

Symbols of Our Concern

What are major symbols of our concern in education today?
How can we encourage democratic behavior rather than authoritarian personalities?

BACK A few years there appeared on American hillsides those mysterious flaming symbols of in-group distemper called fiery crosses. I remember well as a boy going with others in the neighborhood to the lakeshore nearby, trembling step by step with a vague uneasiness, to see one reputedly burning its wrath on our homogeneous Dutch community. Coming upon it in the jet blackness of night, we knew that all was not well. As is the wont of youngsters when confronted with the specter of fear, our only recourse was to avoid, to slip quietly away trying to forget. But the human organism has no effective means of erasing its seared components. Traumatic impressions stick deep in the nervous tissues.

Critical Areas Today

Now, thirty years after, the light of that fire has dimmed but little. By a rather easy transition one could say that for us who have assumed some measure of responsibility for the schools there continue to burn several of these fiery crosses on the land. In our maturity we have a pre-eminent advantage of knowing how to fight the fires, not always with fire, but some with water, others with earth, and all

with energy. As adults we could, but dare not, ignore these conflagrations. For our maturity can limn these crosses as both symbols of our concern and as burdens to endure, placing us in double jeopardy so to speak. My suspicion is, however, that the burden is the lighter as we assume more heavily the yoke.

With your permission may I name these crosses one by one, those at least which seem to be as persistent as they are significant. It should be remembered at the outset that the fiery crosses of yesterday were overt manifestations of despotic anarchy, a condition which denies a reverence for human personality.

Today the crosses are not always so clearly delineated. They have quieted to variegated shades of authoritarianism, hiding sometimes behind the respectable fronts of our basic institutions. Often they test our faith; frequently their disturbing light distorts our vision; occasionally their arms reach out as if to choke our freedoms. Yet, with all of this and that which follows, no inference should be made

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from the metaphor beyond the thesis that these items bear continual watching.

The Three R's

There are several aspects of education with which we are all directly concerned and which constitute some of the heaviest burdens. One of these is the "three R's." Schools are doing increasingly effective work here. But it is difficult to understand why we let ourselves be bludgeoned so by critics. A division in our ranks on this of all matters suggests the need for being well informed. A most recent report of a study of 126 school systems in New York State supports most of the other studies and indicates besides that mediocre programs are directly related to poor financial support and inadequate size. Could we not take the initiative by pointing to the conditions which undergird good or poor programs of education. The generalization of increasing effectiveness is in no way destroyed by saying that what we do is not good enough, meaning that our search for better ways, better materials, better organization, better handling of children must be ceaseless.

The prime weakness in our teaching might be called its inflexibility. Pattern and organization there must be, but rigidity is deadening. Standards there must also be, but the only one consistent with flexibility and individual differences is each student working up to his capacity. No higher standard than this is possible for any school.

May I make a few remarks about two of the "R's." We need to re-examine carefully the whole frames of reference in which both language arts and mathematics are cast. In the

former our research tells us that the study of formal grammar has little or no relation with effective speaking or writing. There are many reasons, one of the strongest being that the traditional nomenclature of grammar has practically no correspondence with the reality of human utterances. And since English is a word order language and Latin an inflectional language, Latin can hardly be the "training ground" for English as many still suppose. As for arithmetic, the concept of meaning inherent in the relationships of the number system and their applications to significant social events seems to be so urgent that we should not rest until all of our teachers reconceive their role with respect to it. For to the degree that syntactical definitions assume the pounding influence they now seem to possess and to the degree that drill supplants the development of mathematical understandings, to that degree our schools are factories of autocracy.

Teacher Education

Another cross we have to bear rather heavily today is related to teacher education. I have the definite impression that teacher education is here to stay in spite of the Lynds, the Bestors, the Smiths, and the Lees. May I cite as evidence that in Greater Boston alone there have been organized within the past three years several new programs of teacher preparation, either graduate or undergraduate or both. I believe responsibility for improvement of these programs rests upon all of us, whether in institutions or in local school systems.

Yet it becomes increasingly clear to many of us that adequate prepara-

tion is impossible in a four-year period without slighting some important breadths and depths. One fallacy easy to come by is to view professional programs as existing in isolation. These should be firmly rooted in the biological and social sciences. Such relationships may help us avoid some criticisms now leveled at us. I look forward to the day when our programs of preparation will encompass, over a six- to eight-year period, extensive work in general or liberal education, a deep and broad specialization, and professional opportunities which will include enough internship teaching so that we may be able to say at graduation, "This person can teach," as medical schools now say of their graduate, "This man is a doctor. He knows his profession and can be trusted to serve his community well." Teaching will then have come of age professionally and our pride in it will be rightly justified.

Segregation

We are entering today a new phase of an issue in education of long standing. I refer, of course, to the education of Negroes in nonsegregated schools. It would be comforting if we could say that all the evils lay below the Mason-Dixon line. But studies reveal that school systems in the non-South have maintained segregated schools for years by several devices, including gerrymandering of school districts, encouraging voluntary choice of separate schools, and careful regulation of transfer permits.

Striking shifts in population complicate the issue. For example, between 1900 and 1950 the white population in the South increased by eighteen

million or ten times the Negro increase. In the North the picture is reversed. In 1900 one in eight persons outside the South was a Negro compared with three in eight in 1950. In Chicago alone, the Negro population increased in the same fifty-year period from 30,000 to a half-million with 90 per cent of them jammed in an eleven-square mile area on the South Side.

We know that segregated education tends to follow segregated housing. Schools in segregated areas tend to be inferior since they are normally the oldest with the least adequate facilities, and have a greater proportion of problem children. Because of the undesirable teaching situation in these schools the better qualified teachers take the first opportunity to leave. New lows in the quality of instruction generally follow. Students from these schools find great difficulty in making social and educational adjustment when transferred to integrated programs. Thus a standard argument for maintaining segregated schools is documented. And the well-known viciousness comes full circle.

In the South there are some encouraging signs that integration will be maturely handled. Superintendent Corning in Washington, D. C., after two years of preparation, has instituted a scheduled program which seems to be working extremely well for the most part. Recent reports indicate that 2000 Negroes are attending Southern white, state-supported, graduate and professional schools in all states except Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. Indeed, the challenge is country-wide.

The Gifted

Look for a moment at the present emphasis on educating the gifted. One school of thought would isolate those of high intelligence as early as grade three to provide special classes for them, to carry them further, supposedly, in narrower fields. At least one spokesman for the Kenyon Plan proceeds on the principles of Faculty Psychology, in disrepute for at least a generation, and the best friend authoritarianism in education has ever had. But let me remind you that brains are cheap in America. They are bought and sold by people high in our power structure, not necessarily by those who are themselves intellectually or artistically gifted. I submit that to raise an intellectual elite who have neither understanding of nor association with those who will assume positions of power is democratic and educational myopia. To hear some on this theme one would think that only a small proportion of our population is educable. But Quintilian, writing as early as the first century A.D. under the *Institutes of Oratory*, said: "There is absolutely no foundation for the complaint that but few men have the power to take in the knowledge that is imparted to them, and that the majority are so slow of understanding that education is a waste of time and labor: On the contrary you will find that most are quick to reason and ready to learn." And again: "Those who are dull and unteachable are as abnormal as prodigious births and monstrosities, and are but few in number."

For the person interested in discovering how complex this business of

leadership really is, may I suggest Alvin Gouldner's book, *Studies in Leadership*. Permit me one quote from it, a statement of Maurice Krout: "The great men of the civilized world have been analyzed for us by competent psychologists on the basis of sufficient materials to determine brightness or intelligence. The results seem to show that 'great' men, including leaders in the public life of Europe and America, range all the way from dull normal to genius."

We have the obligation to ask sincerely whether placing our leadership in intellectual giants necessarily excludes other varieties. For leadership has a way of arising in unexpected times and places out of situations previously unforeseen. But if we can classify all people as either leaders or the led (the law of the excluded middle) we can assume the position of the one, operate in such fashion that all those other nasty untouchables become servile, and wait for the world to come crashing down about us. There is no evidence anywhere that I know of that provides a safe haven for the world in the hands of a selected few. One of the most precious of all gifts possessed by mankind is the power of human reason. And teaching people to develop this power is a most crucial educational objective. The best reason I know of for educating the gifted is simply that they, as all others, are entitled opportunities matching their capabilities. This is the most obvious common sense. The question is not whether something should be done, but how and for what purpose.

Higher Education

I suppose if one were asked where the greatest concentration of mental ability exists he might say, "Why, in our colleges and universities, of course." This may well be true. We have a quip we use over the coffee cups to the effect that those of us who work in the colleges live in the "Squirrel Cage," meaning we live on peanuts and whatever else our submissiveness can wrest from the sympathies of our "superiors." Now autocratic administrators are operating at all levels of our educational system, but somehow we should expect them least where they seem most prevalent—in the "bastions of learning." And interestingly enough, some of our top people in universities across the land proclaim the doctrine of individual initiative while allowing their institutions to become vast conformity devices. I do not blame them entirely for this state of affairs since our society is seriously saturated with the conformity principle. Documentation for this can be found in the work of David Riesman, C. Wright Mills and others.

A friend of mine once said a family should so organize itself that as children develop they can smoothly move from autocracy to benevolent dictatorship to representative government to democracy. This may make some sense for the schools, too. It seems to me, however, that we have turned the concept upside down. My feeling is that the warmest environments, the most patient and understanding teachers, the greatest flexibility are found in our kindergartens; while the most rigidity, the coldest and most calculating systematizing operate on so-called

higher education including our graduate schools. I can account for it only in two ways: one is that we take special care in selecting teachers at lower levels; the other is that the business of specialization is so uncritically accepted that we examine no longer the real nature of man or of our society but perhaps only the nature of our educational system.

Religion and Education

There are, too, within the psychological atmosphere in which we all live some strange and ominous developments in the field of religion. What a clergyman friend of mine calls the dis-ease of our time has driven millions to "spiritual" cover. According to one popular clergyman, anxious man yearns for the Absolute. Without wishing to lock casuistic horns with him, let me say that while God may be Absolute, the world decidedly is not nor are the beings in it. While we may long for the Absolute we never attain it absolutely, and my best guess is that no one this side of God Himself knows Him absolutely.

The growing incidence of anxiety and frustrations of various kinds, the internal conflicts which beset us in adjusting to an increasingly complex world, have driven some clergymen of many faiths to take extreme positions critical of the public schools. A few strongly recommend that parents withdraw both students and support from public education. Others would remake the public schools along partisan religious lines.

We can see signs that some people are asking with increasing bravado for school policies that would end separa-

tion of church and state. Bishop Harrell of The Methodist Church has asked for "a holy wedlock" of religion and education; President Van Dusen of Union Theological Seminary requests that our whole curriculum be reorganized to place "revealed" Truth at the center. I must add in all fairness that the Catholic hierarchy has not remained silent on this matter. To these gentlemen I recommend Leo Pfeffer's *Church, State and Freedom*, whose master thesis is that religious freedom, even for the Church, is possible only when religion and government remain separate.

After wrestling with these matters for many years I have reached the following tentative conclusion. That the public school system in America must remain nonsectarian, that only in remaining so can it serve the best interests of all the people; further, that to jump the chasm to call this Godless indicates a lack of understanding of the reality of cultural interdependence and individual integrity. It would, under the circumstances, be folly for schoolmen to yield to pressure from clergymen, whatever their faith, who want to tamper with this concept in any form. I believe America will pay dearly for such folly. Schoolmen sometimes think they can make satisfactory adjustments when they stress moral and spiritual values. Not only will this not satisfy those clergymen and parents who are interested in religious indoctrination, but such emphasis will play right into the hands of the very people schoolmen try to pacify, weakening the programs to the point where they are subject to the whims of any minority group.

Public schools rest on the same assumption as democracy itself, namely, that each person is capable of developing a value system of his own. Churches are available if one needs them, but schools cannot serve as a church substitute without the danger of "establishment." In fact, there is no need for them to do so for two reasons: (a) no institution can be isolated completely from the culture and the value texture of it; and (b) values are inherent in all learning situations, and admonitions will not likely touch the teacher incapable of seeing the situation realistically. Education, in my opinion, is above any sectarianism. For as Horace Kallen in *The Saturday Review* has said, democracy's true religion is such that "all may freely come together in it, each the peer of the other and equal in rights and liberty . . . Being the religion of religions, the faith in equal liberty must assure to each and all equal freedom of association and worship . . . it must stop all suppression and silencing as an assumption of infallibility repugnant to the religious life."

World Peace and Freedom

Finally, the largest and most pervasive burden surely is the cross of peace. I do not believe it takes an authoritative mastery of international relations to see the inevitable. If you have followed on the one hand the problems of war, both hot and cold, in the past two decades, and on the other the reasoning of Adler's *How to Think About War and Peace*, of Cousins' *Modern Man Is Obsolete* and of Lewis Mumford Jones' *In the Name of Sanity*, you must have concluded as I

have that the only answer, that of an effective world government, is so stark in its clarity that discussion seems hardly necessary. But, precisely because it is so, we may wane in our support and delay the day of reckoning. Unless world conditions change materially there is some doubt that we can reckon in time.

"But," you say, "that may be fine, but what do you do when we are accused of subversion upon the use of materials suggesting this theme?" A most timely question. We learn from the *Denver Post* that F.B.I. agents in at least eight states from coast to coast have been "volunteering derogatory information about school teachers to state officials." My answer might run somewhat as follows. As an individual I must maintain my integrity or wholeness at all costs. I must tell my accusers that while the price of peace is higher than we seem willing to pay, the price of war and chaos is astronomical—in hunger, broken homes, wasted lives and bleeding earth. As for the schools, children cannot too early learn to stretch their thinking to include all men, for to the degree that they limit their in-group they are that much less human beings. Further, I believe that young people, when allowed to face the issue squarely will, too, see the inevitable. As for subversion, I doubt the allegation will stick when one behaves as a person who uses his freedom in genuine concern for his fellowmen and their problems. Yet, beyond that, the use of freedom is its own best protection. If those who cherish freedom succumb to the whims of demagogues, the

next generation has been committed to slavery.

We have had a quick look at a few of the burning features of our educational scene. It is conceivable that there will attend upon the solution of these issues many frustrations. Responses to frustrating conditions can be several. We can fight the persons whom we associate with these conditions. As important as it is to stand up to the attack, it is easy to dissipate useful resources beyond the significance of the events. We can flee from the arena to neurotic evasion of our responsibilities. This behavior, of course, solves no problems, not even our own. We can grasp an easy answer, for many are now offered. But here again we must confront ourselves with the possible results of hasty action.

Since, as you may have inferred, the major flame leaping through all of these fires is authoritarianism, a series of extinguishing devices is necessary. Among them would be to analyze the forces in our culture which develop authoritarian personalities. Fortunately, we have a growing body of research that is tremendously suggestive in this regard. The other side of the coin would seem to be a continuing study of what might be called the pattern of democratic behavior with all of its facets of self-discipline, critical thinking, citizenship responsibility, and the like. For it is here that the public school must make its most telling contribution. Meanwhile, since we have to work with both of these, they must be reconciled—in the classroom, in the personalities of teacher and administrator, in the community.

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