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# Teaching Ethics via The Great Glass Elevator

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## Teaching Ethics via the Great Glass Elevator



By **Mathew A. Cabot**

*"Yes, the chocolate...but so much more."*

The movie *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* has had a cult following ever since its release in 1971.\*

Not just entertainment, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* is filled with social commentary. Its attacks on greed, gluttony, violence, being spoiled (and watching too much television) are devastating and instructive. But it is the journey of the movie's young protagonist, Charlie Bucket, that may offer the greatest lesson to us and our students.

At the end of the movie, Wonka tells Charlie he has won the grand prize. "The lifetime supply of chocolate?" Charlie asks. "Yes, the chocolate," Wonka says dismissively, "but so much more."

Wonka quickly ushers Charlie and his Grandpa Joe out of his office to his latest invention, the great glass elevator. After the three board the elevator, Wonka advises them to hold on, and asks Charlie to push the red button above his head. The elevator takes off, and in a moment, breaks through the glass roof of the factory.

As the glass shatters, so does Charlie's parochial worldview. Soaring over the town in which he lives, Charlie gains something much more valuable than a lifetime supply of chocolate. He gains perspective. He will never see himself or the world the same again.

Many of our students are like Charlie, searching for a golden ticket and dreaming of a lifetime supply of chocolate. Our journalism and public relations students (among others) may start out believing the only reason to get a college degree is to get a better job. And why not? This is how many have been enticed to college in the first place. They need to be self-sufficient, productive members of society. They want to be able to afford the materialistic "good life." And, true, everyone needs food and shelter.

But is making our students employable our only-or even our chief-aim as educators? Since some leaders in the mass communication industries think that stimulating a flow of entry-level workers will keep costs down, and support higher education on that basis, it is up to us, the faculty, to help students set their sights higher.

One of the challenges our own ethical standards present to us is the need is to convince our students to think beyond their paychecks, to enlarge their understanding of their roles and responsibilities, including professional ethics, both as practitioners and citizens. After all, a career dedicated to the pursuit of a "lifetime supply of chocolate" probably isn't troubled by "non-chocolate" ethical considerations, and probably isn't satisfying to us, their teachers.

So, how did Wonka do it? How did he help Charlie see the relative value of a "lifetime supply of chocolate"? Let's look at his method.

Even after seeing the wonders of the Chocolate Factory, Charlie still thought the grand prize was the lifetime supply of chocolate. At that point, Wonka knew Charlie's vision was too small. So, he guided him



itself.

into a vehicle that was specifically designed to expand his horizons: the great glass elevator.

First, the elevator is made of glass. It encourages a full 360-degree view of the horizon-and the nadir and zenith as well. What this suggests in terms of pedagogy is that our courses and curricula need to include a variety of views. That means public relations students, for example, should read both public relations textbooks and texts that are critical of their profession (e.g., *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You*). The juxtaposition of these texts creates a dialectic that moves the student from thesis to anti-thesis, and finally to a synthesis. The need to study the profession in the context of the horizon-expanding liberal arts becomes much more than something arbitrarily imposed by degree-granting institutions.

Second, the great glass elevator-unlike traditional elevators that only move up and down-can move in many different directions. One of the greatest values a liberal arts education can provide is a heightened sense of curiosity. One of our goals should be to produce life-long learners. In addition to helping our students have long-term career success, the ability and desire to learn new things will undoubtedly lead to richer and fuller lives-lives that will benefit both the student and the society.

Finally, the elevator must be propelled by the student. Notice that Wonka had Charlie push the red button to start the elevator. It is small detail with significant implications. Wonka wanted Charlie to begin the journey-the one that would ultimately lead to the breakthrough discovery of a world beyond his own. Getting students to the point of pushing the red button may prove to be the most difficult part of education. Providing them with glimpses of worlds beyond may help.

But if they do push it, then they are on their way to realizing that a lifetime supply of chocolate is only the icing on the cake. Communication becomes a calling, not just an academic major.

*\* A remake of the movie is expected to debut early in 2005. It will be directed by Tim Burton and star Johnny Depp as the eccentric chocolate maker. Both movies derive from Roald Dahl's book, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.*

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