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Our Golden Age Is Now

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Many individuals are immediately concerned with the question of the peculiar role of education in the unsettled world of today. Harold Benjamin, dean of education at the University of Maryland, College Park, draws upon man's recorded history to point out elements in present-day society demanding that this must be a time for greatness. Courage and industry are the requisites in attempting civilization's greatest task. On those who claim educational leadership lies the burden of proof.

IT WAS PROBABLY an apochryphal professor who is said to have remarked daily to his classes, "There are no reasonable lengths to which the human mind will not go to avoid the labor of thought." Under ordinary conditions even very able men never reach those limits; under certain extraordinary conditions men of only moderate ability reach and surpass them with astounding skill and ease.

These extraordinary conditions, appearing at particular times and places, have been responsible for the most sig-

nificant periods of history. At such times human minds and spirits, often apparently dull and dormant through many previous generations, are seen dramatically and in creative profusion to flower and expand. Complexes of favorable forces, hitherto developing slowly, burst into blooms of new and meaningful behavior. With seemingly miraculous speed and power they make themselves suddenly into lashes and bugles and shining dreams. They become whips to scourge men into purposeful thought; they become trumpets

to call men into daring action; they become visions and goals and quests toward which men turn their fighting faiths.

Thus are born the golden ages of man's history. Their elements can be documented almost endlessly. Which of those elements are essential to such periods of heightened intelligence in action? In this regard, what are the common characteristics to be found in Periclean Athens, Mogul Delhi, Mayan-Yucatan, and many other periods of accepted distinction in the slow history of the human intellect and imagination?

WITH THESE COME GREATNESS

What are these chief marks of a golden age? Even though we know that by reason of present ignorance we cannot today produce them at will, we can still work toward a day when we shall know how to create and control such factors in our society. In the meantime we may well try to recognize them when they occur in our midst and stand before our very eyes.

Let Conflict Exist

The first mark is that of *conflict*, harsh though this conclusion may seem to a generation praying for peace. Athenians and Spartans, Moslems and Hindus, English and Spanish, Mayas and Toltecs—it was from clashes of contending peoples that there came drives to new and wider ways. A Tamerlane had to ride slashingly from the North before the brilliance of a Baber's reign could be achieved. It was not completely an accident that a Socrates could say proudly at the hour of death that he had served his people in the ranks on more than one battlefield. The men

and generations of a golden age are commonly those who took part in conflicts that shook their communities loose from accustomed lethargies.

Conflict alone, however, is far from being enough to start this process of freeing men's minds and spirits. If it had been so, the whole of recorded history would have been a continuous golden age. Many periods of conflict have indeed produced precisely the reverse of a golden age, plunging societies into long twilights of bare survival.

Toward the Stimulation of Men

A second characteristic must therefore be added to the factors for which we are searching. The conflict must be *one which stimulates men* instead of crushing them. It must be one which causes them to re-state their purposes and re-form their patterns of action rather than one which confuses them and makes them lose their sense of direction. It must give new meaning and hope to their lives.

Such outcomes may seem at first glance possible of attainment only by victors, and it is true that golden ages are more likely to occur among conquerors than among conquered. There are conspicuous exceptions to this generalization, however. Not only do many victorious peoples sink far lower intellectually and spiritually than ever they were before the conflict began, but also some defeated peoples begin to capture the elements of an improved culture from the moment in which they surrender their arms.

One of the most brilliant feats of this character in the history of the Western world was that performed by the Danes in the nineteenth century. Crushed

again and again by overwhelming war forces, ranging from the British naval guns which destroyed Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807 to the Prussian and Austrian armies which overran Schleswig-Holstein in 1866; under the leadership first of poets and then of teachers, Denmark staged a literary, cultural, and economic revival of the most profound significance. No more fruitful study can be recommended to present-day defeated peoples than that of the aims and achievements of men like Grundtvig and his followers.

The Key of Communication

A third element easily recognizable in the period between the conflict and the golden age is a *new use of communication*. Sometimes it is a new means of communication; at other times it is merely a new pattern of old forms of communication; and often it is a combination of both. This factor is indeed so important that it may seem to be the one feature which makes an age golden, as when oratory, poetry, drama, painting, navigation, or road building mark the zenith of achievement.

The communication element carries its own danger as well as its indispensability to any golden age, however, in that it can easily become the end instead of merely an instrument of cultural achievement. An age which begins with Phidias can end in a dreary succession of sterile art forms, and one which opens with Prince Henry the Navigator can close with the clumsy colonial trade of eighteenth century Spain and Portugal.

A Spirit Which Burns

There is one more characteristic of a golden age which is probably a sum-

mation if not a determinant of the factors of conflict, stimulus, and communication. This last characteristic is difficult to isolate and recognize. It appears in sudden bursts of insight and energy. Often it seems to be the work of a few great leaders, but more likely it is what makes the leaders possible in the first place. Sometimes it accompanies new religious movements. At other times it appears closely tied to political revolutions, technical advances, or social upheavals. Almost always it is developed and reflected in artistic and literary ways. It can be described most clearly in the simple statement that every golden age, no matter what else it may possess or lack, must have *its own burning spirit*. Conflict, the unsettling of routines, and the extension of communication must be fused by that spirit into meaning and drive, or the age will not be a golden one but merely another time of trouble and change and the unsettling of men's minds.

THE TIME IS NOW—A WORLD-WIDE RENAISSANCE

The men and women of the present generation now have for the first time in the history of the race the elementary requirements for a golden age available on a world-wide basis. Conflict of all kinds: military, political, economic, and social, has become increasingly widespread until there is no doubt of its world impact. Religious tensions in Quebec or Bombay, civil wars in Burma or Indonesia, political struggles in Palestine or Mississippi—all are recognized throughout the world as being the immediate concern of Mason City in Iowa, of Petropavlovsk in Kam-

chatka, of Arica in Chile, and of all the other communities, large or small, on any continent.

Thus far, moreover, these conditions of world conflict have not been so crushing in their effects that they have reduced the bulk of the world's population below the level on which intellectual and spiritual renaissance is possible. Granting the tremendously depressed state of the peoples lately conquered in war and of many of the peoples in other devastated areas, there are still hundreds of millions of men and women who have been relatively untouched by war in body.

Shattered Notions Top Nuclear Fission

In mind and spirit, however, not only these fortunate millions but also the other unhappy millions who stand knee-deep in the rubble of ruined cities are shaken by recent conflict and by continuing conflict in a fashion unprecedented in human experience.

This is probably a circumstance of the very greatest moment to our present world. Nuclear fission may sink in importance in another world war beside the power of radio-directed clouds of bacteria, but the shattering of accustomed notions of all peoples simultaneously will probably continue to be the most truly earth-shaking event of this century.

The communication factor likewise operates today over all the world as never before. The world extension of new media of mass communication is just now getting under way. The impact of the conflict situations throughout the world is obviously heightened by the use of these media. Never before in this respect have the peoples of the

world been in a position even remotely resembling their present one.

The final characteristic of the spirit is not so evident in the present world situation. That characteristic is never very evident until it explodes in action. It has to be sought for in some general complex of activity which involves and depends upon its existence.

IN EDUCATION IS THE SPARK

There are some of us who believe that this over-all requirement for a golden age is potentially present in the great educational ferment observed throughout the world. From Paris to New York, from London to Tokyo, and the nooks and corners of the earth in between, more men and women are examining their educational goals, are reforming their means of changing their ways, and are extending their systems of achieving their new objectives.

This pattern of educational unrest, educational reform, and educational expansion has been relatively unnoticed in a world still ringed about with blazing guns and creaking gallows. Nevertheless it has been going on, it has been gathering momentum, and soon it may provide the spark for the great intellectual and spiritual development of which men are capable, for which they are ready, and after which the greatest among them have so long yearned.

If our golden age is just beginning, it is largely because education is just now becoming able to play a worldwide role. The education we need for that role will be one which is not too proud to work out the most effective handling of the smallest detail, and not too timid to attempt the greatest task that civilization can impose.

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