



Change—the Only Constant

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HERACLITUS held that change is the basic condition of life and that there is nothing permanent except change. "You cannot step twice into the same river," he observed, "for new water is always flowing in."

The Omnipresence of Change

Almost a fourth of a millennium later, William Randolph Hearst echoed Heraclitus' general point of view when he noted that "whatever begins to be tranquil is gobbled up by something that is not tranquil."¹ John Henry Cardinal Newman said simply and succinctly, "To live is to change." And R. M. MacIver has written:

All composite things begin at a time, endure for a time, change in time and end at a time. . . .

A person can travel and return. But nothing created, nothing animate or inanimate, can go back in time to where—or to what—it was before. . . .

Even the most enduring of things is changing imperceptibly every moment, though it may be years or centuries or ages before the change is manifest. . . .

¹ Quoted in: Eric Hoffer. *The Ordeal of Change*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963. p. 67.

Change is insistent in all our experience, change in ourselves, change in our condition and in our relationships. . . .²

Continuous and unrelenting change has confronted man from the misty dawn of his existence to the present, and the only certainty in man's foreseeable future is that there will be change followed by more change. Today is not the same as yesterday, and tomorrow will differ from today. Or, as Shakespeare phrased it in *As You Like It*:

'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine;
And after one more hour 'twill be eleven.

To borrow and adapt a current idiom, change is the "name of the game." Man may play the game in different ways and with varied intensity, but play it he must.

Best Source of Change

My reading of material containing theorizing about and research on change leads me to believe that the most meaningful and enduring change comes from within an

² R. M. MacIver. *The Challenge of the Passing Years*. New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1963. pp. 92, 6, 4, and 16, respectively. Copyright © 1962 by Simon & Schuster, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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individual. He must struggle on his own or labor in voluntary concert with others, and must see a real, personal need if he is to alter his behavior or some portion of the human condition which touches his life directly. Changes forced upon a person from the outside—through coarse or refined coercion, indoctrination, inculcation, manipulation, or other means—are less likely to take root and to flourish than those the individual desires for himself.

Edmund W. Sinnott notes that:

The most distinctive traits a person has are not so much what he is, in body and mind, as the things and qualities he values. These, in a sense, *are* what he is. His physical life, his behavior, his philosophy, and his religion will finally depend on what it is he *wants*. . . . If [values and changes] are imposed upon him entirely from without, he may truly be said to have no real character of his own, for what he is bears only the stamp of his environment. . . .³

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once commented that the man wearing a pair of shoes knows better than anyone else where the shoes pinch. And so it is with change. The individual who perceives the need for a personal or social change is most likely to conceive and augment an appropriate strategy for change.

The person who does not desire a change or who cannot accept a plan for change framed by someone else will be a reluctant bride at best or may not show up for the wedding at all. Ideally, when a sufficient number of individuals share in common a commitment to a particular reform and pool their energies, talents, and resources, purposeful modifications can take place on a larger scale.

An obvious illustration of this kind of situation in my own area of education occurs to me. When a number of social studies teachers in a school district believe that a fresh program is needed to replace the existing curriculum, they work together in a dedicated, energetic fashion to bring about a change. The behavior of these teachers would

³ Edmund W. Sinnott. "Spirit." In: Whit Burnet, editor. *The Human Spirit*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960. p. 355.

almost certainly be different if, instead, they were directed by someone in the central office to come up with new offerings *he* wants, as is often the case in other situations.

Three Viewpoints Regarding Change

● Sociological and anthropological studies of the American culture and society which I have read and considered over the past twenty years and experiences I have had for an even longer period of time have given me a certain impression. Too many Americans apparently wish to keep things "just as they are" or to change other people instead of seeking and bringing about changes in themselves and their own situations. They are apparently eager to freeze others or to shape others into their own image rather than being willing to encourage and help others to become their own best selves as the others define those selves.

Such persons have failed to consider, let alone accept, the conclusion of Fray Luis de Leon that "The beauty of life is nothing but this, that each should act in conformity with his nature and his business." Or, as some members of our younger generation might put it, "Everybody ought to have a chance to do his own thing."

Many have not contemplated and internalized George Bernard Shaw's pithy precept: "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same."⁴ They have not discovered, as I am slowly finding out in the autumn years of my life, that *one* Ray Muessig is enough (He may be too much!) and that no others are needed.

They are better talkers than listeners, sellers than buyers, tellers than doers, slavers than abolitionists. They accept only those alterations in ends and means which conform to their own well-established habits, prejudices, and desires. They label all proponents of changes which they have not considered or which are inharmonious with the

⁴ George Bernard Shaw. "Maxims for Revolutionists." In the appendix to *Man and Superman*. New York: Bantam Books, 1959. p. 215. By permission of The Society of Authors, London, as agent for the Bernard Shaw estate.

status quo or the Establishment as "dissidents," "oddballs," "boat-rockers," "agitators," "militants," or "anarchists." Their approach to those who tender alternatives for individual and societal change is typified by the currently ubiquitous bumper strip which reads, "America: Love it or leave it!" and which implies that it is unpatriotic to want to amend, amplify, replace, or improve anything in our existing culture.

In short, they distrust, dislike, and fear the individuality, diversity, pluralism, open-mindedness, and open expression which are so essential for a healthy, viable, progressive democracy. They want the schools and the other agencies of socialization and communication to mold passive, conforming common people who will be like them and have their needs and wants, not active, nonconforming, uncommon people such as Horace Mann, Dorothea Dix, Clarence Darrow, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If they have their way, our nation will be peopled by authoritarian personalities, true believers, and organization men who will willingly escape from freedom in exchange for security.

● Of course there are other Americans—both educators and non-educators, including neo-Platonists, utopians, paternalists, latter-day Reconstructionists, Behaviorists, programmers, egocentric or ethnocentric social reformers and planners, and self-styled change agents—who want to use and control the school and other institutions to bring about specific social changes. These people claim to have a master plan, more or less, for the future. They feel that youth especially should be instilled with a definite vision of tomorrow and should be goaded to mount a charge and lead the country to a *sure, complete, and final* victory.

Such people view teachers, principals, supervisors, curriculum directors, superintendents, and other "public servants" as mere interchangeable employees who should not think for themselves or enable youth to make their own decisions. They operate on the assumption that tomorrow will be exactly what they want it to be; that all change can be anticipated, blueprinted, and implemented

in an orderly way; and that human beings are pieces to be moved on a giant chessboard according to a fixed strategy.

Their tunnel vision keeps them from seeing that man will encounter and initiate a myriad of changes in the years ahead which no one can predict with any degree of surety. Their conviction, enthusiasm for their own pat design, and disdain for others who are uncertain about what will come and what should be done to meet changes and launch improvements make it impossible for them to visualize human relationships in which there are not always clearly the leaders and the led, the philosopher kings and the subservient warriors and workers, the elite and the masses.

Such people cannot imagine a situation where there could be elected, temporary, rotating leadership, in which individuals selected for their special talents and skills would function as facilitators and resource persons who would help others to reach individual and group goals identified through a democratic dialogue. As with the people previously described, these persons cannot accept the possibility that the more change is desired and studied at a personal, grass-roots level, the better its chance of success and survival. For them, change must always come from the "top" on "down," and any leader-initiated *change* is automatically equated with *progress*.

● There is a third group of Americans, doubtless a minority, whose position I accept. These people believe that change—as with other phenomena and human concerns—should be surveyed, studied, and pondered in terms of its consequences for the individual and the society. They hold that the person or persons confronted by or desirous of a change should have a voice in determining how it will be approached. They are opposed to the idea that the school or other bodies should endorse and pursue a monistic plan for a change or for preserving the status quo.

They maintain that the school should be a place where individual students and groups of learners sharing common needs

and interests can reflectively examine problems, frustrations, aspirations, proposals, and values associated with change. They believe that the school should be an open, honest, flexible, permissive, relevant, dynamic, human, and humane laboratory which helps pupils to become increasingly autonomous, self-directing, self-actualizing individuals capable of identifying and pursuing their own aims within a living societal context.

They trust that youth will discover for themselves that change may be desirable or undesirable, or, as is frequently the case, a mixture of the positive and the negative, and that no change comes with a written guarantee of lasting satisfaction. They hope that youth, after deliberation, will develop vision, commitment, responsibility, courage, patience, sensitivity, and other personal attributes which may serve them in times of pressing change; but they are unwilling to impose a crystallized set of their own beliefs or those of others on learners.

They posit that an individual can become a "part author of his own history" and can "make the changed reality conform to his intentions," if he cares enough and tries

hard enough.⁵ They conclude, as did William Ernest Henley in his poem "Invictus," that wherever and whenever possible each person should be the master of his fate and the captain of his soul.

The Task Ahead

Most of us can agree that change is the only constant, though we view change and what should be done about it in the school and elsewhere in different ways. But we are all in this together, and we must do our individual and cooperative best to see it through. Perhaps we can capture something of the pluck and perseverance of Captain R. F. Scott, who penned these words just before the end came to his tragic expedition:

We mean to see the game through with a proper spirit, but it's tough work to be pulling harder than we ever pulled in our lives for long hours, and to feel that the progress is so slow. . . .⁶ □

⁵ MacIver, *op cit.*, pp. 110 and 111, respectively.

⁶ Robert F. Scott. *Scott's Last Expedition*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1957. p. 404.

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