

Commitment: To What and Why?

Kimball Wiles

ONE night, after a long day of meetings, four educators sat in a hotel room. One turned to another and with complete sincerity said, "Jack, you are the most committed man I know. How did you get that way?"

After several bantering exchanges, the one questioned answered, "I don't know that I like to be considered committed. I hope I'm open to new data and new truth." It quickly became evident that one of the difficulties educated men have in discussing life-directing beliefs is the assumption that intellectual rigidity and enslavement are components of commitment.

No one wants to be committed in the sense that he accepts a belief that he will hold to in spite of all contrary evidence. For us to be able to give serious thought to the schools' role in the task of developing commitment, it is necessary to use a phrase like "commitment without closure." Such a phrase makes explicit to all that commitment means the current interpretation of evidence that gives direction to our lives but which is subject to modification in light of new data.

The 1960's have demanded that each of us become clearer concerning our commitments. J. F. Kennedy asked each to declare himself. The Peace Corps offered the opportunity for some of us to implement some basic values. In 1963 all were forced to take a stand on the issue of human rights. The proposal for

a "war on poverty" calls for additional clarification of our position.

To be realistic we must recognize that each of us holds beliefs that are in contradiction. We have absorbed them as we grew up in a plural culture. Perhaps we are more "stuffed men" than "hollow men." We have been indiscriminate in our intake without effort to integrate our ideals into a harmonious whole.

The choices that cause me difficulty, and I assume this is true for the reader also, are the decisions in the areas in which I hold conflicting values. It is easy to be for democracy and against communism. It is not difficult to decide against aggression and for consultation. Yet decisions such as those concerning the reading of the Bible in school or the transporting of pupils from one district to another to attain integrated schools are not as easy.

Conflicting Values

Each of us must accept that we do and will hold opposing values. Yet if we are to be effective as individuals, we must seek to understand our commitments and establish for ourselves a priority among them. It may not be the best priority. It may be one we will change, but it is essential that we seek to establish such a priority if we are to have any significance to ourselves or others. Without a priority we become indif-

ferent because we care equally about so many things. Since we care about so many things, it is not important to dare to be different or to exert much energy over anything. If we do not have a priority of values, we become resigned and hopeless because we know we cannot do something about everything we value—so why try?

It is the Fourth of July as I write—a day for examination of commitment. Although few flags fly in our town, today calls for more soul searching than usual because the Civil Rights Bill became the law of the land yesterday.

A few days ago, four of us, returning from the beach, stopped briefly at a roadside picnic table. Within two minutes after our arrival, a young man in a sports car, flying a Confederate flag, roared to a stop, gave us a careful scrutiny and drove away. Three times in the next five miles we were “inspected” by young vigilantes giving of their time, money and energy for values they deem to be important.

As we underwent this surveillance, I thought, “You have been talking about the importance of commitment if life is to have meaning and the individual is to have identity. You have said that a person is what he is willing to live and die for, that a man without commitment is hollow and worthless except as someone’s tool, that schools should devote a major portion of their effort to developing commitment. But these young men are committed. They are willing to wound, maim and even kill for their beliefs. And be wounded or killed. Asking for commitment is not enough. One must ask ‘what commitment?’”

One percent of all the students at a major university volunteered for the Peace Corps last December. Thousands of youth march in civil rights demon-

strations or engage in “sit-ins.” Hundreds of college youth give their leisure hours to tutor disadvantaged children. Many forego their summer vacations and risk grave personal danger to assist in voter registration.

Not all the values in the American heritage are consistent. Our forefathers sought to protect the rights of all and they took the law into their hands. They sought to promote the general welfare and to protect property rights. They believed in unity and strength and in states’ rights and balance of power. The groups described in the preceding paragraphs are all in the American tradition. Where does youth get assistance in evaluating and selecting the portions of our heritage worthy of their commitment?

Viewpoint Toward Life

The July issue of *Esquire* contained an article entitled “The New Sentimentality” by David Newman and Robert Benton. These writers claim that the emerging viewpoint toward life and living has as its tenets: personal interest as the abiding motivation instead of ideals, causes or goals that are in some way beneficial to all; self indulgence as a virtue since it tells us the truth about ourselves, our drives and our appetites; pride in ability to change instead of pride in ability to maintain a firm position; commitment to self instead of to something bigger than one’s self. Although the picture they paint of new beliefs of our civilization must have disturbed many of their readers, the interpretation is supported in part by Dan Dodson’s study of suburban youth. His conclusion was that they are calm, cool and uncommitted—unwilling to take a stand for a cause that might interfere with their upward mobility.

The development of the intellect cannot be the only function of public schools in the United States. Educators must be equally concerned about the development of commitment that gives purpose and meaning to life. If schools produce men and women without commitment to democratic values, the United States will lose its sense of direction and strength of purpose and will be subverted by those within or without who are opposed to equality of opportunity, free inquiry and objective evaluation of ideas and procedures. Men who "know how" but not "why" are easy

prey for those who would make them puppets and pawns.

When you read this editorial, it will be October. Another year of decision will be in progress. *Educational Leadership* will have begun an attempt to put a sharper focus on values. It is hoped that the theme "Schools and the Social Revolution" will help each of us think through our values and our responsibilities in this period of change, conflict and confusion.

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Schools and the Social Revolution

Robert R. Leeper

THAT a social revolution is now under way cannot be denied. Its existence is documented in each day's headlines and broadcasts. Through sit-ins, picketing, drives for voter registration, protest meetings, petitions for redress of grievances, and other nonviolent demonstrations, we are having the needs of hitherto silent minorities laid squarely upon the consciences of all citizens. The burden of the haunting freedom songs cannot be ignored. Symptomatic of the revolution, too, are many of the more violent events, such as the riots in several of our cities, the bombings, and the mysterious disappearance or death of persons working for civil rights.

We are conscious today, as never before, of the intensified efforts of individuals, of groups, of peoples to improve their lot. They seek to enhance their condition in life, to attain for themselves and their children a better chance than might otherwise be theirs. Only such an idealistic goal could justify the hazards and

the sacrifices entailed in such a revolt against "things as they are."

In a very real sense, the social revolution we are now experiencing is part of the long and continuing struggle of man for freedom and for the right to guide his own destiny in concert with his fellow human beings. A definition of "revolution" is "a sudden, radical or complete change." Such is the nature of the present phenomenon that in some respects it is difficult to gauge its depth and the far-reaching quality of change that it represents. This movement is at once local, state, national and worldwide.

Scholars have studied and analyzed the onset, the middle period and the outcome of many revolutions. They recognize, in retrospect, the severity of circumstance and condition which brings about a popular revolt. They also recognize the critical points at which the original motives of the revolution hang in balance. At such points the ideals of the revolution either are adhered to or are re-

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