

## **Health:** Words and Actions

### What if picking up litter brought words and actions into line?

Elizabeth wanted to raise her students' awareness of their responsibility to the environment. They accepted this responsibility in the abstract, but it did not seem to be reflected in their actions. She decided to set up a situation that enabled them to bring their words and actions into line and to accept constructive criticism of their current behavior.

"I deliberately dropped trash all around the classroom before the students came in. They sat down and didn't seem to notice the empty candy and cookie wrappers scattered around their desks. I led an abstract discussion about our responsibility to care for the environment, during which they all agreed that it was wrong to litter. I then asked whether they would pick up someone else's trash and throw it in the garbage can. I got a mixed reaction, but some said they would. I then gently pointed out the litter at their feet.

"What about that?" I asked.

"I could see that some were clearly embarrassed. We might say we will pick up other people's litter, but seldom do. We talked about what we could do, and I realized from the discussion that I needed to make sticks and gloves readily available for safely picking up trash. I found that I, too, had to be willing to take criticism."

### What's going on here?

Elizabeth saw her lesson on the environment in a new way; for her, it was a way of helping students bring their words and actions into line, take responsibility for their actions, and reflect on their degree of attentiveness to their environment.

She engaged students in experiencing dissonance (talking about environmental responsibility in a littered room) in order to evoke a more personal response from students. Elizabeth also created a "learning from" situation, not just learning about.

She reshaped her practice by using the classroom environment and choice of questions to create a particular atmosphere (deliberate unease).

## What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Faith without actions is dead. Being gently prompted to see when behavior does not match faith or values helps us to reflect on when our beliefs are a cover for inaction and when they have integrity. Realizing our responsibilities to each other and practicing putting beliefs into action allows us to grow in love towards the world and towards each other. Criticism itself, done in the right way, can be an act of love.

## What difference does it make?

Many students grow up in a very individualistic culture, where they don't feel responsible for the actions of others. Questioning this assumption and helping students to see its force in their own lives is difficult to achieve, but an activity like this helps to make visible our very self-centered lens on the world, and pushes us to consider others. It could help the class grow together if they accept the criticism and feel able to make suggestions that involve their teachers as well, so that the relationship is not one way.

## Where could we go from here?

Students today are often very engaged with questions about the environment, issues of fair trade, and environmental sustainability. It is a good topic to connect to the life of faith and the radical choices that require us to make in order for whole communities to thrive. Websites of Christian aid organizations such as World Vision (<http://www.worldvision.org/>) have some good activities to encourage empathy and illustrate, in concrete terms, the consequences of our decisions for communities in other countries.

## Digging deeper

Western societies tend to stress the individual: individual decisions, lifestyles, and tastes. Although this has brought a certain type of freedom, it can lead to loneliness and a lack of connection with others and the environment. A lack of a sense of belonging to communities and a lack of sense of place make it difficult to make choices with others and the world in mind. Christian community is based on everyone being one in Christ and expressing that oneness in a caring lifestyle (Romans 12:9-10), which means translating beliefs and attitudes into choices and actions. Within a Christian community, criticism can be gently given and taken (along with encouragement) in order to grow.

The Bible calls people to serve their wider communities and work for their well-being (Jeremiah 29:7); this includes caring for the environment. In Genesis God describes the newly created world as “very good” and entrusts the world to people as caretakers. People were given rule over the earth in the sense of bringing creative order and exercising responsibility. Caring for the earth is a charge on Christian communities, not just individuals, because the land is on loan; it belongs to God. The Bible has guidelines on the environment, from caring for birds’ nests to protecting fruit trees in times of war (Numbers 35:33-34; Deuteronomy 20:19; Deuteronomy 22:6). These guidelines preserved the environment for future generations.

*Most of environmental ethics and sustainable development policy could be based precisely on the viewpoint of the guest. Just think of what you would and wouldn't do as a guest in someone else's home. How much would you eat from their table—even if you felt it were a banquet laid for you? Would you chop up the furniture for kindling? Kill the pets? Deny other guests their share of the host's bounty? Whether we base this sensibility on belief in God or not—we are indeed guests, here for a twinkling in the cosmic long haul. We continue acting as the haughty master of the house at our peril.*  
*From Jeremy Benstein, “The People and the Book,” quoted in the Jerusalem Report//, October 7, 2002.*



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