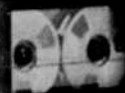


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THE POWER OF MUSIC

though he discourages discipleship. "Bob is the most important figure in Harvard undergraduate life," claims Larry Ronan, a medical student who spent six years as a section instructor in Coles's undergraduate courses. "He helps you map out questions but doesn't answer them for you." In fact, declare many former students, Coles creates a spiritual sanctuary like no other on campus. "Other teachers ask you, 'How are you going to understand this or that text?'" explains Ronan. "Coles confronts you with challenging books and asks, 'In the face of what you have read,

**Says a former student:
'Coles confronts you
with challenging books
and asks, "In the face of
what you have read,
how are you going to
live your life?"'**

how are you going to live your life?'"

Coles helps some students find answers outside traditional academe. Often he holds seminars in his living room, to get freshmen away from the classroom atmosphere. At the Harvard Medical School he spends summers—without pay—guiding med students who donate their time to neighborhood clinics for low-income families and the homeless. He has also carved out a niche in Harvard's Graduate School of Education for doctoral students who want to combine his kind of documentary fieldwork with the more traditional social sciences.

Among Coles's protégés is Tom Davey, who used his clinical methods to examine the political identities of children on both sides of the Berlin wall. Another is Jan Linowitz, who came to Harvard from Brown after reading "Children of Crisis." Under Coles's direction she mapped out a graduate program combining literature, child-development and public-policy questions. "Most graduate schools want you to focus on tidy, narrow issues," says Linowitz, whose dissertation compares how the United States and Europe deal with immigrant orphan children from Asia. "Coles shows you how to deal with broader questions in an interdisciplinary way."

Coles's authority in the classroom derives in large part from his intimate understanding of how life is lived outside academe's citadels of privilege. His own method of doing research—he calls it "fieldwork"—is to spend weeks at a time with children in their homes—eating, talking, praying and watching television. He finds he works best with preadolescents who are neither too shy nor too anxious to impress. He listens, observes and analyzes their drawings and paintings, then relates the observations to wider issues of class, race, religion and the historical moment. Coles purposely does not read up on a foreign country until after his visits; this way, he believes, children become his teachers—about themselves and their social milieu.

Rare trust: "Bob's tools are innocence and anxiety," theorizes his wife, Jane, a former English teacher who for years was his sole companion on the road (the couple have three sons, one a first-year medical student at Georgetown University, one a junior at Harvard and one in high school). With these attributes, he has developed a rare capacity for gaining a child's trust. "Coles has this uncanny knack of listening to children and being able to elicit their deepest thoughts," says South African economist Francis Wilson, a close friend. "He also watches them very closely and establishes nonverbal communication. In this way he gets himself right inside the child's experience of a violent situation and can transmit and interpret the child's feelings."

Coles's two recent books display both the