EDUCATION AS A MISSION TO THE WORLD OF IGNORANCE

EDWARD A. HART

The views I express are from the perspective of one who has been a practitioner in the field, slugging it out in the trenches, so to speak, for thirty-one years. Those of us who labor in these pursuits carry the responsibility of continuously assessing the world and the society in which we live, and translating these assessments into relevant educational programs which will serve well those who look to us for guidance in preparing for their lives ahead. Necessarily then, views from those like myself are more the product of clinical experience than of scholarly research.

The theme I am pursuing, "Education as a 'Mission' to the World of Ignorance," is straightforward enough, however, the examination of this thesis reveals that there are serious obstacles in making it a universal reality.

We live in a complicated world, one which is fraught with turmoil. We have a destabilized Middle East with declared and undeclared wars, and which exports terrorism around the globe. There is civil strife in Central America, and South Africa stands on the brink of massive upheaval, possibly with unprecedented violence. The rest of Africa is replete with unrest, poised for its giant leap into emergence as an economic and political force in the world. And, most ominously, all this is against a pervasive backdrop of constant tension between two superpowers

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Edward A. Hart is President of Irvine Valley College, California. This address was presented in February 1986 at the Albert Schweitzer Festival held in Palm Springs, California, sponsored by National University.

which walk the tightrope of maintaining supremacy without committing world destruction.

The forces which drive these conditions are not easily blunted: economic power, religious zeal, political ideology, the quest for basic freedoms, and the most compelling of all forces, hunger, to which a third of the world's population falls fully or marginally victim.

Exacerbating this entire condition is a reality from which we cannot escape: we live in a closed system. The dramatic or subtle events in one part of the world are more than just rapidly transmitted news items in another. They often have important implications, even unexpected and significant effects in unlikely places.

A few years back in *Mankind at the Turning Point*, the excellent "Second Report to the Club of Rome," by Mesarovic and Pestel, drove home this point with a steel-like example. The failure of the Soviet wheat crop in the Fall of 1967 gave rise to an important economic decision. The choice was to either attempt a winter and spring crop or to purchase the stored supply available in the United States. The latter was chosen, immediately causing a rise in the cost of bakery products in the U.S. and a widespread consumer outcry. The following summer, when an African drought had failed to produce crops, millions starved to death in Biafra partly due to the absence of a sufficient available reserve of grain anywhere in the world -- all related to a decision independently made months earlier and thousands of miles away.

The impact of this closed world system in which we live can only intensify. As technology and telecommunications expand, the effective proximity among the peoples of the earth necessarily will increase. To get the point, consider only the immediate impact and then the ongoing shift in American energy policy that resulted from O.P.E.C. decisions made in 1973 and again in 1978.

Lest I appear too much like a purveyor of doom and gloom,

let me assure you that by nature I am an optimist. Most who select the field of education are optimists, for we believe that change -- change for the good -- can be effected in people and in societies. It wouldn't make sense for us to be in education and believe otherwise.

It is my fervent belief that if the peoples of the world are to experience long term peace and prosperity, the root to this experience will be a world population that is substantively educated. Albert Einstein stated: "The splitting of the atom has changed everything, save our mode of thinking, and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe." I contend that only through universal education can we change our mode of thinking.

While it must be conceded that social growth has not even come close to paralleling technological advances, to believe that progress has not been made, and cannot continue to be made, would be an error. Recently a report on changes in American attitudes was released by George Gallup, Jr., upon the fiftieth anniversary of that respected polling organization. Some of these changes are remarkable and heartening -- and, I submit, are likely at least in part to be the result of American public education. Let me cite a few:

There has been remarkable growth in tolerance toward persons of different races, religions and other background characteristics. Those who say they would vote for a black, a Jew, a Catholic, or a woman for president, for instance, has jumped from 31% to 78% since 1937.

There has been a substantial shift in health habits among Americans. Daily exercise in our population has soared from 24% to 59%. (Remember Eisenhower's President's Council on Fitness which ultimately impacted every school system in the country?) Offsetting this, of course, has been the increas in substance abuse -- drugs and alcohol --, but I would argue that the educational campaign against these has just begun.

There is a continuing conviction that the U.S. must work closely with other nations at many levels, but there is a strong reluctance to commit U.S. troops to involvement in the affairs of other nations.

Interestingly, there are some attitudes that have not changed. The problems named as the most important facing the nation are the same today as fifty years ago: unemployment, international tension, government spending, cost of living. I suspect these will be named fifty years from now, also. Basic religious beliefs also have remained intact, although there is a decline in the proportion of those who say religion is very important in their lives.

One must believe that, similarly, attitudes can and do change among people in other countries of the world. Certainly, attitudinal patterns in western Europe have progressed along lines which parallel our own since the end of World War II. Social progress in some parts of the world may come with more difficulty, however. The education of a populace is not high on the agenda, nor can it be effectively implemented when a nation is preoccupied with the number one priority of feeding its people. Likewise, in countries where the people are isolated from free and full information by religious bias or political manipulation, basic literacy can be achieved, but the mode of thinking which could lead to international harmony may be skewed.

Nevertheless, I am compelled to believe that advancing technology and electronic mass media eventually will penetrate even the most guarded of societies. The increasing amount of affordable world travel and the proliferation of film, television and printed materials must ultimately foster in these countries a growing public awareness of the superior and accelerating standard of living enjoyed by those of free and open societies. This awareness cannot other than erode the abilities of those who would govern to withhold full and accurate information.

The advent and skyrocketing use of the microprocessor has

enormous implications in the equation we seek for universal education. The microprocessor may be both the heart of technological devices which facilitate learning among masses and also the propellant which fuels the rise to higher standards of living among scores of millions.

In the first case, we have just scratched the surface of using microcomputers to process and deliver information and to interact with students in hastening the learning process. (I should quickly say that they will not replace teachers, but in the hands of good teachers they can be invaluable. After all, I do not want a faculty revolution!)

Let me give a few dramatic examples. In my own institution, after a pilot study with two sections of freshman English classes, nearly all classes now require students to write their compositions using word processing programs on personal computers. We teach them the basics of text editing in a parallel five hour crash course. Our motive with the original study was to have students learn to use the tools of the future while they were learning English composition. What showed up, in addition to this, was a startling surprise. The quality of compositions among these students was significantly superior. Having the capability at their finger tips of readily revising themes, the students eagerly produced second and third drafts. The use of electronic spelling checkers and grammar checkers helped the students, and freed the instructors to assist students with the content of their papers rather than spending fruitless hours correcting spelling and grammar. Our motive with the computers is now quite different!

Immigrant students learning English-as-a-second-language make rapid progress using microcomputer programs. This eliminates the initial intimidation that can be experienced by students when they are simultaneously confronted with the written and the spoken word. The phonetics come later, and more easily.

Use of the library now regularly includes the search of nationwide data bases with microcomputers and modems as part of our students' information gathering for term papers. Business classes teach the use of electronic spreadsheets for management and accounting. And, of course, the use of the computer for manipulating mathematics problems is well documented. All of these are just a few of the applications that were not available to large numbers of students only a few years ago.

Returning to the second impact of the microprocessor, that of spurring a rise in living standards, there is scarcely an industry or product that has not, or shortly will not, be positively affected by the use of specialized electronically controlled devices. Prime example: for centuries creative clockmakers went to heroic measures to develop the ultimate in accurate timepieces -- ones which would attenuate for atmospheric changes -- ones with mercury columns in their pendula to compensate for the effects of temperature changes. Today you can go to any flea market and buy a quartz and microchip regulated wrist watch in a plastic case which will give you accuracy within one second per year and account for every date including leap years through the end of the century, for less than four dollars. The implications for future goods and services are endless. I won't belabor the point.

The implications for east-west relations, however, could be profound. In his 1981 Landmark book, *The Micromillennium*, Christopher Evans, unfortunately now no longer with us, unavoidably expressed the obvious. At the dawn of the microchip era this visionary heuristically concluded that the material developments afforded by microchip technology, along with the personal uses of computers enjoyed by those of the free world, could inevitably create a stress within the Soviet bloc. Evans sees, in my view accurately, a widening of the gap in personal comfort and living standards between easterners and westerners. How long will the people of the Soviet Union accept the seeping but

growing evidence of better conditions elsewhere while they still must obtain authorization to use a copier machine?*

By analogy, I am, for one, absolutely persuaded that a main contributor to the civil rights movement in the United States in the late 1960's, along with the Martin Luther Kings and the Freedom Marchers, was the general availability of television sets. It did not take too many months of viewing, after black Moms and Dads got their first TV sets, for them to realize that their children were not enjoying the same benefits of our society as were others. Could not this same dynamic apply internationally as the east-west standard of living gap widens? Christopher Evans thinks so.

Given the potential pressures of a widening gap in living standards between those of the free and communist bloc nations, we can only hope, pray and strive for rational responses from those who are empowered in the east. One scenario is that they will accommodate, gradually release the freedoms that permit enlightenment and its potential for domestic growth: another is to generate militancy against the foreigners from without and concoct crises in an effort to maintain power. The balance could be precarious, and with high stakes.

At this point I must confess to thus far having used the word "education" euphemistically as if the need for it, the expectations of it and the results of it are spread evenly world wide. Clearly, the status of average education among the populations of different regions of the world varies widely, and the beginning point for educational campaigns, as of February, 1986, would be defined differently depending upon where you wish to look. We are speaking about dimensions which range from the need for more basic literacy to the need for more basic research, and everything in between, depending upon the location and condition of a given society.

*An informative elaboration of this point may be found in the report, "Moscow Faces the New Age: A Closed Society Meets the Information Revolution," *Newsweek*, August 18, 1986, pp. 20-22. Editor's note.

Certainly education begins with basic skills. We think of them as the "Three R's." I would allow, however, that this also depends on where you are. I am convinced, as I have alluded to earlier, that in our country in the nineteen-nineties and beyond, basic skills must include computer and telecommunications literacy for those expecting to function effectively in our society.

In the underdeveloped nations, however, all else follows pervasive efforts to provide people with the ability to read and communicate with the printed word. For the economic emergence of these countries, and even for those countries which are well into transition toward modern nations -- Mexico for example -- high levels of technical training also are needed.

But basic literacy and technical education are only the building blocks upon which the economic viability of societies rests. It is at the next level, that which we call "general education," where there is enlightenment about the human condition, past and present, and where the attitudes of people are expanded.

It is my thesis that when high percentages of the world's populations have assimilated substantial and accurate information, have gained the capacity to somewhat critically evaluate it and make unimpaired choices based upon what they have concluded, then the roots for prosperity and world peace will have been established.

Finally, at the most advanced levels of education we have professional education and basic research. One is for the practitioners who guide and administer societies, and the other is for scholars who explore and discover at the leading edges of knowledge in all fields. It is those achieving at this level who will provide us with unforeseen advantages which can be shared among all peoples. Parenthetically, it saddens me to think of the thousands and thousands with brilliant minds throughout the world who could be contributing at this level, but whose potential for development has been undermined by hopeless conditions or by the lack of opportunity. It haunts me to think that locked

up inside one of those heads could be the cure for cancer or the ultimate solar energy breakthrough which Harrison Brown in 1954 accurately identified as the harbinger of unprecedented world-wide wealth.

The eventual achievement of widespread education at all of these levels, in all regions of the world, appears overwhelming. Perhaps it is manifestly naive to think that it is possible. The hurdles and complexities confronted in each different society are substantial -- and in totality they are mind-boggling. I wouldn't presume to address them all. Contemplate, if you will, the task we face in our own country, to which I now turn.

Much has been studied, written and said in recent years about American public education. There is growing evidence and general agreement that fundamental changes are required. Eleven of the forty million young people in our elementary and secondary schools will not finish. The dropout rate in our high schools has increased 1% per year during the past five years and now is 27%. There is alarming growth in the numbers enrolling in our colleges and universities who require remedial work in the basic skills. I submit that these are symptoms. To get at the causes what we need to do is change the whole way in which we look at education in America.

We can begin by stemming the commonly held attitude that the sole road to respect and dignity is through the baccalaureate degree. Twenty-five years ago in his book, *Excellence*,John Gardner responded to his own question, "Can we be equal and excellent, too?" by stating: "The importance of education is not limited to the higher orders of talent."

There is an enormous human resource in our country that is not being fully developed, in part because we have shaped our schools incorrectly. In his recent book, *The Forgotten Majority*, Dale Parnell points out that 25% of our high school students are on the college prep track, 25% are on a vocational track, and the remaining 50% are on an unfocused track of "general studies"

which leads nowhere. (Please don't confuse this with the "general education" I referred to earlier. Here I am talking about "life skills courses," many without substance.) Parnell argues that by developing the correct curricula and connections between secondary schools and community college, many of these students can pursue productive courses of studies at the associate degree level. I will spare you the impressive numbers about future careers which will be available for those who pursue paraprofessional and technical courses of study. However, let me just state that we have an enormous opportunity to develop much of our untapped talent, provide millions with rewarding livelihoods, and in the process infuse general education at the collegiate level for whole generations of our young men and women.

To drive home the point, I can't resist this one passage of John Gardner's:

> An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society that scorns plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

The problems in American education are not necessarily limited to our elementary and secondary schools. In a recent essay, John Hurst, co-chair of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at the University of California in Berkeley, noted "During the twentieth century increasing percentages of the world's people, especially in the more modernized nations, have received more and more formal education; yet our global crises have worsened in so many ways during the same period." This is an unsettling thought, given my thesis. Hurst claims the need for wholesale change not only is in the structures of our institutions but in the processes by which higher education is delivered.

I could go on and on about the revisions needed to optimize education in our country. However, the purpose of even referencing it is to illustrate that, if we face such a formidable task in addressing educational problems in this one country (and the one with the most resources with which to work), what will it take to effect an educated population around the world?

The commitment to this goal is one which must be shared internationally and which must be high on the agenda of every nation. It should be clear that this commitment is not for those of us in education; we are already committed. It is a commitment to be made by those who set public policy. The bumper sticker reads, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

In his 1920 *Outline of History*, H. G. Wells warned us that "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." If it is the politicians who must take action to avoid catastrophe then it is we the citizens, at least in the free countries of the world, who must insist that they get at it. We must insist on high quality education here in the United States, we must insist that we aid those countries which need help with it, we must export it with more programs like the Peace Corps; and, we must find ways to build bridges with it to the eastern bloc countries.

Most of all, we must be persistent. A lapse with a single generation in a single country can mean an epidemic of ignorance. We must believe in it as a fundamental truth.

Albert Schweitzer wrote: "Truth has no special time of its own. Its time is now -- always." The fundamental truth to me, is that if we are to weave the fabric of a civilized, peaceful and prosperous world, the thread with which we will do it is education.

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