

## Helping Young People Discover Commitment

I AM much concerned these days with the question of commitment and involvement. Finding satisfying commitments has become almost a casualty of our way of life, so that many social scientists are studying this question. For example, Rollo May discusses the problem of encounter. Carl Rogers talks about involvement. Martin Buber speaks of dialogues, Maslow talks about commitment, and Victor Frankl is concerned with the problem of helping people discover meaning. I have been using all of these terms interchangeably.

What I mean by commitment and involvement is the ability to enter into meaningful relationships. It is a question of the discovery of purpose and point in life and the finding of fulfillment in the things that one is doing. We know there is simply no action and no learning of any consequence without some kind of involvement on the part of the individual.

Once it was easier to develop involvement. In a frontier society, with not enough food, clothing and shelter, involvement was *given* to people and they were firmly committed without much choice. The problem is different in a replete society. In a society so wealthy it has the majestic impertinence to believe it can eliminate poverty—the problem of finding something to be committed to,

something to be involved with, something that makes life worth while becomes a much more difficult question. What shall man live for in so rich a society? What shall he die for? What shall he work for? What shall he give himself to?

### Tough Questions

These are tough questions for adults. They are terrible questions for young people because they find themselves confronted with a society which has entered into a conspiracy to keep them from getting involved or committed to anything. We are embarrassed by our overproduction of children. We cannot very well plow them under like we do with cotton, or bury them in caves like we do with butter, or sell the surplus to the Russians like we do with wheat. We do not know what to do with them and, as a result, they are having a hard time finding any place where they belong. For example, we have five percent unemployment among our adult population, while with young people it is 18 percent! Our young people find themselves in a world which rejects them right and left. We prepare them better and better to do less and less. We keep them out of adult things just as long as possible. We tell them to go away and don't bother us.

The matter is especially difficult with teen-agers. The very word "teen-ager" is practically a "cuss word" in our society. We just don't like them. We have practically driven them out of our society. Their reaction to this is to build a society of their own, with their own music, their own language, their own dress, their own codes of ethics, their own traditions, their own customs, their own symbols of prestige and status. They have developed their own because there is no place for them in the society in which we are living.

We cannot afford this waste. On humanitarian grounds the loss in human potential involved in this rejection is tremendous. The loss in human happiness is even greater. If it is not enough to be concerned about the matter because we love and respect our young people, there is another very practical reason why we had better be interested. That is, because it is downright dangerous not to be concerned.

One of the things we found out about the young men in Korea who succumbed to brainwashing was, that those who did give way were young men who *had no commitment or involvement of their own*. If you have to argue with the Russians, for whom their way of life is practically a religion, and you do not have a strong commitment of your own, then you are a sitting duck to be changed.

People who do not feel they really belong to our society see no reason why they should support it. If you do not feel that you belong to the club, there is no reason why you should pay your dues or look out for the members. If the club we are talking about happens to be the human race, and young people feel they do not belong, that is a very dangerous condition indeed.

Young people do not *want* to be un-

committed. They want to be involved. They want to be committed, and they seek such commitment when it is possible for them.

At our university, many young people have offered their help with problems of cultural deprivation in the Negro children of the community. They have volunteered many hours to help some Negro child enrich his experiences and pick up some of the cultural aspects that he is not getting elsewhere. These young people are having the time of their lives. The other day one of these young ladies came to see me after class and said: "When I entered this class, I listened to a lot of these people and the things they say about education. I didn't think it would be worth much. But two weeks ago I started working with a little Negro girl on the other side of town, and I have decided that teaching is for me!" Her eyes were shining and the look on her face expressed the joy she felt in being committed to something.

### Principles of Commitment

I believe our schools are crucial in helping children find commitment. We cannot wash our hands of our responsibilities. I am not talking just about mental health ideas. Youngsters cannot even learn mathematics without being committed to it, or English or any other subject. Even the child's grasp of the curriculum cannot come about without some opportunity really to get committed to the subject matter. Somehow we have to find better ways of developing this commitment and of filling this gap which has come about in our society. Unhappily, much of what we do in schools seems

---

Arthur W. Combs is Professor of Education, University of Florida, Gainesville.

almost expressly designed to discourage children from getting committed. I would like to suggest four principles about commitment which may help to point some directions.

### *Commitment and Discovery*

First, commitment is a matter for discovery. It cannot be given. It cannot be taught. It has to be learned. It is a personal matter. It is a personal discovery that some idea, some person, some thing is enhancing and fulfilling. It is a question of being challenged but not threatened.

There is a difference between being challenged and threatened. An individual feels challenged when he confronts a situation he thinks he has a chance of dealing with. He feels threatened when he is confronted with a demand that he does not feel he is capable of fulfilling. Our problem is how to help him feel challenged without feeling threatened. Yet this is not a question of how it looks to you and me. It is a question of how it looks to him! We need to understand that what is challenging is not determined by some outsider, but by how it seems to the individual.

Here is one source of the dropout problem. Dropouts are young people who are not finding anything to commit themselves to in school. Perhaps sadder still are the ones who sit in classes day after day but for all practical purposes have dropped out because they have no commitment left to the program in which they are trapped. Whatever threatens or embarrasses, whatever degrades, whatever cuts down a person's conception of himself, is not only humiliating; it is also stultifying and stupefying. Such acts actually destroy intelligence and have no place in our public schools.

### *Eliminating Barriers to Commitment*

A second principle: We must systematically search out the barriers that lie in the way of people getting committed. People will become committed if they can but we have erected an unbelievable number of barriers that stand in the way of getting committed.

One way to find out about these barriers is to listen to young people. As part of my homework for this paper, one of the things I did was ask my sophomore students at the university: Why is it so hard to become committed? How is it that young people in other countries riot over politics and foreign affairs but our young people riot over co-eds' panties? I was astonished at the list these young people gave me. They said:

"The reason we don't get committed is that nobody ever believes we are important or count. Nobody has any respect for our beliefs. The only choices we are confronted with demand conformity. They feed us a 'pabulum' diet; it is all chewed over and there is nothing left in it of any interest.

"Everybody is afraid to let us try. Nobody really cares. Students and teachers are enemies; they behave as though they didn't like each other. We never talk about ideas, only about more and more details. Grades, grades, grades! That's all we hear, and everybody behaves as though that's all that matters. A college education is only of value to get your union card. You don't ever dare to question the teachers' ideas."

Most shocking of all was this statement which all agreed upon: "The things that are worth getting committed to are not the things that get you ahead!" I think that is a terrible indictment of our world.

We must find ways of searching out barriers to commitment and of rooting

out these barriers. Years ago I discovered, quite by accident, how to do this. I was adviser for the High-Y in our high school. The school had a regulation that any money obtained from students during the year had to be returned to the students somehow before the end of the year. So, our club came up to the end of the year with \$35 in the treasury. What could we do with it?

Somebody suggested that we could give a party for the school. Another said, "Well, it ought to be for everybody." I said, "Let's see if we can figure out a way of getting everybody into the act." Someone else suggested, "Well, we could have a dance, but if we do have a dance, the people who can't dance won't come." Then another person said, "Well, maybe we could have a dance that everybody will come to."

We thought: "What kind of dance would that be?" This was a large city high school and nobody in this high school knew how to square dance, so far as we knew, so somebody came up with the idea, "Let's have a square dance." And that is what we agreed upon.

Then somebody said, "Well, even if we have a square dance, some people won't come because they don't have the right clothes." The reply was, "Well, this is a country dance; we won't let them in if they look too sharp." Somebody else said, "Well, they won't come if they aren't able to get a date," and somebody else suggested, "Well, we could let the boys in one door and let the girls in the other on opposite sides of the gym, and nobody would know who had a date."

Then somebody suggested: "Some of the people won't come because they won't have enough money and they would want to buy the girl they were with something after the dance was over." So we said: "Let's feed them at

the dance." A committee was set up to enlist the aid of mothers in baking cakes. When we got all through with this, someone said, "We've still got the problem: Some won't come because they can't afford it."

So after much figuring, we found out how much it would cost us for the band, made an estimate of how many people we thought would come, and finally got the price of the dance down to eight cents.

Everyone told us, "It will never work!" but when the night of the dance came, we had the largest crowd that had ever been in the gymnasium since the school was built. In fact, we had so many people that nobody could dance because there was not any room and instead of losing \$35 we made \$50.

I have tried a similar approach with my classes at the University of Florida asking, "What are the factors that get in the way of student commitment to these ideas?" This has resulted in major changes in the traditional practices of lecturing, grading, assignments and discussion programs. It has also produced innovations like personal letters to the instructor, planning committees which tell me what to lecture about, individual projects of great ingenuity and the creation of an atmosphere as free of threat and full of challenge as we can make it. The result has exceeded my fondest hopes in student commitment even in classes as large as one hundred and fifty.

#### *Commitment from Relationships*

A third thing we know about commitment is that it comes about through relationships with significant people, especially people who care. Every psychotherapist knows this.

It is no accident that the very best

cure we have found for juvenile delinquency is marriage. Of all the things associated with delinquents who get better, getting married seems more effective and more certain than any other one thing that we know about. When you have somebody who cares, somebody to live for, somebody to share things with, you are taken out of the boredom that is the basis of most delinquency. Juvenile delinquents are simply bored to death. The reason they are bored is that they cannot find anything that is meaningful with which or with whom to find satisfying and fulfilling relationships.

All this is not only true with respect to people. It is true of ideas and of subject matter, too. Learning itself is a social process. The youngsters know this, too. Despite our best efforts to tell them to work on their own, they still insist on sharing things with each other, in spite of our apparent determination to make education a solitary business. They know you cannot get along that way and so they share things with each other, sometimes, even in spite of us, answers on examinations.

We are beginning to discover that human interaction is not just a nice idea. Satisfying human relationships are not just a nice way to live. They are vital to living. In recent experiments, it has been found even monkeys who have never seen or entered into relationships with other monkeys cannot be made to reproduce. Apparently, they do not know they are monkeys, unless they have some kind of experience with another monkey that helps them to discover who they are and what they are.

We cannot afford dehumanized schools. We have sold ourselves on the idea that in order to have a rich curriculum we must have large schools, and I guess that is true. The only difficulty is

that people get lost in large schools, lost and lonely. We must find ways of reintroducing human relationships on a person-to-person basis, in our beautiful, huge new plants. When I was at Syracuse University years ago, we used to have a winter carnival. All the fraternities would build snow sculptures on the lawn. I remember one that showed a large building marked "Syracuse University." Going in one door was a freshman with his little green cap on his head, and coming out the other side was an IBM card complete with a diploma. This was a cry of protest from the young people who were going through this great university!

#### *Commitment and Responsibility*

It is necessary for us to recognize that teaching for commitment is a relationship. I would point out, however, that you cannot have a relationship with a nonentity. Teachers have to *be* somebody and have to *act* like somebody and have to *stand for* something and to share their humanness with young people. Encouraging young people to get involved is not going to get results unless we ourselves value involvement, because each of us behaves in terms of what he thinks is important in spite of himself. As the old Indian said, "What you do speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say."

A beautiful example of this occurred recently in a fifth grade. At the end of the day the youngsters in the class got to talking about love for half an hour or so. Following this the teacher said to the youngsters, "For tomorrow, I want you to write me a letter about our discussion and what you think about it." One of the letters she got from a little boy said: "Dear Miss X: It sure surprised me when we talked about love in our

class today. I learned a lot of things about how people feel about each other. It sure surprised me, though, to talk about love in our class. I never knew you could talk about things in school before that you didn't get grades for!"

I think it is a sad commentary when what is perhaps the most important subject in the world is not regarded as part of the curriculum. If we do not think it is important for young people to become involved, they simply will not do so, at least not about what we hope they will.

We have to find ways of giving young people responsibility for their own learning and for their own direction. This means we have to involve them in planning. It means our schools must become more and more and more child-centered rather than less and less as some people would have us believe. A well-known educator once said, "Isn't it interesting that we give children more choices in kindergarten than at any other time they are in school?" Presumably the younger a child is, the less he is capable of making intelligent choices, and the older he gets and the further he goes through school, the less choices we give him until by the time he is working for a doctor's degree he hasn't got any choice whatever.

Responsibility and involvement are learned from being *given* responsibility. They are never learned from withholding it. Let us take the example of the teacher who leaves the room and goes down to the office. She says to the youngsters, "I'm going to leave you for a few minutes. I want you to be good kids till I get back." She comes back to find the room is in bedlam. She walks in and says, "I will never leave you alone again!" By this act she has robbed these children of their only opportunity to learn how to

behave when the teacher is not there. You cannot learn how to behave when the teacher is not there if the teacher never leaves you! When we are too afraid that children may make mistakes, involvement does not happen, because we do not dare let them try.

### Building Confidence

Sometimes students back away from responsibility and involvement when we try to give it to them. They do not want to take it. We must not be misled by this. It only means that they have not had enough responsibility. Responsibility and involvement are learned like everything else. You have to have simple responsibilities to build up confidence to deal with big ones. Even an adult who is given a responsibility that he has not had an opportunity to build skills and confidence for handling, is quite likely to feel anxiety-stricken and to back away from it. Involvement and commitment are learned from having opportunities adjusted to the individual's state of readiness.

One of the things that have been said about a genius is that "a genius is a guy who likes to get in trouble for the sheer joy of getting out again." I think we need to encourage our young people to get into more trouble. I mean this very seriously. I think we have leaned over so far in the opposite direction in not ever giving them opportunities to try, that for a while it would be good to go in the other direction, good for all of us concerned.

Somehow we have to find better ways of getting across to young people the idea that it is good to look and fun to try and that it is all right to be different. We are not doing this well at the present time.

Copyright © 1964 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.