

## *Commitment to Overriding Values*

*by Marvin Kohl*

What values ought to be taught? Probably the most important is that human beings, as a species, will survive only on one condition: that they must take control not only of their own destinies but of the whole of life. This means that, when circumstances permit, to control all matters of life and death. This includes taking a positive stance toward human cloning, assisted suicide, and having sufficient jurisdiction over any industry that is a known threat to the health or safety of citizens it purports to

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serve. To talk about the omnipotence of reason and intelligence, when our understanding of life is very far from being complete, is denial and a deadly lack of wisdom. What is needed is reason, intelligence, and a genuine humility—one that combines audacity with the realization that, although mistakes will be made, the fear of correcting them should not lead to the acceptance of change only if it is risk-proof.

It is true that ethics stem from human need and interest. But there is also a vital need for commitment to overriding values even if they may lack the kind of cognitive justification typically found in the sciences. Here again we must be bold. Instead of talking about critical intelligence infused by a sense of caring,

let us talk about the need to inculcate a pithy feeling and principle of beneficence. Let us, as humanists, take the messianic dream out of its theological context. Let us commit to the belief that the supportive values—empathy, sympathy, benevolence, and beneficence—will produce more good than people dominated by other attitudes and emotions. This is not a utopian dream. Our goal is a modest one. It is to take people from where they are up to the next level of helping or loving others. ❧

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