If We Survive

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FORTY-EIGHT years ago an observer remarked that human history had become a race between education and catastrophe. (H. G. Wells, **Outline of History,** Chapter 15.) We could reasonably say now that the race has become one between catastrophes. Which will get to us first: atomic war, intolerably polluted air, insupportable population, or some natural disaster such as a slight shift in the temperature of the sun—or simply the breakdown of a civilization which can no longer cope with its everyday problems and seeks nirvana in irresponsibility? Not long ago the editor of the **Bulletin of Atomic Scientists** moved the hands of his famous atomic clock a little closer to midnight, and the astronomer Fred Hoyle has said he thinks human beings have about had it on this planet.

A bare outline of the problems that confront us could take all morning. As more and more of us opt for cities as places to live, the urban environment becomes steadily more inhuman and unlivable, complicated by the misery of millions of our fellow citizens who happened to be born black. We are bogged in a quagmire in Asia, apparently unable to realize that we have neither the right nor the power to try to make the world over in our own image, and, with an excess of pride worthy of a Greek tragedy, unable to recognize that all our firepower is inadequate to "secure" one small Asian country if its people do not want to be made secure by us.

Seeing things like this and the apparent inability of the adult world to cope with them, a small but growing number of our brightest and most promising young people appear to have given up on liberal institutions, on the democratic process, on the material society which has been the hallmark of American economic development, and on us. As middle-aged responsible citizens we not only have to face all the other problems, we also have to cope with the young or think we do.

In such a situation, what is a keynote speaker to do? One option is simply to put together all the horrendous facts, painting such a picture of doom and disaster as to send the audience away with a satisfying feeling that things are so bad that nothing can be done anyway and that we might all, therefore, as well repair to the ski slopes or to the Costa Brava to await our fate. A second option, and one I must say I tried for awhile, would be to spend endless hours in the Library in search of light: reading everything from Pitrim Sorokin's massive analysis of the sensate society to Walter Lippmann's doleful conclusion that we are living through the closing chapters of our traditional way of life and are in the early beginnings of a struggle, which will probably last for generations. to remake our civilization. It is, he says, "A time for prophets and leaders and explorers and inventors and pioneers, and for those who are willing to plant trees for their children to sit under." (**Newsweek,** Oct. 9, 1967)

But then, I thought, you can read all these people for yourselves and decide whether they see well or ill. The chances are that you would rather I obeyed my own often-repeated injunction to students "Don't tell me what you read, tell me what you think. . ." And since one theme of my talk is going to be let's try to be honest with one another I shall not try to impress you with learning or profundity or beauty of phrase, but try instead to say where I

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am right now in the effort to try to work out for myself a way of dealing with this booming, buzzing confusion which is the modern world, especially as it presents itself to a concerned middle-aged academic person. Rather than a precis of what the great thinkers are saying about the malaise of our time, this will be one person's muddled and mixed up effort to get hold of some of the problems of our particular life in Academia, in the hope that since that is what I presume we're all trying to do, it might offer an opening for some useful discussion.

To begin with the proposition which was originally put to me in your flattering invitation: do I, as a historian think our present discontents portend progress or disaster? It is always dangerous to ask a historian to tell you how we got to where we are: he might just take you up on it. I am even more wary of historians who try to say where we are going. You know perhaps that the writer of the famous Nuremberg Chronicle on 12 July 1493 declared that his volume covered "the events most worthy of notice from the beginning of the world to the calamity of our time" and left two or three blank pages for any events which might happen to occur in the interval that remained before the inevitable Day of Judgment. Yet of course at that very moment word was about to reach Europe of the discovery of a new world as large as that already known, the most momentous event of 1500 years and from the consequences of which we trace practically all the things we are dealing with today.

It is clear that we who are in the midst of events understand their total import less than the historians who come after us, because inevitably we see only a segment of what is going on, and have no way of judging the long run consequences even of those things with which we are intimately familiar. Kirkegaard put the matter succinctly when he said "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward."

At the time of the Cuban missile crisis a distraught student came to me saying that she was so upset by the prospect that the world might end that weekend that she couldn't study for my test on Monday. In the absence of a crystal ball all I could think of to say to her was, "Well, Mary Jane, if you **don't** study and the world **doesn't** end, you're going to be awfully sorry. And if it does end, you might as well go down studying as any other way." So she went back to the library, made an A on the test, and now she sends me a Christmas card every year. Perhaps you also know the story of the Connecticut assembly in the seventeenth century, confronted with an eclipse which was said to portend the Day of Judgment. The house was somewhat frenzied and not clear how to meet the crisis, until the Speaker calmly announced that the candles would be brought and that if the Day of Judgment were indeed at hand, the Connecticut Assembly would be found doing its duty.

Nobody can say whether we shall survive, as a people, as a civilization, as a nation. But the operational effect of not knowing is really very small. If we do survive, this is the only world we have, and the sooner we get on with the job of making it more livable, of changing it to make it more human, the better it will be for us and for our children who will, in Lippmann's phrase, sit under the trees we plant. With the energy we don't spend worrying about final outcomes, much can be accomplished.

If you are with me this far, then we ask ourselves, what are the implications of this stance for those of us who spend our lives in some connection with the education of the young, and who are daily confronted with students telling us that we have made a mess of the

world, that adults are hypocrites hung up on material values, that the whole social structure is so rotten that the only solution is to tear it down and start over; who infuriate us with their utopianism while charming us with their determination to be honest and simple; who change ground so fast that we have hardly got hold of one issue before they are presenting us with three more; who frighten us with their cavalier dismissal of the hard won principle of the rule of law, while they tempt us to join them in the pleasures of happenings and music and sensory enjoyments? They make us feel guilty about their alienation, and simultaneously guilty that we ourselves are so little alienated from the tawdry, vulgar, dishonest aspects of American life. It is no wonder that you, living on campuses, chose dissonance as your theme this year.

But there is no place to hide, and the students are not (at least I hope not) going to retire to the apathy and silence of the 1950's. Those of us who are more or less 45 are likely to spend the next twenty years in the midst of the breaking up and re-making of, at the very least, American higher education, and perhaps of American society. The compelling question is: are we going to be only observers, or are we going to be actors in that process? This, as I see it, is the issue with which student protest confronts us.

As I listen around the faculty lunch tables it seems to me that I discern among our colleagues two general reactions to the challenges students are throwing our way. One is simple fear and rejection, epitomized perhaps by what Seymour Halleck found on the beach in Florida last Easter: a growing adult paranoia which saw the younsters as a dangerous threat to their peace of mind and which could think only of suppression, of cordoning off the beach. This response calls for putting students in their place, spends a lot of time trying to outwit the kids (about as profitable as trying to outwit the Viet Cong, and anyway, any parent should know better,) and might be called the Colonel Blimpism of the contemporary academic scene.

On the other end of the spectrum is an equally extreme reaction which finds the student voice full of wisdom, lets the students define every issue, operates on the tacit assumption that students are more inteligent than their elders, and that experience counts for nothing. This might be called the mystique of youth, and it is, as many people have found to their sorrow, an extremely vulnerable position.

Neither of these responses seems to me appropriate to the needs of the society or to the needs of the educational institution.

Let me see if I can define a quite different response.

The criticism of American society, the criticisms of domestic and foreign policy, the worries about the Viet Nam War, which form the content of student protest, are significant criticisms. The problems are real enough, and we all know it. They are deeply rooted in the rapid economic development of the past century, in the enormous and unanticipated increase in world population, in the startling appearance in the last twenty years of an affluent society, in the consequences of hundreds of years of race discrimination, in the moral and ethical re-examination triggered by all these things. Neither we nor our students brought these problems into being. Both we and they can sometimes sympathize with the bitter comment of a boy writing to the **Berkeley Barb:**

> Our society was already formed when I was born. I have participated in no decisions about how the available resources were to be used. What shape our life on this continent was to take or even the type of person who was to regulate these things was given to me as a fait accompli. . . (Sept. 8, 1967)

So it was. But we are living in 1968, not in 1607, and if we can't start over from the beginning it is absolutely necessary that we take hold where we are and begin to cope. The key point here is that these things are not **our** problems or **their** problems; they are shared by all of us and they are just as compelling to someone my age, watching two teen-age sons as they watch the evening news — as to any college student whose draft board has just sent greetings.

And yet what do we see on the campus? Endless time and energy going into endless confrontations in which neither side seems really to hear what the other is saying, in which students are sensitive to some kinds of ideas and we to quite different ideas, and in the end a wasteful polarization which leaves both sides bitter and wary. We cannot afford this kind of waste much longer.

The responsibility for changing the climate rests squarely with the adults. The students have endless power to disrupt, as they have already shown, but not so much to construct. The constructive power lies largely in our hands, and we must ask ourselves what to do with it.

To put it another way: how can their admirable and seemingly boundless energy and ours (not so endless perhaps) be combined to begin to change the things which worry us all: The U.S. stance in world affairs, the gap between two worlds of poverty and affluence; the uncertain state of civil rights; the physical threats of air pollution and urban sprawl; crime and lawlessness and all the rest of it?

Before we can work together we must find a common ground. How is this to be done?

Perhaps, as a beginning, by trying to hear the dialogue that is going on between us in a new light.

The students say, You are all hypocrites. It's a nasty word and we are right to be stung by it. But what are they really saying? (1) That when they talk we often don't seem to answer their questions, but answer others, that they didn't ask. (2) That we say one thing and do another.

On the first point, my guess is that much of what is called hypocrisy on the part of faculty and administrators is really the problem of preconceived opinions. We seem to know what we think about so many things, and to have a ready-made answer to so many questions. To the extent that we can really **listen** to what our students say, and try to answer both honestly and **de novo**, as if this were a new thought we were encountering for the first time, we would be in a strong position to ask that they, too, listen to us with more attention and try to see the world a bit through our eyes as well. A startling honesty can sometimes lead to a startling reciprocation. There is even a matter of **manner** here. One of my sons remarked of a very famous college president whom he heard talking "He's used to being listened to." Well, most of us are used to being listened to, an advantage we ought to be careful not to use unfairly.

On the second point of what we do versus what we say, I was led to some thoughts by my college freshman daughter. She came home from a party one night and was no sooner in the door than she exploded, "What is **wrong** with adults?" "Well," said I, somewhat hurt, "lots, but what did you particularly have in mind?" So she poured out her grievance: there had been this great party with all these faculty members, and the guest of honor a fascinating Australian member of Parliament. And what did the faculty people do, she demanded, but stand around and drink and talk inconsequentialities— "only the students took advantage of the opportunity to learn about Australia." I reminded her that the admired Australian was **also** an adult

and so she would please not indulge in such wholesale condemnations. But that was a lame rejoinder. And I began to wonder. I was reminded of the fact that the psychologists suggest that our children learn much more from our behavior and our unconscious cues than they do from our advice; that what we say is of comparatively little importance in their education compared to what we **do.**

So then I asked myself, what are the students I know learning from their elders about some esential things? Are they learning, from association with us, to be open and flexible in confronting new ideas? Are they learning to listen to the other side? To be patient in discourse? Or do they learn from us that you can make a questioner look foolish if you have superior knowledge, and browbeat him if you have superior power? Do they learn from us that the way to deal with difficult problems is to analyze them carefully, figure out what can be done and go to work — or that talk is cheaper?

Do they learn from us that self-discipline is basic to accomplish almost anything? One Wisconsin student told me scornfully that the faculty meeting after the riot adjourned promptly at 5 because "it was martini time." Our Wisconsin friends here today may tell us that the meeting in fact was held in mid-morning — but the point is that this idea was passed from student to student as a measure of the seriousness with which the adults were dealing with what to them were absolutely crucial issues.

Do they learn from us, I wonder, that the human personality is never finished and that people who are willing to confront new situations, meet new challenges, go on growing as long as they live — or is it from association with us that they conceived the idea that anybody over thirty is washed up?

There is a frightening new romanticism abroad on the campus which says that feeling is all, the life of the mind doesn't matter. How can this be? Is it because classes are often arid and unrewarding and, in their phrase, not "relevant"? The most recent report out of Berkeley puts the matter well: After reminding the reader that many students move "routinely and unthinkingly through the system," it adds:

> Many others, while reacting passionately to the failures of American society, have not linked their emotional reaction to any appreciation of the need for disciplined analysis of these urgent problems and a search for reasoned solutions. The reaction against the narrow, instrumental uses of intellect and of the university has let to a growing tendency to reject all uses of reason, a rejection which leads either to an enervating quietism or to a form of nihilism which admires only the passionate assertion of humanity through direct, physical protest. (**The Culture of the University: Governance and Education,** Jan. 15, 1968, p. 9)

William Arrowsmith in his explosive speech in New Orleans in 1966 remarked that students are quick, and right, to suspect hypocrisy in a teacher who lives without the slightest relation to what he knows, whose texts are wholly divorced from his life, from human life. We all know the phenomenon: Shakespearean scholars who have no passion: psychologists who have little human insight; historians with no perspective; economists who think the world is made of mathematical formulae. "What fills one with rage." Arrowsmith went on to say, "is the callousness of scholars, the incredible lack of human concern among humanists, the monumental indifference of the learned to human misery and need . . . What matters is the integration of significant life and knowledge, of compassionate study and informed conduct. . ." (Speech to the American Council on Education, Oct. 1966)

Are we, their academic mentors, unconsciously teaching that the life of the mind **is** a dry and arid thing? Or that it is the source of genuine enthusiasm and excitement, one of the most im-

portant ways to get hold of the world? The adolescent is concerned about life, **his** life above all; most academic adults are concerned with a discipline, field of study, or an administrative task. How are the two to meet? If the discipline or the administrative task matter at all, they must be part of the answer to the ever repeated question the student is asking (often in various obscure forms), what is life all about? Unless **we** think what we do makes a difference, they won't either.

To turn this problem into a somewhat lighter vein: I sometimes think that what the students really mind about us *is* not that we are wicked but that we are boring. We are not, as they say, with it. Many of us still make out with the stock of ideas we put together in graduate school, with the same old jokes, have never dared burn our notes and start anew, in battles of wits we rely on the heavy artillery of facts instead of engaging in exhilirating hand-to-hand combat. We don't try out new fields, or learn new skills, or take up the guitar or give the Beatles a chance. Yet all of these things might have a salutary effect upon our capacity to think new thoughts about parietal rules, curriculum, drugs and marine recruiters.

Perhaps most frightening of all the standard components of the present dialogue is the student contention that there is nothing anybody can do to change this miserable society and therefore tearing it down makes sense. When I tried to argue with a wonderful Duke student that harrassing the Dow Chemical recruiter would not in all likelihood have one pennyworth of effect on U.S. foreign policy, he cried "But what **will?** Show me what will and I'll do it."

"Show me what will, and I'll do it." In a revealing moment it was the cry for help of his generation — but a cry they apparently do not expect us to be able to answer. Herein lies our greatest challenge and theirs. Can we, together, before it is too late put new content into the old assumption that in a democracy the people can shape their own destiny? Can we and they find ways to get hold of problems which seem so big as to be out of anyone's grasp?

I think we have to try, and again by example and not by talk. How many of us in academia are taking hold of any community problem and doing the hard work necessary to really learn about it, putting up with the talking and maneuvering, and the failings of other volunteers, just to get something that needs doing done? Not everybody has a taste for politics nor the time to run for the Board of Aldermen, much less for Congress. But there are many ways of exercising community responsibility and it was perhaps never more true than now that those who are willing to work will shape the future.

To bring about a new degree of citizen responsibility in this complex society will require a change in the habit patterns of two centuries based as they were on the assumption that if everyone took care of his own self-interest, the public interest would automatically be served. You do not have to walk a block from this hotel to find overwhelming evidence of the failure of this assumption. Sixty years ago from the vantage point of the Chicago slums Jane Addams wrote a book which bears rereading today called **Democracy and Social Ethics.** Her point was that the old democracy of individualism was not adequate in an urban-industrial society, and that a new social ethic of direct, personal responsibility for the social welfare would have to come. She thought it would come through evolution. I suspect we've got to give evolution a hand.

A social ethic, I presume, goes far beyond being willing to be taxed for poverty programs and better schools. It looks upon the Great Society **not** as

something that can be packaged and mailed from Washington, but as something that has to be slowly built in every community, in every neighborhood, by a great deal of human sweat and very messy hard work. We have a great tradition of volunteer work in this country, but at best it has only involved a handful of us. What we must reach, I think, is a very wide agreement that just as we have long felt a responsibility to our families (for better or worse) so we feel now a responsibility to the community (whether we like everything that happens or not).

Busy-ness is a disease of the twentieth century, but much of what keeps us busy we could do without. The busiest woman I know, the highest ranking female Civil Servant in Washington, spends one night a week tutoring an eleven year old Negro boy, an engagement she considers inviolable. I am tempted to say that if she can manage, anybody can. An insurance executive I know says he works 35 hours a week for his company and 40 hours a week for the state of North Carolina — the latter without pay. Thanks to his 40 hours it just may be that some major problems of Negro education in our state are moving toward resolution.

The relation of what I am saying to the students' despair with the democratic process is obvious. It is no good telling them they can change things: demonstration is needed. And the demonstration will take hard work and courage. We need, perhaps, a Churchillian motto: No one should assume that it's going to be easy; no one should assume that victory is inevitable. But the way to begin is to begin.

There is one more aspect of the student — faculty — administration dialogue I think we must examine because it is so important. There comes a time almost inevitably when the students say "If you aren't for us you're against us." Yet however sympathetic and open we learn to be, there may indeed be points of genuine difference, and on those points, it seems to me we must set an example of sticking to conviction, cost what it may in popularity. The place this is most likely to happen is over the issue of violence and civil disobedience, mindless disruption for its own sake. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan recently pointed out, the tactics of Harvard students on the occasion of Secretary McNamara's visit were no more attractive on the Harvard campus than they were in the early days of fascist Italy. The rule of law, due process, protection of civil rights are all hard won, and not to be taken for granted. None of us has yet heard the knock at the door in the middle of the night, suffered the incarceration without trial and without recourse, the sentencing for the crime of writing a book. But there is nothing written in the Book of Fate which says the people of the United States are automatically immune from the danger of totalitarian government. This is a point on which, if the 19 year olds do not understand, the 45 year olds must, and must stand and be counted.

I began drafting this speech on a jet at 40,000 feet, an altitude which is calculated to induce euphoria. Most problems look human-size from that height. I began by writing in large letters an injunction to myself, "Don't preach, just level." That's a hard injunction to follow, almost as difficult as the one the young are so fond of, "Tell it like it really is."

What I have tried to do here is to take a new look at the now familiar dialogue which is going on between us, the faculty and administrators on one hand, and our most restless, often our best, students on the other, in hope that we can begin to get away from polarized confrontations and work toward a common ground.

We and our students are all in this world together, and whether they be-

lieve it or not they will soon be past that magic age of 30 and joining us in the ranks of the so-called responsible adults. We have no other world; our only choice is to remake this one; and to do what we need to channel all the available energy toward construction, not destruction.

I have said that I think the primary responsibility for carving out the common ground and getting the show on the road, as it were, lies with adults. Like it or not we have the power, we are the decision makers, the elected and appointed officials, the people who write the books and affect the mass media, who teach the classes and run the schools and universities.

I am suggesting that our influence will be felt more as an emanation of what we are and do than because of what we say, and that the beginning point, therefore, is a clear-eyed self-examination. I am suggesting that some of the terms of this self-examination shall be asking ourselves whether we have developed a habit of growth and openness, a habit of listening — with the third ear, if need be, of meeting new ideas without fear and new challenges without dismay. I am suggesting that we ask ourselves whether the distribution of our time between social and private concerns makes sense, in view of the pressing needs of the society.

There is enough here, I should suppose, to keep us busy for twenty years, by which time we can enjoy the spectacle of our present students, in their middle age, trying to bridge the generation gap!