybody. These ideas are promoted by people who have reasons for promoting them, but the common good is not one of them. **And many of the developments in the economic world, which are really driving political changes, are not in any way for the common good.**

So we end with this understanding that this wouldn't have started in the first place if we weren't **creatures of meaning**, if we didn't have wonder, if we didn't **wonder why we are here.** And we see that **our culture today can provide no answers** to that question—doesn't even try. It simply holds up allurements, blandishments—buy this, buy that, you need this, you need that. I heard an interview of one of the great economists of the world who was in Switzerland at some sort of big conference. And I couldn't believe what he said! He said, "Well, you know, the problem is that these rich countries, these people have everything they need, so we have to convince them they need something else!" That's what he said! It's a horrifying idea, but that's exactly what is happening—**just trying to convince people they need something which they don't.**

And there is almost no ability anymore for people to distinguish between need and want. “You owe yourself.” So now we have in this world people who actually are not too badly off, but who think they are terribly off, because they can’t provide themselves with what they owe themselves, which they owe themselves because they heard it on television, because even the poorest person has a television, and they are comparing themselves constantly to people who have a lot more, but it has nothing to do with need.

When I was in China, it was amazing how happy people were with actually almost nothing. And a Peace Corps worker said to this one man, “Well, you know, it’s amazing you people are so happy and you don’t have anything.” And he said, “What do you mean? We are eating three times a day!” That’s a recent development. In the 70’s they had three bowls of rice gruel a day and occasionally during the month a few vegetables, maybe, and for most people never any meat. Now that’s all changed. They have a lot of food now. They have chicken. They have vegetables. They have rice, and they have all kinds of stuff to eat. So they are happy. And you can see they are happy.

But Americans are laboring under this burden that we don’t have enough and we need more and we are being cheated every day. And these very ideas are **eating away at their soul**, and those are idolatrous ideas; they are false ideas. They are **false ideas** about who we are, and this is what **our society is holding up to everybody very often unconsciously** because people just absorb them without thinking. Why? For the same reason **people believe whatever they hear.**

And it’s important that we talk about these things. This is a part of building faith in a child, talking about these very issues **because they are directly related to whether they are going to be able to make a response to God in justice and whether they are going to be able really to worship in spirit and truth.**

So do we have a consistent, coherent conception of our own selves? Probably we do. We need to share that with our children and help them develop one. Society will not do it for them.