

### *Education for Liberty*

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."<sup>1</sup>

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 is more than the memorization of our great documents—more than the exhortation of youth to voice their vote in civic affairs as adults—more than the job of the social studies teacher; though, to be sure, it may involve all of these. 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

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Address at Sanitary Fair in Baltimore, April 18, 1864, *Complete Works*, New York, 1894, Vol II, p. 513.

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 problem in public education today seems to be that of encouraging a fuller realization and extension of students' opportunities for experience in choice making, rather than that of restricting such opportunities for students or of condemning as excesses occasional instances 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 responsibility in trust—it is not ours to keep. One of the deepest obligations of our profession 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 sidelines waiting for this competence to unfold automatically from within each individual. It means instead that we seek to promote activities which confront 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 relatively 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 husband 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 necessary to decide for them. It is our obligation 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 dependence upon a favorable combination of climatic conditions and careful nurturing 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 promoted—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*.

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*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.*

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*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. BEALE, 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.)*

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