

Commitment Is a Personal Quality

G. Spencer Beasley

AT TIMES people seem almost frenzied in their search for something to which they may be committed. Frantically the searchers shift from one cause to another, depending on what appears to be the order of the day. In almost desperate attempts the exponents strive to convince others that the latest cause is *the* one deserving everyone's attention. This type of commitment I choose to term external commitment. What is lacking, it seems to me, is an internal force called personal quality.

Commitment based on personal quality works on several premises. There is sincere, quiet, working belief in the dignity and worth of the human being—recognition that the human mind is capable of contributing something to the society of which it is a member, even though the contribution may be limited to the partial care of the person himself. The limited individual may be mentally or physically—or both—unable to go beyond himself to assist others; but the care he is able to provide himself creates great personal satisfaction for him and makes possible more time for another individual to devote to someone else.

Personal quality stems partially from conviction about oneself and the forces making one a unique person. He can look at his weaknesses as well as his strengths and attempt to appraise himself fairly. Both the bad and the good can stand improvement; both deserve attention; and both require hard work, the strengths sometimes calling for more attention and concerted efforts than the weaknesses.

Personal quality demands love. In our desperate effort to promote the idea of love for our neighbors, we have tacitly agreed that one must not love himself. In making such agreement we delude ourselves and live the lie. Love is one of

the bases upon which respect rests. Who can respect others when he cannot respect himself?

Belief in the dignity and worth of the human being, an honest appraisal of oneself, love, respect for oneself—these provide a foundation upon which one builds commitment.

Commitment To Achieve

Merely to be committed, however, does not say anything. One must be committed *to something*. In teaching, as in any other profession, the practitioners are committed to achievement. Yet what the achievement is—"Ay! There's the rub," and it "must give us pause." Is the achievement self glory? Is it the passing on of acquired knowledge? Is it the pursuing of scientific inquiry? Is it the giving of help to make possible another person's gaining greater

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respect for himself? Perhaps all of these ideas, as well as many more, are involved, but the goal must be the last; all other ideas are means to that end.

Implied in the achievement of the end results is self-understanding. Stories of teachers who have inspired self-understanding in their students, who have created within their students an awareness of the great potential of the human being, and who have given their students confidence in the latter's ability to rise to great heights are legion. Virtually all of us can well remember the dedicated individuals whose strengths far outshone their numerous faults and created for us some sort of inspiration to go into our respective fields of endeavor. Those were the "dedicated" teachers. They were committed to their profession—to uniting knowledge and curiosity with boys and girls.

How did those dedicated beings achieve what they did? We analyze them as persons. We romanticize the attributes of those people. We attempt to emulate them. Sometimes this works; more often it fails. It fails because we seek to superimpose the qualities of another on ourselves, and such action does not allow for development of our own abilities. Only when we recognize that concern for others is an innate personal quality can we begin to develop that most basic tool—love.

Our actions, we are frequently told, speak louder than our words. Why this is true is so apparent, it seems, that we continue to provide lip service while disregarding the practice. Mrs. X tells her students that the self-respecting person dresses neatly and attractively. Yet she constantly looks as if she has slept in her clothes. Mr. Y tells his students that the self-respecting person drives courteously because he respects

the rights of others on the streets and highways. Mr. Y is careful to adhere to what he preaches. His students are impressed by his conscientiousness. Mrs. X's students, however, decide that what she says applies to everybody except her; therefore, they also may become exceptions.

Commitment is a peculiar quality because it is personal. Vast numbers of people accept as totally normal the facts that faces are different, that eyes vary in color, that heights and weights differ, that arms and hands, feet and legs are not the same from one person to another, even that taste in dress and food is likely to differ from one individual to another. Yet no one denies that faces are faces, eyes are eyes, etc. However, at the same time that acceptance of physical dissimilarity is granted, attempts are made to fit all mental characteristics into the same patterns. Without diversity of personal qualities, we should indeed be bored beyond expression!

Diversity in Teaching

That all who call themselves teachers—regardless of position—are not what they call themselves is so true that it seems trite to mention the fact. Yet within the group whom we may in truth call *teachers* are represented such diverse qualities and approaches that one wonders how they all belong to the same profession.

Miss T. is a first grade teacher who sometimes bores those of her own age group because her conversation is filled with stories about her pupils. Every syllable she utters, however, seems to be swathed in the soft flannel of love. When she tells of her work with the child of a different race, she radiates her love for the child as a fellow human being. When

she works with the mentally retarded child, she instills within that child the faith that much can be accomplished. And it is! That child who has been considered unable to profit from a full day at school soon requests permission to remain throughout the school day, and between November and June the child learns to read so that she progresses through the primer level and is ready for first grade reading material.

At the high school level a coach meets a group of sullen football boys, disgruntled from poor experiences the previous season. Coach talks; players try not to listen; coach speaks the language of the boys; students begin to listen. Every boy is praised for his efforts; errors are pointed out but in a constructive, not a destructive manner. Soon belligerence and apathy are replaced by a desire to improve. The season ends with a fine record and, more important, with a group of youngsters devoted to roles of serious leadership.

Beneath the brusqueness of the college instructor's exterior there is a serious dedication to and belief in the importance of his subject field. When he talks about his area of work, he seems to be transformed into another person. The young man who sat in the back of the room so that he could sleep more peacefully finds that he is caught up into the realm of the instructor's joy about the material at hand. Conferences are arranged; barriers are broken; the instructor eagerly offers help. What brusqueness? It has disappeared in the human relationship that has been achieved.

In her magnificent treatise on the Book of Job,¹ Margaret Brackenbury Crook examines the idea of a teacher's attempting to explore a question of great interest

¹ Margaret B. Crook. *The Cruel God*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1959.

to his students: Why do the righteous suffer? By starting at a point understood by his students, the teacher stimulated interest. By appealing to their desire for a satisfactory answer, he kept interest at a high level. Through presentation of arguments for all sides, the master built that interest to fever pitch. According to Crook's theory, when the teacher had reached the point of greatest curiosity and excitement, he was cognizant of his students' attitudes and brought his explanation to a dramatic conclusion.

We cannot all be first grade teachers as Miss T. is; we cannot all coach football; we cannot all be college instructors dedicated to scholarly pursuit; we cannot all be dramatic geniuses exploring profound questions. Nor do we wish to be all of the same stamp! Each of us, however, can develop his own personal qualities to the precision of a Miss T., Coach, Professor, or Joban master; and each of us can radiate the loving quality exemplified by all of these committed persons.

In *The Divine Comedy* Dante places in Hell those whose desires lead away from all faith, hope, and *caritas*. In Paradise he places those who have achieved perfection of the three qualities. In Purgatory he spurs the laboring souls upward by constantly reminding them that faith and hope combined with unremitting, all-encompassing love will lead to the Earthly Paradise and achievement of Paradise proper. Yet each climbing soul must travel at his own rate of speed, committed to the goal of perfection.

As we labor with our commitment to teaching, we do well to consider seriously the three qualities which should characterize our work and the personal use we make of those qualities. Then perhaps we shall succeed in achieving the goal of producing well-educated men and women.

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