

## Letters from Abroad

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### Mental Health in Today's World

☛ We are indeed happy to present again some of the thought-provoking comments of Helene Brulé, principal of a normal school in Tours, France, and guest of ASCD in our own country during the winter of 1949. Her comments in the following article were made as a result of the announcement of the theme of the 1950 meeting in Denver. She asked if she might share with us some of her thoughts on mental health, and we immediately reserved space for them. You will find them as provocative as those included in the October, 1949, "Letters from Abroad."

We also want to include a personal note from Madame Brulé. In a letter written February 28, she says, "Yesterday I received the special pamphlet on the Denver convention and felt some melancholy at not being there. So many names are alive for me now and I can evoke faces, remember friendly moments and discussions. I am sorry I did not send a message in due time to all my friends in Denver."—G.H.F.

THE SAFEGUARDING of mental health is today a problem of the greatest urgency. Never have adults been so deeply disturbed by the efforts demanded by the struggle for survival, so obsessed by the threats overhanging their security. All too frequently children are stripped of their fresh and carefree nature, desirable at their age, and led to despair and suicide or to those more frequent manifestations of maladjustment—instability, backwardness, and delinquency.

#### Memories of America

As the passage of time lends perspective to my memories of my journey in the United States, two impressions stand out

clearly. On the one hand, I have a great admiration for the work undertaken by your educators, with the support of the public, on behalf of physically, mentally, or socially handicapped children—work carried out in institutions as admirably adapted to their task as the Ann J. Kellogg School at Battle Creek or the Special School of the Children's Hospital at Iowa City. On the other hand, it does sometimes seem to me as though the New World, with all its power and dynamism, were being drawn irresistibly into a race in which the very conception of the essential human element risks extinction. Moreover it is, I think, only by the poverty of the physical means at our disposal that we in Europe are held back from following the same current.

The richness of your great nation is bound to astonish Europeans like myself, who have found themselves at the end of so long a period of oppression and misery so very markedly poorer than in 1939. The possibility of heating our houses in winter, of eating our fill of bread, of being able to use electric current every day seems to us, on the material plane, the end of a long and slow climb back towards a long-forgotten standard of well-being. Yet, I must confess that several times when in America I found myself asking the question, "What, after all, are the most precious things in life?"

#### Freedom for Reflection

The answer seemed to me to be that freedom and an essential condition of that freedom, the free disposition of our time and movement, are what we need most—leisure, silence, and shelter from the invasions of anxiety, hurry, and agitation of the city. But modern life gives us less

and less generously of time and space.

Modern apartments are of course light and convenient, but the preoccupation with the practical, with the need to secure maximum efficiency in relation to their cost, has meant the sacrifice of the "spare room" so well adapted to the adult's need for solitude and to the daydreaming of the child. The daily program is measured with such precision that one comes to the end of the day or week without having managed to secure a moment for rest or reflection. The evening, the weekend, bring their own obligations. The telephone and the radio intrude upon the silence of even the most secluded homes.

The city of today wounds our personality by frustrating our deepest aspiration towards the beautiful and the good. Risen too quickly from the earth, marred by smoke and the waste of industrial processes, they offer to the eye not a pleasure but a permanent offense. By catering to the taste for breaking records, for making headlines and sensational news, they constitute a constant contradiction to the proper relationship between man's capabilities and his undertakings.

Time and again, with charming spontaneity and a pleasing curiosity about the world at large, American students would ask me about the city where I live. I feared to disappoint them, for I could lay claim to no spectacular superlatives for my city. Tours is not the most heavily populated, nor the most industrialized, nor even, devastated as it was, the most war-ravaged city of France. All I could tell them was: "It is a beautiful city in which it is a pleasure to live." And my mind lingered lovingly on the memory of a city lying along the banks of a beautiful river, its fine white stone houses so perfectly at harmony with the trees, the water, and the sky. I was moved to find your students susceptible to the charm of the city I evoked for them, so well in keeping with the tastes of man.

Surely the act most proper to the human being is the act of free choice. How gravely this free choice is threatened when our every activity is more and more organized, when we are constantly beset

by harassing publicity, when, reacting actively or passively to sloganized suggestions, we come to dispense with reflection and analysis of motive. To the pessimist it might appear that the devastation resulting from the large-scale utilization of modern techniques is destroying not only the resources of the soil, compromising future crops, but is reaching out to touch the human personality itself, raising problems which man tries to solve in an often fruitless and even destructive race against time, dispersing his research on more and more compartmentalized specialization, driving himself into a maladjustment resulting in faulty psychic equilibrium.

### The New Generation's World

Such is the world in preparation for which teachers are asked to educate children who are to be healthy and well-equipped to succeed in the society they will enter—capable of finding their place in the world of mechanization and nuclear physics. The trust thus placed in us may be a cause both for pride and for a certain bitterness. Pride that parents rely on us to guide the steps of those they hold most dear. Bitterness when we reflect not only on the poverty of the means at our disposal compared with the sacrifices accepted as normal in the pursuit of pleasure or of war, but, above all, bitterness at the realization that an adolescent has only to open his eyes and ears to be constantly assailed by the appeal to everything that constitutes a denial of all our efforts—tawdry luxury, brute sexuality, and destructiveness.

When one has twice in a lifetime seen the pendulum swing between massacre and painstaking restoration, between the glorification of destructive power and of intelligent and patient reconstruction; when one feels the growing threat of another cataclysm; one is bound to ask whether it is right to bring up a generation healthy and confident in the future, pure in heart, and thirsting for justice. Yet, where is the teacher truly in touch with children who does not feel a deep desire to help and serve them?

## Elements in Maintaining Balance of Personality

In Western Europe for centuries past famous minds have held that as a teacher, Nature has no equal. Reacting against the over-brilliance of eighteenth century society, Rousseau would have his pupil Emile learn in country fields the necessity and virtue of patient effort, respect for what passes man's understanding, and come by contemplation of Nature to the attainment of religious feeling. Maria Montessori and Dr. Decroly, in their turn, have claimed for the child the benefit of contact with animal and vegetable life. In American schools I was delighted to see children watching over the unfolding of buds or awaiting the birth of a litter of guinea pigs. Cement and metal can never produce Shakespeare's milk of human kindness, nor inspire the patient observation necessary to the formation of mind and will.

The atmosphere of free activity of "new" schools is also eminently favorable to mental health, provided activity does not degenerate into agitation and that working alone does not cause the child to be isolated in a little world of self-pre-occupation. The free and graceful movements, which from the kindergarten onward, express joy in dance or show their efficacy in the handling of tools, alternating with the complete relaxation of rest, is a most important element in the balance of the personality as a whole.

Creative activities, particularly all artistic creation, liberate the personality of the child from those feelings which, if repressed, might become elements of emotional disorder, and facilitate the full and happy expression of that personality. Open-mindedness, shown in the genuine curiosity as to ways of life in distant countries, in exotic folk arts, is valuable both to knowledge and to international understanding, particularly if it avoids the dangers of too wide a dispersal of the child's attention and is careful not to encourage a certain disregard for everything that is not necessarily excitingly original.

The acceptance of the unexpected, the

foreign visitor or projects arising from the day's events, are a valuable resource in the school not bound by the obligation to follow a strictly pre-established curriculum. From them youth can learn to welcome novelty in people and in things.

## The Schoolroom World and Its Implications

All these elements of the new schools, admirably conceived to secure mental health in the pupil, are found almost everywhere in America. Such is the atmosphere of the schoolroom that the children have a real love of the life they experience there, and adults often express their nostalgia by assuring you that their schooldays were the best years of their lives. Few Frenchmen, I think, would express themselves in such terms. For, while our schools too have made themselves beloved, they are above all a place of study where, in the space of a few years, one must prepare to face examinations in which one's whole future is at stake. The day's work is hard and discipline is rigid. Hence, at the end of one's schooldays there is a feeling of achieving freedom—of entering at last into the real world.

Both conceptions have their disadvantages. Our own conception, by the effort demanded of the growing physical and mental organism, inevitably runs the risk of exhausting the young. But may not the American conception, so much kinder and understanding, give rise to some kind of "weaning complex," causing an emotional block in the young man or woman when the moment comes to pass from the sheltered world of school into the adult world with its duties and responsibilities? In Europe the more difficult life is, the more the young aspire to fend for themselves at an early age. In the United States where family and school watch so tenderly over them, may they not fear to escape this protection and to face the often harsh competitive struggle they must enter if they are to gain for themselves a place in the adult world?

Helene Brulé

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