There are few Americans today who would not agree that liberty is a key word in an understanding of our Nation's heritage. "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These two quotations from the Constitution and from the Declaration of Independence document the central role of liberty in the thinking of the Nation's founding fathers.

There is far less unanimity of opinion among our citizens, however, as to the meaning of liberty. As Abraham Lincoln pointed out,

"The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act, as the destroyer of liberty. It is obvious they are not agreed on the definition of liberty."

Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that liberty, rather than being general and abstract, depends on the pattern of freedoms and restraints placed upon individuals in a specific situation. However, we are too often tempted to formulate a generalized meaning for liberty based only upon a particular set of circumstances with which we are familiar. As is pointed out well in several of the articles which follow in this issue, liberty is reflected in a number of dimensions—political, social, economic, intellectual. Educators should be aware of all of these, but it is perhaps most urgent that they understand what liberty means in relation to education.

It is our deep conviction that education for liberty is the central task of American schools today—the ultimate basis for synthesis of all of the experiences we provide for children and youth through the school. Education for liberty, in its most fundamental sense, is the promotion of conditions of life which free each individual to make an increasingly wide range of intelligent choices. The freedom to choose, to try, to err, to decide, with the fullest possible access to information bearing upon the consequences of these decisions for oneself and for others, is liberty.

There are those who would say, "All this is fine, but you of course are speaking of mature persons of wide experience, able to view a specific problem in the broad context of their previous experience. College students? Certainly. High school youth? Perhaps. But certainly not children of elementary school age. They are too young to

choose.” We can agree that there are
many choices which parents or teachers
must make for children and youth. The
disastrous consequences of an error in
some situations—perhaps the toddler’s
straying out onto the superhighway or
the novice swimmer’s unfamiliarity
with the undertow and depth of water
make intervention imperative. It is
likely, too, that in many of the more
common situations of school and family
life, the limited experience of the
child or youth makes necessary the
judgments of others. We would hold,
however, that the more serious prob-
lem in public education today seems
to be that of encouraging a fuller real-
ization and extension of students’ op-
pportunities for experience in choice
making, rather than that of restricting
such opportunities for students or of
condemning as excesses occasional in-
stances in which students have made
poor choices.

Realistically we must recognize that
as teachers and school persons we make
choices for students at many points
where in our judgment they are not
competent to choose intelligently, and
where the consequences of an error in
judgment would not be remediable.
We need to recognize at the same time,
however, that we take this responsibil-
ity in trust—it is not ours to keep. One
of the deepest obligations of our profes-
sion involves the return of freedom of
choice to each individual as soon as he
is able to effectively assume such. This
does not mean that we sit on the side-
lines waiting for this competence to
unfold automatically from within each
individual. It means instead that we
seek to promote activities which con-
front the child with a problem involving
alternatives that are meaningful to
him and from which a reasonable
course of action can be determined. It
is in the funded experience in making
choices of a nature appropriate to the
maturity of the individual that the
basis for dealing intelligently with the
great social-moral issues of our age is
to be found.

It is our opinion that evidences of
failure on the part of some individuals
today to value liberty can be traced to
the failure of those responsible for their
care as children to ask of themselves
repeatedly, “Is it necessary for me to
make this decision for Johnny, or can
he choose for himself?” Too often our
impulse as parent or teacher is to make
the decision ourselves on the grounds
that we thus protect the child. One of
the most difficult habits to break is that
of thinking of other persons as relativ-
ely static and unchanged. Many of
us continue to picture Cousin Sue as
the scrawny little girl of ten, with pig-
tails and buck teeth, whom we used to
visit during summer vacation, even
though a recent letter from her hus-
band informs us of the birth of their
second child. Similarly, we tend too
often to forget that our children, or our
pupils, may today choose with wisdom
in an area where yesterday it was neces-
sary to decide for them. It is our obliga-
tion to ask ourselves repeatedly, “Must
I make this decision for him?” When
we take an affirmative answer for
granted, we may once again have laid
waste the most fertile seedbed of liberty.

Liberty’s dependence upon the
broad, pervasive elements of the total
social-cultural climate as well as upon
family and school relationships runs
parallel to the garden plant’s depend-
ence upon a favorable combination of
climatic conditions and careful nur-
turing by the gardener. The core values
of the culture and the current political-
social climate determine, to be sure, the
extent to which the kind of educational
experiences described above will be pro-
moted—even permitted. Our obliga-
tions as educators must extend to these broad forces as they touch the school. Our point, however, is that liberty is not just to be found at stake in the great ideological struggles of our age. Its seeds are to be found in the day-to-day experiences of each individual as he is confronted with choices that affect him. Yes, liberty may be found in the Declaration of Independence, in our Constitution, and in the words of our great statesmen down through the years. But liberty may also be found in the choices between finger painting or clay play, the blue dress or the green plaid, the ice cream bar or the dime saved toward the model kit, Sally or Mary as the prom date, and college or factory in career planning. Liberty means a free people exercising intelligently their right to choose. Education for liberty in a democratic America provides opportunities for choice designed to help each individual develop fully into what he alone is capable of becoming.

—GEORGE W. DENEMARK, executive secretary, ASCD and editor, Educational Leadership.

IF THERE is one conclusion to which human experience unmistakably points, it is that democratic ends demand democratic methods for their realization. Authoritarian methods now offer themselves to us in new guises. They come to us claiming to serve the ultimate ends of freedom and equity in a classless society. Or they recommend adoption of a totalitarian regime in order to fight totalitarianism. In whatever form they offer themselves, they owe their seductive power to their claim to serve ideal ends. Our first defense is to realize that democracy can be served only by the slow day by day adoption and contagious diffusion in every phase of our common life of methods that are identical with the ends to be reached and that recourse to monistic, wholesale, absolutist procedures is a betrayal of human freedom no matter in what guise it presents itself.—JOHN DEWEY, Freedom and Culture. New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1939. p. 175-176.

EDUCATION can be truly served only by teachers who understand that it means the development of the individual within the obligations imposed by his membership in society and for the ultimate advancement of both to the highest forms of life within the reach of human beings. Such teachers will not try to force pupils into their own mould nor will they carelessly liberate a pupil’s powers for free action without seeking to make him capable of acting intelligently and constructively and inspiring him to do so.—HOWARD K. BALFE, from Are American Teachers Free? Report of the Commission on the Social Studies, American Historical Association, Part XII, New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1936. Used with permission. (From report of a conference on academic freedom held July 22-25, 1935, at Harvard University.)