

WANTED: TEACHERS FOR A CIVIL SOCIETY

BY

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Fellow teachers and those who support us in our craft, it is a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to share with you this morning some thoughts on what I consider to be one of the most important issues facing education and American society today. In my opinion, if America is to flourish, or perhaps even to survive, you and I and all our education colleagues must respond to the need for a Civil Society.

By a Civil Society I do not mean a polite society or one characterized by effortless good manners. It is more than that. A Civil Society is a community where people live together in a civilized manner, where they willingly assume the burdens of civic responsibility. The word civil comes from the Latin *civilis*, which is also the root of the words civic and civilization. One meaning of the verb to civilize is to educate, especially to educate for one's citizen duties. It is my belief

that if we are to continue to enjoy the benefits of civilization (and civilization is more than just running water and television, despite the popularity of the Dukes of Hazard), all of us must work to teach our students to act civilly.

Fifty years ago in his book on *The Revolt of the Masses*, political philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset put it very well:

Civilization is not 'just here,' it is not self-supporting. It is artificial and requires the artist or the artisan. If you want to make use of the advantages of civilization, but are not prepared to concern yourself with the upholding of civilization—you are done.

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And 20 years ago sociologist Edward Shils wrote an essay on "The Theory of Mass Society," in which he said:

Civility is the virtue of the citizen, not the virtue of the hero or of the private person. It is the acceptance of the...management of public affairs in collaboration with others...with a regard to the interests...of the entire society.

For too long we have worshipped our heroes, guarded our privacy, and neglected our civic duties while public problems have increased. Our population has grown, creating greater probabilities of infringing upon each other's freedom. Our country has become more diverse, especially with the introduction of over one million immigrants last year, giving rise to more chances of conflict. And with new, rapid means of transportation and communication our lives have become more interdependent and complex. What once were purely private acts, like burning our refuse and dumping waste into rivers and bays, now become public nuisances and require public decision making.

But as the need for public-spirited decisions has increased, single-issue private interest groups have proliferated and escapism has been raised to new heights. Sophisticated polling techniques and mass media campaigns are used by technicians employed by narrow, special-interest political action

committees to defeat candidates who will not do their bidding. The public interest is relegated to theoretical discussions of pluralism; and the notion of a zero-sum society, where we have achieved Pareto's optimum of everything that you gain must be my loss, prevails.

If one were to read the current best sellers, he or she might conclude that the most serious problems facing middle-class Americans today are whether or not to eat quiche and how to have thin thighs in 30 days. For many young people the most difficult decisions they have to make are which pair of designer jeans to wear to school and which video games to play at lunch time. Centuries from now archeologists may wonder who were these demigods Calvin Klein and Pac-Man. Sadly, not all our students or all those in the nation are as fortunate materially. Unemployment plagues the land resulting in poverty and misery for millions of families. Compounding the problem, though, is the scandalous fact that unemployment is not recognized as a public problem by all of us. Many of those who display designer labels or who generously may be called videots are not aware of unemployment, much less spend time discussing it seriously.

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Historian Christopher Lasch refers to this current plight as *The Culture of Narcissism*. He sees paternalism and materialism increasing as well as selfishness and ethnocentrism intensifying. It is as though some unseen hand has sprayed us with a substance like the pesticide used to fight fire ants in the South. The ants' youth hormones are over-activated so they never mature—they never grow up to assume the duties of adults to gather food—so the whole colony starves to death. Unless we can teach our students how to assume the duties of community life we also must perish. In the long run, doing one's own thing can really only be tolerated on a sparsely-inhabited desert island, in the nursery, or in bedlam.

Our social values are easily observed by the way in which we spend our resources: for example, \$14 million to promote a rock concert on the edge of the Mojave Desert and \$5 billion per year on video games. While the federal government plans to increase military spending to \$292.1 billion per year by 1985, up 115 per cent from \$132.2 billion in 1980, it plans to reduce spending for human services, for example, from \$30.8 billion on education in 1980 to \$17.8 billion in 1985, down 42 per cent.

With increased military spending one is reminded of the dark prophesy of Jonathan Schell in his book on the *Fate of the Earth*, compiled from his articles in the *New Yorker* magazine earlier this year. He points out that nuclear

war will be different, not only in degree but in kind, from any war we have known in the past. It will not be merely the defeat of one nation by another, nor even the death of millions of soldiers and innocent civilians, but perhaps the death of the planet. It will have such a devastating effect, according to Schell, that it will probably never be used deliberately by one nation against another, but may set off accidentally or may become the perfect weapon for terrorist blackmail. At home and abroad terrorism and violence are escalating, and a resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan threatens to destroy the advances we have made in human rights.

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In the midst of this crisis University of Alabama Dean Emeritus Robert Bills in his new book, *Education for Intelligence or Failure*, tells us that "the public believes students are not learning what they should." The public senses that students should be learning to cope with demands of our current plight. But I believe the public is confused about what should be done and how it should be done. Instead of helping us to improve the quality of education, they call for a return to the so-called basics, reduce our budgets, and threaten to institute a voucher

system that may all but destroy public education. Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, describes the voucher plan as someone saying, "I don't like the public drinking water—so pay for my Perrier." I believe that instead of buying everyone a different bottle of water we ought to restore the public water works.

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the figures for danger and for opportunity. Although we are in danger, we as educators have an opportunity to help change our culture of narcissism to a Civil Society. I believe we can teach students what they should learn by focusing upon the needs of a Civil Society, not a pluralistic zero-sum game. How? In at least two ways.

First, if I were to offer an addition to the "Why Johnny Can't" series, I would propose "Why Johnny Can't Disagree Agreeably." Certainly one of the essential elements of a Civil Society is a dialogue on public problems, a dialogue that is informed by feelings as well as by reason, but a dialogue that transforms the emotions and the intellect into comprehensible speech—not shouted obscenities or physical violence. One of the pleasures in listening to British public rhetoric, for example the debates in the House of Commons, is the elegant way in which displeasure and disagreement are often expressed. The member of Parliament does not pull any punches, but does not throw any low blows either. All of us in our

teaching, whether we are cooks or bus drivers, fourth-grade teachers or mathematicians, can strive to set an example in disagreeing agreeably.

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Second, we can demand higher standards of performance from our students. We should not only require higher level skills but encourage serious thought from students about the public consequences of proposed alternative actions. We should not accept the mind-numbing discourse of students using Valley-Girl hyperbole. Of course it may be difficult to expect much from students who never read a serious book. And, to the extent they read anything, receive most of their print stimuli from the sensations of newspapers and the superlatives of advertisement. Perhaps psychologist Bruno Bettelheim was right when he said we have tried to make education too easy, when it is really hard work. If it is perceived as something easy, there is little satisfaction in accomplishing it. And if students are told it is easy and they do not succeed, they are defeated and develop unwarranted low opinions of themselves. All of us whether we teach music, coach track, or maintain attendance records can succeed as educators only if we lead students to the edge of their own

awareness and provide them with an open window on life, not hand them a paint-by-number landscape to fill in at our direction.

In the past several years we have been bombarded by innovations of one kind or another: by new math, by teachers aides, by individualized instruction, by open classrooms, by values clarification, and by the media revolution from filmstrips to programmed videodiscs. Now the computer is upon us. And it will be no greater help than the other innovations unless we use it properly as a tool to increase our nurturing of students rather than a replacement for it. There is a great deal of wisdom in the words of President James A. Garfield, who spoke at a Williams College alumni meeting in 1871 and said:

A true teacher can perform in a log hut, sitting on the end of a simple

bench with a student on the other end.

But there is a difference today. Mark Hopkins had only one student, James Garfield, at the other end of the bench, while now most of us have some 30 students with several different cognitive learning styles at the other end of our benches. It is my opinion that all television and computers can do for us is to give us an electronic log hut.

In the final analysis, it is the teacher and the student who are still the primary ingredients of education. And teachers dedicated to the attainment of a Civil Society can lead to its establishment. If Marshall McLuhan, the communications specialist, was right that "the medium is the message," and I believe he was, then the model of an educator as a feeling, thinking, caring human being is the most important element in achieving a Civil Society.