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# **UMI**

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PREVIEW

**AN ETHIC OF DISCLOSURE:  
ENACTING MORAL AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS  
AS A TEACHER PRACTICE WITHIN SOCIAL DIVERSITY**

by

**Russell G. Moulds**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Presented to the Faculty of**

**The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska**

**In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements**

**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Interdepartmental Area of  
Major: Administration, Curriculum, and Instruction**

**Under the Supervision of Professor Karl D. Hostetler**

**Lincoln, Nebraska**

**October, 1995**

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DISSERTATION TITLE

An Ethic of Disclosure: Enacting Moral and Spiritual Traditions

as a Teacher Practice Within Social Diversity

BY

Russell G. Moulds

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**AN ETHIC OF DISCLOSURE:  
ENACTING MORAL AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS  
AS A TEACHER PRACTICE WITHIN SOCIAL DIVERSITY**

**Russell G. Moulds, Ph.D.  
University of Nebraska, 1995**

**Adviser: Karl Hostetler**

**This dissertation is an argument for a teacher practice called "disclosure." The theme is an investigation into teachers alerting students to the condition of cultural/ethical diversity, acquainting students with ethical frameworks within diversity, and introducing students to coherent modes of moral rationality not otherwise available in the diversity. The dissertation will investigate the community contexts for disclosure and present rationales for constructing disclosure. It will present a practice of disclosure and a discussion of selected problems about that practice. Throughout, the dissertation will focus on elaborating the concept and a justification for a practice of teachers revealing to students important content and features about the teacher's own moral/spiritual convictions.**

**The dissertation is a philosophical construction rather than qualitative or quantitative research. Nevertheless, it is research into the works of several authors and how their themes apply to the practice of teaching. It is also research in the sense that a treatise is research: the critical, scholarly work required before moving on to the "conceptualization" and "operationalization" of typical educational/social science research. In this way, any ensuing quantitative or qualitative research will be "grounded" not in unexamined prejudices but in the prejudices and intuitions deliberately located in some**

identified and expressed tradition of thought. In fact, it is this kind of disclosure that the dissertation seeks to describe and then apply to the teacher's practice.

I have selected an emergent style of presentation rather than commencing with fixed definitions and working deductively from there. I have drawn several themes from several sources, largely unrelated, and have woven them together. The aim of this work is to elaborate a style or posture that informs the teacher's overall practice. For this reason, I ask the reader's patience in examining the entire writing project. I believe the result will be a comprehensive though not exhaustive appreciation of a teacher practice valuable for those who reflect on the challenges of teaching in the context of cultural diversity.

PREVIEW

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE DISCLOSURE OF COMMUNITY**

**At present, opinion is divided about the subject of education. People do not take the same view about what should be learned by the young, either with a view to human excellence or a view to the best possible life; nor is it clear whether education should be directed mainly to the intellect or to moral character...whether the proper studies to be pursued are those that are useful in life, or those which make for excellence, or those that advance the bounds of knowledge.... Men do not all honor the same distinctive excellence and so naturally they differ about the proper training for it.**

**- Aristotle**

**Whether "at present" is 2300 years ago or today, concerned and thoughtful teachers have always paid attention to the content and practice of education and to its context. Because of a current and persistent context in which "opinion is divided about the subject of education" in some ways that are exceptionally intense, I want to write here about that context particularly with respect to moral character and about a practice for teachers that I call disclosure. By disclosure I mean the practice of deliberately formulating and articulating to students some consequential and formative aspects of the (or lack of the) teacher's tradition(s) and community that have informed and shaped that teacher's moral judgment, decisions, conduct, and character. The terms and implications of some of these consequences and formative aspects and why they can be important to the development of students' moral character will make up the content of this dissertation. To begin, it may be useful to take a brief opening look first at the context and then at the practice of disclosure.**

### **Some Features at Present**

Certain features of the current circumstances in education (as well as society) contribute to this persistent and intense division and an accompanying debility in education directed to moral character. To begin this investigation of disclosure, I want to notice three of these features. These three will not be sufficient to comprehend the current scene in culture and education. They are intended to suggest something about why many feel that in education the development of moral character is at an impasse and to indicate why a practice of disclosure as I propose it can be one helpful response to the impasse.

The concerns I will identify are familiar. It is not so much that we need to be taught about them for they confront us constantly in the news, the education journals, and our own experience; but rather that we be reminded about them in a reflective way, for their very familiarity masks some misunderstanding and misrepresentation and thus may mislead us about what we might do about them. These concerns are, I think, very perplexing and that's why--despite their familiarity--it is still worth talking about them.

(1) The first concern is violence. Violence is a topic that has always belonged to the study of the human condition, but only fairly recently has it emerged as a concern for the condition of schools. When a seventh grader in rural Chadron, Nebraska, comes to school and shoots his science teacher with a hand gun point blank for no discernible reason other than the act itself,<sup>1</sup> we see that violence to persons has moved from geo-political proportions, from social deprivation proportions, and from the sometimes convoluted psychological proportions of an adult to the scale of a school child's behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> *Omaha World Herald* (Omaha) February 12, 1995.

Student misbehavior typically has been addressed with a scolding or a detention, but these responses are no longer sufficient.<sup>2</sup>

And we need not confine violence in schools to physical assault on others but may include a variety of ways in which the well-being of self and others is violated. These ways may range from sexual innuendo to sexual harassment, from self-abuse to suicide, and from verbal abuse to threats and intimidation. However violence and violation may be construed--against body, spirit, dignity, esteem, opportunity, self-respect, identity--there is a heightened anxiety about its place and presence in the school setting, why it is emerging there, and what to do about it. It as if here we most visibly detect some sort of breakdown in civility--the fragility of which we have always been aware of--in a way we cannot dismiss but which we cannot fully explain or address and at which we can only shake our head.

This shake of the head is a reaction of discouragement and despair, and this reaction is now no more surprising than the reports of the violence itself. What I think is often missing in our reaction or, at least, in understanding our reaction, are adequate ways of reflection on both the subject and object of violence. Here I do not mean the person receiving the violence (although that is always of immediate importance) but rather some recognition of *what* about that person is being violated (the object violated) and some common understanding about when conduct becomes violation (the subject or topic of violation).

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<sup>2</sup> Current investigation on violence in schools includes *Hearings on H.R. 6, School Safety: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1994).

It is not so much that we fail to recognize overt acts of violence when we see them (although some are wondering even about this now), or that we don't discuss and even argue heatedly that some sort of violation has occurred, but that we have few ways of discussing and agreeing on the limits and constraints we are to impose on behavior so as to at least minimize the overt acts we can recognize. While working with an eleventh grader who had been spurned by his girlfriend I learned that, in response, he and a friend had initiated a harassment campaign targeting her with locker trashings, annoying and obscene phone calls, and confrontations in the hallway. When I suggested this might amount to abuse, he remained unconvinced since it was not his intent to harm her but only to stay involved and make matters between them "even." The point here is not that some intervention is impossible but that common ground for understanding between student and teacher was so conspicuously lacking--and this was not a "bad kid." Other than gross imposition of authority (which some may claim can itself be understood--justifiably or unjustifiably--as a form of violence), there is too often in such events no commonality for any appeal to rational dialogue. Clearly, this is not always the case with such incidents. However, when it is--as it seems to be more and more often--the violence is disturbing not only for its own sake but because it indicates that we are unsure of how even to recognize, understand, discuss, and agree on just *what* about this person is being violated, why *that* should be inviolable, and at what point behavior, conduct, or policy becomes violation. This is always the case in society to some degree, has been the case for some time now to a heightened degree, and is now also part of our schools.

(2) This lack of clarity in identifying and agreeing on the *why's* and the *what's* about ourselves and others that are inviolable is linked to another pervasive concern in the current scene. We could call this concern a yearning for coherence. This yearning, I think, is evident among some who search for roots and ethnic ties that they hope will locate their lives within a larger and meaningful story. It is also evident on the book self-help shelves of book stores where many look for assistance and solutions to the disarray of their lives. Certainly the theme of our being a therapeutic society is some testimony to this yearning for coherence.

Perhaps a few among us crave certainty in decisions and life's answers in a way approaching absolutes. I see a few of these folks in my counseling work. I learn from some of my colleagues in Roman Catholicism that they call this "scrupulosity": a psychological, neurotic need for ethical and epistemological purity that has little to do with living in a rather messy world and much to do with pestering a father-confessor for constant absolution and reassurance. Yet most of us, content to settle for less, strive for at least some amount of coherence in our moral lives and some amount of congruence in our decisions, goals, and purposes. The concern here is that so many among us lack much of this kind of coherence and either struggle to make some sense out of our lives or have instead abandoned that struggle altogether to the merely sensual or what Kierkegaard called the aesthetic life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard's well-known treatment of this orientation is found principally in his first volume of *Either / Or*. See Soren Kierkegaard, *Either / Or*, 2 vols., trans. David Swenson, Lillian Swenson, and David Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944). While some today praise the aesthetic life, two current critiques of a hedonistic and narcissistic orientation are Paul Zweig, *The Heresy of Self Love: a Study of Subversive Individualism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Donald Capp, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).

Charles Taylor addresses this condition in terms of what he calls malaise or aspects of culture and society "that people experience as a loss or decline."<sup>4</sup> Taylor argues that modern individualism, despite all its important benefits and achievements, has also resulted in a massive loss of meaning. We are no longer able to claim a place in any larger order of existence. We have lost any vision broader than our individual lives. What's more, with only our own individual lives at stake, reason and rationality have been reduced to instrumentality. We need make no more sense out of our circumstances and decisions than what is necessary to "calculate the most economical application of means to a given end."<sup>5</sup> Our difficulty here is, of course, that individuality impoverished of any larger order of things has great difficulty in locating meaningful ends. This is in part why we also have trouble locating with others, defining with others, and sharing with others those *what's* about ourselves that are inviolable. I suspect this has much to do with the increase in violence of all sorts that has even invaded the child's world of school.

Parallel to this individualism and instrumentality--and I suspect even integral to them--is a strong strain of highly personal ethical orientation, so much so as to be largely absent of attention to community and solidarity, and which has been addressed variously as emotivism, subjectivism, and some individualistic strains of relativism.<sup>6</sup> These -isms

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; Taylor notes that this expediency has not always been the case. He regards it as a characteristic of modernity and of a kind of rationality that corresponds with a utilitarian viewpoint.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instances, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Note that some forms of relativism stress the importance of community. Many modern conceptions of such relativism commence with responses to Kant and his transcendental unity of apperception and to Hegel and his various forms of consciousness moving toward absolute knowing. The German Romantic philosophers postulated multiple sets of rules (instead of Kant's one set) for perceiving or creating reality and a related scheme of ethics, with these sets usually



are sometimes used to describe what has been called a "culture of narcissism," as if that culture is quite content with mere self-preoccupation. But that analysis does not line up with the public debate, including the persistent and intense division about moral education. Instead of self-absorbed complacency, we see wrangling and even bitter debate about recognition by and toward others, expectations of and obligations to others, and the ethics of entitlements. While it is true that the discord and debate often are intended to accrue benefits to self, they are usually asserted in reference to others. The yield of such individualism, though perhaps satisfying for some persons, is for many others not any alleged peace and contentment for self-and-others but rather this uneasiness, this vague and unfulfilled yearning for cohesion and authentication that cannot be met by sheer attention to self. Here again I am suggesting that this ideal of connectedness and endorsement from others is a powerful aspect of the human condition, and I will appeal to the work of several thinkers to develop this claim within a communitarian perspective. That ideal has to do with deeply sensed though usually not articulated notions of self, identity, and solidarity which, when left unmet or experienced as violated, can result in violation of others through what are irrational or non-rational efforts to connect--as with my eleventh grader. Such psychological dynamics are well documented with various accompanying theories of explanation. The point here is that people seek to have their

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being contingent on historical or cultural context. Despite Hegel's own insistence on the Absolute, he inspired others, particularly Marx, to claim that it is not Idea that determines reality and world history but the details of history and human society that determine ideas. This attention to contingency is represented currently by Richard Rorty who has defended the pragmatic solidarity of a community, which he contrasts with objectivity, as the source of truth based on "what is best for our community to believe." See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" from *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

needs met even when their behavior is self-defeating by its violation of others whom they believe can or should meet those needs, whether claimed or real. The metro section of the newspaper is full of such accounts.<sup>7</sup>

(3) A third feature about the current circumstances in education, society, and moral development has to do with diversity. Diversity, I notice, is used as a place-holder expression that covers any number of compatible or incompatible differences in society, and may refer variously to cultural, ethnic, religious, political, philosophical, sexual, economic, linguistic, and other differences in orientation toward what is regarded as a good or flourishing life. Diversity is an issue that is now hard to avoid in any teaching-learning conversation, I suspect because of those different orientations and claims about what is a good and flourishing life and its closeness to our concern about violence and violation and to that vague sense of loss of coherence.

It is also a concept that is central to this practice of disclosure I will explore, and a few caveats may be helpful here. While I will consider different attitudes about cultural diversity and try to characterize a sort of ambivalence that many have toward it, I regard diversity neither antagonistically, as an enemy of human well-being, nor protagonistically, as a commonweal. Like many aspects of the human condition, diversity (similar to plurality) is problematic. It carries with it, I think, the potential both for good and enjoyment and for difficulty and confusion. I want simply to acknowledge it as an

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor addresses this theme of recognition in his essay, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). For a popular, interpersonal treatment of this theme see Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

important aspect of the current condition for moral development in young people and consider its importance in a number of ways throughout the project.

For now, the connection I am making among these features might be expressed this way. We are experiencing an intensified concern for violation: violation of rights, of person, of space, of privacy, of dignity. It could be argued that such violations have been present all along and we are more attentive now than before; or, perhaps, in some important ways there has been a decay in civility that has led to increased violence. However this may be, the concern and the language of and about violence is all around us. We are also permeated by that diffuse and troubling lack of coherence in life's projects, purposes, and significance. We find little to tie those projects and purposes together, whether they be our own or our own and others'. As many have argued, there is an instrumentality about our decisions and directions which when examined or challenged comes up excessively individualized, sterile, and short on significance for meaning, too much so for many.<sup>8</sup> This acute sensitivity to violation and this sensed lack of coherence lead to an ambiguity about the cultural diversity that confronts us in so many domains. My intent here is not to postulate some chain of cause-and-effect to explain diversity. Which or whether one, the other, or some additional factor came first and prompted the next is not important to recognizing the current situations for students, teachers, and moral character. My intent is only to notice that these conditions are much a part of what

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

defines the setting for students' moral development, conditions which include an uncertainty about how to regard our now conspicuous diversity.

What is this ambivalence about diversity? We seem to simultaneously respect it and resent it, and both the respect and resentment are linked to our sense of violation and our sensed loss of meaning. With amplified attention to violation and its variety of offenses (perceived and real), people may prize diversity as both a concept and forum for grievance. For all our privacy and individuality, the broad acknowledgment of diversity in our culture now affords an opportunity for those who are or feel disenfranchised and violated to redress their grievances. At the same time, this continual filing of complaint is an offense to those who are on the receiving end of the complaints or are not stakeholders in the grievance. How many or few of us really care whether the Sinn Fein political representative of the Irish Republican Army receives a visa and is allowed to speak publicly in the United States? How many or few of us are concerned whether neo-Nazi propagandists in Lincoln, Nebraska, who use the U. S. Postal Service without interference to send their literature to Germany receive legal counsel, whether at their own or state expense? Yet even if we don't much care, we realize in at least some distant way that sometime it may be our own ox that gets gored. We both respect and resent the diversity, and detect it as a source of ethical tension.

If my characterization of a sensed loss of meaning and an excessive individuality and separateness is valid, this also points to an ambivalence toward diversity. On the one hand, the shrill and strident voices among the diversity calling for recognition and enfranchisement (whether political, artistic, religious, economic, or otherwise) offend

against our individuality and its attendant benefits and privacy we have come to enjoy, even if too much. On the other hand, those voices of diversity alert us to our separateness and private anonymity and a lack of community and its attendant meanings. The possibility for recognition and a greater sense of coherence in our own life and our life with others is a possibility offered by a respect for diversity. Here again, we both respect and resent the diversity, and detect it as a source of ethical tension.

These, then, are the three features of context "at present" that I consider as matters of concern for the development of moral judgment in students and for a teacher's practice of disclosure that I will propose. The first is a milieu of violence and violation. The second is an absence of coherence for the individual of projects, meanings, and larger purposes. The third concerns the conspicuous theme of diversity that surrounds our participation with others.

I have allowed already that these features are not comprehensive of our entire educational context, yet that they are perplexing enough in themselves. They are certainly not beyond dispute and controversy. There is no lack of reading on these matters and that itself is testimony to disagreement on how significant these concerns are, how they should be construed and combined, or whether they should be at all. Those who deconstruct and reconstruct history may find nothing new or accentuated about violence. Liberal voices (among others) check and balance encroachments that communities and majorities may impose on individual freedom--about which I will say more in a moment. Proponents and nay-sayers of diversity dispute its importance even as each may experience some of that ambivalence about it. Tensions abound among even so few features.

One important tension that will emerge in this exploration of teachers disclosing to students not only a range of ethical perspectives but also important aspects of the teacher's own ethical perspective and world view has to do with tolerance. Whatever its variances may be, within the current diversity there is a rich heritage of high regard for individual freedom and self-determination, liberty, and political tolerance. This outlook of liberalism itself includes many variations but generally represents a commitment to the freedom and dignity of the individual as essential to the well-being of all. The tension here for a practice of disclosure has to do with the communitarian theme I will emphasize as an essential source for moral frameworks for young persons, along side a caution about domination and a deep concern for fostering the individual liberty of students. In short, this is a tension--well known--of teacher authority as a source of truth or validity over against tolerance of perspectives other than the teacher's own. Liberal concepts have contributed much to maintaining an atmosphere of at least political tolerance in the classroom.

I believe that while this tension will not go away with a practice of disclosure (or any other teacher practice including political tolerance), that disclosure, which I will argue is not limited to but can include a strong communitarian perspective, can peacefully co-exist with liberal concerns. What's more, disclosure can contribute to an attitude of political tolerance and to a broader tolerance for alternative and plural viewpoints in the diversity about what amounts to a good and flourishing life.

These themes of strong moral perspectives and frameworks and of tolerance will surface with some of the theorists I will cite. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre, a strong

communitarian, is a controversial voice for traditions as the necessary source of rational and coherent ethical frameworks. I want to employ several of his useful and powerful concepts of community and tradition, though without adopting what often seems like his strong anti-liberal stance. Kenneth Strike has some concepts of teacher practice that also pertain to disclosure which are more sympathetic to liberal concerns and will offset some of MacIntyre's tone. I will try to represent these and other thinkers with respect for the tensions among them and with attention to the importance of their different perspectives and concerns. They are certainly not all saying the same things and there is no grand convergence of philosophies. Yet they all in different ways address the possibility of a frank while responsible teacher practice of sharing with students in the classroom the teacher's ethical situation in the diversity and significant aspects of the teacher's moral and spiritual outlook--all toward assisting students with recognizing or developing their own moral and spiritual framework.<sup>9</sup>

To the extent that such features of the conditions "at present" such as violation, absence of coherence, and the diversity are addressed separately and separately from their relation to moral development, our appreciation falls short of their importance. The circumstances for students' moral development are more subtle and complex than any single treatment can address, as I will try to demonstrate. In fact, those circumstances are too complex for any one treatise to address, so I will limit myself to the themes of moral

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<sup>9</sup> Not wishing to add too much verbiage to this sentence, I note here my understanding that not all moral perspectives are also spiritual perspectives. I also acknowledge that moral and spiritual frameworks can be at different points of coherence and development, and that recognizing that one has or doesn't have a particular or well-defined framework or tradition does not exclude the development of one. It is to these (and some other) issues that I want to write.

coherence and community and to the implications of diversity for fostering moral judgment. The theme of violence and violation (though I think extremely important) will play a lesser role, remaining in the background as an example of one of those important social factors that informs ethical issues and moral judgments and includes serious implications for the formation of moral judgment in the context of diversity. I do not aim to settle all disagreements. I only wish to set out what are to me a few of the more obvious factors which "at present" divide our opinions "about the subject of education...directed to moral character." Those factors characterize a present social milieu in which the formation of moral judgment for students is quite difficult. Whether that formation depends on role immersion within some tradition, or an internalizing of some set of principles provided by some sort of social life, or an orientation to some prevailing value (such as care, respect for persons, or reducing cruelty), or some combination of these or other avenues, young people today do not have ready access to many resources for such formation. That is what I claim and will argue, and will introduce a response and suggest a practice that can contribute to educating for moral character. This, then, is the broad scheme for my work.

### **Disclosure and Community**

I now want to anticipate some of the aspects of disclosure and disclosure's relation to community as a context for developing moral judgment. Again, by disclosure I mean the practice of deliberately formulating and articulating to students some consequential