

# The Presidential Response

from Dr. J. Herbert Hollomon

This past year, so full of faith and hope yet of tragedy and violence, has made us see ourselves again as human beings first. We see ourselves and each other more clearly now than before, for some reason. We see people who work hard and struggle for the light. We see cynics—the fallen idealists. We hear critics and apologists, we see laughing people who love life, but now also, we note those who are grim—and some who are intensely grim. We see people in anguish and frustration, yet even in innermost despair we see joy. We both love and hate our few charismatic leaders. We deal with machine-like men. We see apathy. And we admire those who take responsible action against the evils that beset us.

We see in ourselves these others. We love, we hate, we kill, we build, we criticize, we create, we laugh, we cry, we hurt, we feel. We are each of us all of these and more. But of all of these, the cry I hear loudest from the silence of what the young do not say is, "*Don't let our idealism die.*"

Doubt and self-scrutiny turn inward. They fall especially hard on each person and on us as an entire people. And the question of life and death once again recurs to envelop us, as it did Hamlet:

*And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action.*

To Lord Hamlet his old friends of student days, Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, had become fops useful in disposing of Polonius's body or running an errand to England for the prince. How could they possibly know what the question "To be or not to be?" meant when they themselves were dead? We do not need the final trumpet of the play to see that they were dead. They were out of it to begin with. They were cop-outs. Their acts were meaningless, their consciences dead, their perceptions only vaguely aware. They were closed off from themselves. Perhaps they are like many of us, for they recur as universals—believing only in fate, incapable of living or loving, and unable to understand the princely question.

People sometimes mistake places and institutions as safe havens from the world. There one can withdraw and pronounce upon the world from a sanctuary without being involved in it. Or some people prefer not withdrawal within but removal to the outside where again they can have the comfort of certainty and can attack, provoke, and coerce the system they seek to change.

Both extremes are less noble and less painful than being an aware participant in a community. Ultimately the extremes are grossly hypocritical. Those who want immediate action to precipitate immediate change so that past accretions of civilizations can be corrected really may be asking for an Alexander the Great or even a holy crusade. They would be the first to rally with Lawrence to free the Arabs from oppression and to unite them. They would also be among the first to have to face the fact

that the Garden of Eden is not free for the taking nor ours by right or by choice. It was one thing for Lawrence to lead an Arab movement against the British. It was quite another to run a city once taken.

What are we to be, we of the land of prairies and mountains, who knew what was happening before the country did? We saw the painful conflict in ourselves, in our homes with our children, in our communities. Shall we do everything? Shall we do nothing? Can we be worthwhile? Must we destroy?

The question of action is where the hang-up is. How can one act to change something for the better? From inside or from outside? And if from the inside, how can integrity be preserved?

Consider the student who has declared uncompromising war against the established value system. We know him well and want to understand. Disillusioned about changing it from within, he would act with resistance or by confrontation to coerce honesty. He prefers not to tamper with trivial remedies. He seeks total reform, by destruction if necessary. For only then, he says, can a better way be built.

But let us look at the consequences. Destruction is more than revolution. It means relying on some agent of drastic action that may have fewer values and less humanity than the system being destroyed. Given the nature of man, how can we expect an alternative to be better?

Coming to this university last year from the outside for a year of learning, it crossed my mind that I might be expected to be all things to all people: A sorcerer who uses magic to change things instantly; a charlatan, mouthing everybody's righteous causes; a Steppenwolf who sits alone outside society's circle with a grin on his face, waiting to lead a revolution. But after all, my humanity is the same as every man's. And we all are expected to face these same questions.

Most students share these human values and have concerns also. Even if it does not show on the surface, all students have the same struggles with themselves as more vocal activists. The vast majority of students struggle to overcome their conflicts. They are hopeful people. They stick to their education despite the obvious shortcomings of it. They produce—and produce well—despite inner battles with themselves and outer battles with the Establishment. They share with all of us the need to stay alert, to be alive, to preserve inner integrity. They quietly wish things were different, and they want to help change them in their own ways.

An angry student, an outsider, can try to destroy an institution, flouting authority. He may antagonize policemen at political conventions or provoke violence for the sheer point of laughing at the Establishment's reaction. For he believes he will not be listened to without a revolution, without a confrontation. And as in Paris, there is

camaraderie behind the barricades. There is a common spirit of a united cause against the old enemy, the System.

However, there may be no sense of community for those who cannot tolerate the students who demand an abrupt end to hypocrisy, dishonesty, and bureaucracy. There is mutual rejection. Outsider and conformist alike become deeply estranged and critical of each other. Neither shares with the other. Force is the only way left, hence, confrontation. It is courageous to act on belief, to confront one's enemies face to face, unafraid even of violence. The tempo of life and events seem to make tolerance or patience unacceptable. But to destroy a human institution because it has some serious flaws is as inhumane as to kill a human being simply because he, like all of us, makes serious mistakes sometimes. *Our humanity is that we can love and accept whole persons despite their capacity for good and for evil.* In institutions and in solitude we must go beyond good and evil to survive. What is the "dirty, long-haired" fellow in the funny clothes really saying? If we listen closely, we hear him asking for his burden back, as the Negro and the American Indian have also asked.

When someone threatens another, saying, "You made this mess, you fix it, right now," he wants somebody else to take the burden. He is asking for a Messiah, someone to bear the burdens and guilt of the past and accomplish a remarkable miracle. As Dostoevski's grand inquisitor said people would say, "Make us your slaves but feed us." One who wants instant action is pleading for a Zarathustra to drag the dead man from the marketplace on his back.

We must refuse taking up another man's burden. Painfully and consciously, we must refuse it. We must love him enough to let him learn for himself to share responsibility with the community. He must learn to participate as a critic who confronts while he accepts his own part of the dead past. If he destroys, he must take the responsibility for the consequences.

The faculties of colleges and universities are inside the established system of higher education. Except for a few outsiders, the preoccupation of faculty members is to inquire and preserve. Most professors are impartial critics of society *outside their departments*. They may advocate change frequently. Less often do they act to overcome the evils of the educational system, for to act means risk. Experts at changing others should be able to renew themselves as well. But professors talking about changing the world outside the classroom while not in it are like the students who want immediate change in the university. Both are likely to be against the world but unable to be part of it.

Administrators have been equally affected. Mainly we attempt to be neutral, and thus we are not accepted by either students or faculty. We are interpreters, speaking many tongues without acting on our own values or commitments. But even the administration should have a right to participate together with the students and faculty within the university community and also within the larger society. If so, it cannot be neutral, for neutrality is a fiction hiding either manipulation or unconscious choice. But making the unaware administrator conscious for the first time is the discovery of a loss of innocence.

The administrator should also be a critic capable of sustaining his own values. To keep his integrity, he must preserve them even in light of change. A secure administrator is a catalyst—he is and his values remain the same during any change he helps introduce. He does not shift with the wind. The power of an administration, however, rests on its participation with others. By engaging their own value systems, administrative officials help clarify common goals and develop strategies for achieving them with everyone else who is committed to making the hard decisions that life and society require.

Tyranny in any administration means usurpation. A tyrant would exclude all students and faculty from participation just as surely as a student revolutionary would exclude faculty and administration. Each would assert his own values in place of established values. None can tolerate other members of the community, for tolerance would threaten the absolute nature of their own values. If they are unaware critics, they are dead. If they understand the meaning of their acts, they are despots.

The critic-at-large of the university is no different. He seeks not only to be heard but to prevail. He is the same as the student at the left who wants to tear Columbia down because it represents the Establishment and is corrupt. He is the same as the professor who wishes to change the outside world from his classroom.

**F**ences to exclude and walls to imprison are unhappy notions. They ask how can we love others when we do not love ourselves. How can we both attack injustice and share action? How can we accept ourselves without walls and fences when we are so afraid?

Just as surely as nature abhors a vacuum, the student, teacher, or administrator who himself offers no alternative to his restrictive criticism will find that he has lost his humanity. Then the demagogue can easily move in to capitalize on the reaction that follows and play fear against fear. Critics who refuse to participate from within while criticizing from without are begging someone else to do the hard work of setting right what they see as wrong. Saying they accept responsibility is not enough, for they can rarely foresee the consequences of their acts on others.

Just as students, faculty, and administrators must be both critics and participants, so institutions have the same potential for arenas in which they are involved:

*Universities must also learn to accept the larger community and be a participant in it, even though they must also be a loving critic. And the society should view the university as the university should view its critics—with humility and compassion.*

*Nations in their domestic and international affairs share the same problem. How can a nation assure the critics on the left and right and the minorities that they are a legitimate part of the political process? And how can the temptation be resisted to look to the President as Deity responsible for failing to remedy all the particular injustices of each citizen and each group? The nation must be large and just enough to have compassion for dissent and a process for its expression.*

The university lies midway between the church and the state. Uncommitted to either and detached, it has been a friendly critic of society for hundreds of years. Yet,



concerned and restrained, it has preserved our tradition and passed on the experience we call culture. It has not had secular or spiritual power, so its survival has depended on getting along with the state and the church. Its spiritual reserves have come from a passionate intellect—a life of the mind. It has kept the scabbards of the swords temporal and spiritual. It has kept nor drawn none of its own.

Now we see the university in crisis—attacked from within, accused from without, cursed by critics. Our minds are filled with cliché about the hypocritical Establishment, impersonal bureaucracy, irrelevant professors, apathetic students, radical student power movements, lack of academic freedom, violence on campus, the grim generation—and we miss the sharp edge of authenticity. Somehow these slogans do not ring true. Certainly they offer no criteria of value. As Nietzsche said, moral pronouncements negate themselves.

Is it possible for us to accept the fact that conflict does and will continue to exist within our universities and in society? Under these conditions perhaps a sharing of

values will come about only through a ritualistic battle, not a real one, within new forms where the confrontation can be made explicit, open, and nonviolent and the resolution understood, accepted, and accepted peacefully.

We have a deep feeling for the reverence for life in our land. In times of crisis we find great hope for its renewal. And even the old is filled with life. We sometimes forget what Walt Whitman said:

*Youth, large, lusty, loving—Youth, full of grace, force, fascination!*

*Do you know that Old Age may come after you, with equal grace, force, fascination?*

So that there may be a meeting of minds, so that there may be mutual loyalty to shared commitment, we must also listen deeply to Dag Hammarskjöld:

*The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak. Is this the starting point of the road toward the union of your two dreams—to be allowed in clarity of mind to mirror life and in purity of heart to mold it?* □