

Studying and Learning American Ideals

THESE are times of great change—social, economic, political and scientific. The economic, political and scientific are impersonal and are usually accepted as “trends of the times” but social change is always more difficult; in fact, social change is not likely unless there is a social revolution.

People tend to equate social change with their immediate personal lives or the lives of their families and thus react to local community, state, and federal efforts toward equal opportunity as attempts to infringe upon their personal lives. The local institutions, churches, clubs, and sometimes schools usually react as the individual reacts. Expressions like “this is our church, our club, our school” personalize these institutions and “others” are looked upon as “invaders into their private lives.”

A social revolution changes all this. Those who are secure and have sound values accept this change as inevitable and attempt to find ways of showing their commitment. Those who lack security and whose values are questionable will resist social change with everything at their command including violence.

But how does the positive person make his commitment known? Can he teach it?

How does he get the social institution to teach it?

He may recite need for national unity, and need for continuance to serve as leaders of free men of the world but with little persuasion, for these things are remote to the average individual.

The school as a tax-supported institution is the only local group with an obligation to all the people. Yet generally school administrators have been reluctant to carry out their responsibilities. Fear of the local power structure and often of the parents themselves is a primary reason for this timidity. Being out of tune with today's youth is another. Many school administrators are living in two worlds: the one of the first forty years of this century when there was no need to worry about the plight of the minorities for they were generally “invisible,” and the one of the postwar world that has moved so fast it is not worth the effort to catch up with it. The administrator therefore has become very conservative and often a reactionary. Many

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young staff members are discouraged or find themselves in difficulty if they attempt to involve their students in activities of commitment in the classroom.

To Be Committed . . .

What do we mean when we talk of commitment? What is it we want to teach? Verbally we have made commitments all our lives. When we read the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, we are committing ourselves to the ideals of our democratic concept. When we sing, "My Country, 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty, of Thee I Sing" or "And Crown Thy Good With Brotherhood," we are committing ourselves. But I am afraid there is no conscious awareness of such commitment. These words are more likely to be platitudes.

But a Negro woman on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus with tired feet refused to give her seat to a white man and a revolution began. What had been platitudes are with many Americans becoming commitments.

Nobody has referred to the actions of the past few years as an insurrection. It has been referred to only as a revolution which implies a change in the social order. The question of how do we accept this change and move on to the challenges being offered by a rapidly changing world is our immediate concern.

We in education are attempting to rationalize and educate. This will help but not as quickly as would implementation of the laws of the land.

We can pique the conscience of people, we can stir their sense of guilt. But we cannot get them to act. Some, of course; but the mass of Americans need more than words on a printed page.

To be committed is to act. Non-school groups and extracurricular activities have been more effective in direct action than the formal school. Let me cite three examples:

1. Eighty-five Y-Teens from Northern New England held a one-week conference at Lasell Junior College at the close of the school year. They came from hamlets and towns and cities. They were between the ages of 13 and 17. Their young professional group leaders came with them, 25 of them. Their first request was for the right to handle the responsibility of "lights-out"—that time of the day when emotions are high and mischief is afoot. This privilege was granted and they proved they could govern themselves. All week these young women sang the freedom songs, discussed America's domestic and foreign problems, visited Boston to see and hear at firsthand what the revolution was all about.

The theme they had chosen for the week was "Strength to lead and faith to follow." On the final day of the conference they accepted a rephrasing of their theme and agreed to complete the rephrased statement—"O God, give me strength to lead and faith to follow, for I believe—." These beliefs were written by them out under the trees and in their living groups (the eight girls and the adult leader with whom they had lived as a family group all week). Scattered through these living groups were ten Negro youngsters, and youngsters with names like Gomez, Callini, Kokolski, Shurtleff, Sweeney, and Smith. Youngsters who were tall and short, chubby and thin, blond and brunette.

That night in a candle-lighted ceremony under the stars these youngsters read their beliefs. These teen-agers have made their commitments. This is how
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ing profession needs to be working continually at the content of his own courses. His teaching should be as much his personal expression as is the painting to the painter or the novel to the novelist. He needs to be continually thinking about what he is doing—not relying on national reports, not waiting for those who are supposedly better informed than himself about the areas of subject matter in which he is teaching. Each teacher must take, as his personal mission, the perfection of his own style of teaching, the development of his own curriculum, so that he can become the chief critic of the curriculum of the national educational system, not simply leaving it to a national consensus to decide what is appropriate.

A 14 year old boy, in answer to a question from the Putney School on his application form for admission, said what he thought he wanted to do with his education: "To make a valuable contribution with my life," he said, "is the only way I can assure myself that I have value."

I think he is right. It is the only assurance we have for believing that what we are doing makes a difference.

I wish to return to the statement with which I began. Each of us lives in a public and a private world at the same time. The task of each, if he is to be a true teacher, is to enrich his own private world in such a way that he has something to give to the public world by reason of which it may be enhanced. I urge therefore that we think of the development of humanity and the development of teaching and teachers in the same set of terms. The man who learns to understand something about the structure of nature, of man and of society is by that fact more fully human. The man who learns to put together a body of knowl-

edge about nature, man or society, not only because these matters interest him but because he wishes to share with others what it is he has discovered, is by that fact a teacher. He then has a double responsibility before the world—to continue to add to his store of knowledge and to continue the search for ways in which others may more readily come to know what he knows.

In that way he continues to be himself—that most difficult of all the arts.

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you teach commitment, by having an opportunity to study and to live the American ideals. Schools, too, could do this if they would.

2. Five hundred high school student council members and school club leaders met at the University of Michigan to talk about their role as youth leaders in the present social upheaval. They heard a speaker talk about the shortcomings of United States Information Libraries in the Orient. Materials in these libraries offered little information about those Americans who were nonwhite and non-Christian. At the close of the speech the students sent a telegram to Washington and within ten days received an answer stating the matter would be looked into. This was a commitment. Who taught this and how?

3. A group of ultraconservative Americans in a suburban area of one of our prominent cities threatened a school board and forced it to cancel an invitation to the commencement speaker, a Negro professor from a large university.

All the mass media in the area, particularly radio and television, deplored this action, so that a substitute could not be found. It was finally agreed a school

official would give the address. However, the senior class on the morning of commencement said that if they could not have the speaker of their choice, they would take their diplomas that morning and go home. As a result of the action of these students the board called an emergency meeting and revised its previous actions. The original speaker agreed to speak and the commencement was held.

The following are excerpts from a letter that was received by the speaker from the class valedictorian who had left the stage in tears on the night of commencement:

This is just a note to tell you "Thanks" for being so wonderful about commencement at _____ . We, the class, sincerely appreciate your action. We realize what an insult it [the earlier action] was to you and your race and we want to apologize for it.

... I'm sure none of us will ever forget it or you. Under ordinary circumstances, if this incident hadn't been brought up, our graduation wouldn't have been half as meaningful and we wouldn't have been as good a group for the world outside.

Our class has always fought as a body for what we felt was right whether it was a small rule or the millage assessment for the school. Certainly this struggle has shown us all the importance of continuing education.

The school superintendent and faculty were supportive of the students in their action. This was commitment. Who taught it? How? Answers to these questions may contradict previous indictment of schools and school administrators. The only thing to be said here is that such positive instances are too few and too far between. Schools in their formal programs could, if they would, speed up the process and touch more young American lives.

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