

The Larger Question: A New Sense of Common Identity

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ON JULY 20, 1969, we put a period to the first phase of a new era in this country. The moon landing was our answer to the question of whether we could mobilize our resources for the kind of achievement that seemed, after Sputnik, to be needed to restore our feeling of competence and indeed our sense of safety.

Yet that footstep, fateful as it was, came late in the new era of national regeneration. Already other concerns loomed larger in our consciousness than those resolved by Apollo 11. On July 20, as we looked at our success in space, almost all of us compared it to our failure at home. "If we can land a man on the moon," we said to ourselves and to one another, "then surely . . ."

And we have begun to think together, more earnestly than ever, about the size of the effort it will take to regain peace . . . eradicate or reduce poverty . . . build new bases of understanding among our component racial and ethnic strains . . . offer more meaningful goals and roles for youth . . . control a careening economy . . . stop the deadly pollution of our environment . . . re-plan and rebuild our great but decaying cities. . . .

One thing we can be sure of is that if we are to succeed in doing something about these problems, we must try for a new definition of community and a consequent new sense of common identity. We can be sure,

too, that as our society tries for a new model of the American, we in the schools will be in the midst of the effort.

We Are in It Now—If Not Too Far

In truth, we are in it now, for our society has already, if perhaps slowly and meagerly, declared itself to some extent in behalf of a higher level of public conscience. A good many new provisions for meeting unmet needs have been made by government in this decade. And for some time the schools have been trying to do more for the disadvantaged than in the past.

Our attempts may not as yet have come to much. We may have reason to feel better at this point about our impulses than about our results. With a little help from our critics, we may find in looking back that even our impulses were open to some question. Our short courses in sociology may have defined ends for us that, while well meaning in spirit, turned out in practice to look very much like middle class meddling.¹ We saw ourselves as needing to assess and alter as we could parent-child relationships, outlooks on learning and attitudes toward school, patterns of gratification, concepts of time, im-

¹ Ben B. Seligman notes this approach as an example of middle class *noblesse oblige*, in: *Permanent Poverty: An American Syndrome*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968.

ages of self, and even patterns of language.

We may have been learning, we may decide, more about changing *them* than about changing *us*; or settling too easily for learning how to understand the children of the poor and empathize with them (attitude is everything, we have been telling some of our teachers-to-be) instead of persisting in the very tough task of finding out how to teach children more successfully. "We'll be the parents to our children," some of these parents are beginning to say to us. "Why don't you be the teachers?" And they are expecting results that so far we have not been able to provide through our modest missionary ventures.

We are also already trying out a variety of curriculum modifications that we think may assist in bolstering up the search for personal identity among ethnic groups. We need to explore the dimensions of such modifications, to watch for and weigh results.

Socialization—Toward What Ends?

But to return to the theme of this paper: A major concern, on which all of our other school efforts may well depend, as may the direction of our society as a whole, is the redefinition of what it means to be an American. Schools, we have always contended, serve as the bonding device in a democracy like ours. Certainly they are the primary formal institution for political socialization of the young. The proper fulfilling of this role of theirs is thus central at all times to the well-being of society and at a time of disunity becomes critical.

Political socialization in normal times may have seemed to require little more of the schools, as the Hess study² indicates (data from 1961-62), than to support the home and society in general by helping children generalize and transfer respect for properly constituted authority from the parent and the teacher to the policeman and the President. The young grow into learning how

to behave as a citizen chiefly through practice in service and self-government activities, safety patrols and student councils, for example; and they store up information along the way about how government is organized at its several levels. The ends of such socialization are more or less obvious to everybody, more or less taken for granted.

However, in times of national crisis and division, the question of ends (as well perhaps as processes) may be reopened. The problem right now that is most disturbing to many of us in education is really a question we may not have asked ourselves out loud since the 'thirties: "Socialization—for what?"

Efforts to find an answer to this question cannot be delayed. We may not know where our society is headed, but some think they do. In a sample survey of secondary school principals last year, two-thirds of those from urban areas reported experience with some kind of student disturbance, as did more than half the principals of rural schools.

Our problem, then, is one of trying to rethink the ends of political socialization in ways that may contribute to the creation of a new model of the American, beyond myth, we would hope, and above mockery, we would insist.

Some of the Ways We Might Go

What are some of the ways we might go? Based on one reading of the signs and an obviously limited awareness of the full range of possibilities, those offered here are only conjectural. But we need all of us to think as well as we can on this matter and to share what we think.

● *Should we rewrite American history?*
A fairer representation of the contributions of minority groups needs to be included in any school study of our past, we are all agreed. Perhaps some episodes in our history, like the resettlement of Indians on reservations, the reconstruction era, and possibly even the Mexican War, may need retelling. More attention also may need to go to the role and achievements of dissenters, reform movements, and third parties.

² Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney. *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967.

● *Should we revive the problem-centered curriculum?* A core program today could draw on a broader base of accessible study resources from fields like economics, anthropology, sociology, human ecology, and political science. Our problems, too, would strike young learners as more relevant now than perhaps they did in a quieter and less self-conscious era.

● *Should we center more attention on value development?* Sometimes in the past we may have been a little afraid that by dwelling too long on concepts like freedom, justice, equality, community, and peace, we might maudlinize their meaning. But we are newly aware of the centrality of such concepts in political behavior, their cruciality in determining choices. Perhaps we are readier to face up to the straight-out teaching of or for values.

● *Should we settle for basic social insights?* More than ever we are aware that there is a body of knowledge about how men behave as political creatures, a content that might be usefully taught to develop insights into power and its exercise and into such aspects of social behavior as conflict and confrontation.³

● *Should we educate more directly for human sensitivity?* In adult society, we are learning how to reeducate ourselves to become more expressive and authentic in our relations to one another. There would seem to be hints here for the education of the young in better interpersonal and intergroup relations as well as for the fuller development of self.

● *Should we provide experiences in political action?* Apprenticeship to the many projects of community improvement or involvement in the development of cooperative projects by school and community could give students something that classroom study cannot.

³ Lewis A. Coser is the author of the major analyses of these phenomena: *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: The Free Press, 1956; and *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict*. New York: The Free Press, 1967.

● *Should we try for planetary perspective?* At the State Dinner in Los Angeles, astronaut Neil Armstrong remarked of the people with whom the Apollo crew had been in touch all that long day:

We hope and think that those people shared our belief that this is the beginning of a new era—the beginning of an era when man understands the universe around him, and the beginning of the era when man understands himself.

Somehow withdrawing from the earth has seemed to provide our astronauts with a perspective that makes them, as Michael Collins said, feel “proud to be an inhabitant of this most magnificent planet.”

From his planetary perspective, the second man to set foot on the moon, Edwin Aldrin, reiterated for us the feeling of national resolution we had shared as a people when he related our space success on July 20 to our domestic confusion: “We can do what we will and must and want to do.”

Our national regeneration would seem likely, then, to be forwarded by seeing our own problems in some kind of global perspective, in school as well as out of school. Our search for new ways to deal with these problems is shared by many others around the world. Our search for new identity is shared by many; in one way or another, we are all citizens of developing nations.

“What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men.”⁴ These words, addressed to his fellow Africans by the Algerian revolutionary philosopher, Frantz Fanon, may speak to us also as to men everywhere. “Our country is the world, our countrymen all mankind.”⁵

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⁴ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966. p. 255.

⁵ Motto carried on the masthead of William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper, *The Liberator*, founded in 1831.

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