

The Educated Man in an Untidy World

By Horace Taylor

EXTRACTS FROM COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
GIVEN JUNE 3 BY DR. HORACE TAYLOR, '21

AN untidy world is not a pretty thing. Much that I have to say also is not pretty. On a beautiful June morning, when we are gathered to celebrate an event of great importance to all these young people, we feel, to the extent that we are able, joyous and poetic. If my contemplation of the issue that confronts us lacks overtones of lyricism, if it reflects a sober concern with a situation that is deadly serious, the reason lies both in me and in my subject. An untidy world has much that is detestable; yet I know no call for melancholy foreboding. A world in which educated people exist is still a world of abundant promise.

Educated people have minds that are trained in orderliness and in sustained reason. And, since educated people also are driven constantly to seek truth, beauty, and love in their particular manifestations, their mental patterns are more flexible and adaptable than those of other people. When the minds of educated people can find no sufficient reason or no adequate justification for what they see going on about them, then indeed there is no true meaning to the mind and no true value to the spirit as our bodies spin aimlessly through space and time.

This test by the minds and by the spirits of educated people is the ultimately convincing proof of an untidy world. It also is the prelude to the frustration and despair to which educated people always are peculiarly subject, but from which they can make their own escape by the very power of their education.

An educated person tries, by his knowledge of the past, so to understand the present so that he can visualize and prepare an abundant future. In this sense he seeks a command over time. But education itself ties us strongly to the past; it is only our visions and our hopes that relate us now to the future. The education which our past offers surpasses so greatly our finite capacities that its total can be expressed only as an ideal. The ideal involves knowing, understanding, and appreciating in the full light of our critical faculties the civilization which has shaped us and which we make.

If our bewilderment seems to us greater than any that our fathers knew, it must be because, at times now past, we misunderstood the meaning of what lay behind us and we built on false foundations our predictions and our plans of things to come. For the devastating effects of

these misapprehensions all of us bear some burden of responsibility. For the educated men among us there is the urgent obligation to acknowledge error, and to seek truth.

Most of us are, in some degree, liberals. In saying that we are liberals, I am using the word in its original and only



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true meaning, not in the current vulgar sense which makes it synonymous with "radical." In this original and true sense it means simply a person who believes in and advocates liberty, in thought, in speech, in action.

Why should we not believe in liberty. We have known it to do great things. We have seen free people, our own people, acting with the initiative, the courage, and the conviction that only free people have, create our own country. They made it a vast area which has greater material abundance, more lasting peace, broader ranges made secure for the mind and the spirit, than ever existed before so far as the annals of history reach.

Whence comes our world's untidiness? Is it that we of this generation have been betrayed by those men called great in the history of liberal thought and action? But betrayal is a conscious act, and those men did not know either us or our times. No man can betray people of whose very existence he is not aware, in situations of which he has never even dreamed. The fidelity of these men—as well as their wisdom—must be tested in the light of their own environments and according to their attitudes toward the problems that they faced.

These men did not betray us. It is we who have not been faithful to the

principles for which they stood. We have sought a mastery over our times by adopting the *conclusions* which these men reached, and have neglected or forgotten the *methods* which they used. To the extent that we have done this, we do not deserve the name of educated men.

Too many of us have become addicted to those deadly narcotics of the mind, slogans, over-generalized formulae, and too-simple explanations. These affect our understanding of the relations of man to man, of group to group, of nation to nation by blinding us to the particulars which are relevant.

The conclusions which were uttered by the great liberals of the past as propositions which summed up and clarified the facts and trends of their times, are mouthed by men today in ways which obscure truth. Untested and unverified generalizations were abhorrent to the great minds of the liberal tradition.

It is for us to examine the foundations of our beliefs. The Eighteenth-Century doctrine of liberalism was concerned with the liberty of individual men. Its conclusions with regard to practical action and the future of mankind were based on this conception.

Individual thought today is giving way before mass programs, and individual action is being submerged in collective action. In our economic life, determining power is exerted not so much by individuals acting according to their own free choices, as by entrenched organizations, such as corporations and trade unions, with which no single individual is strong enough to cope. In our political life also, the determining power is coming more and more to be exerted by organized factions and pressure groups.

Our ways of thinking about the conduct of affairs among nations also call for modification according to ascertainable facts. The liberalistic internationalism of Adam Smith, for example, was based on the conception of a nation as a free association of free men. As regards this assumption, also, there always have been deviations. But here again the deviations now are greater and are growing. Nations are coming more and more to act according to the dictates of a single directing intelligence toward the fulfillment of a single objective. When the directing intelligence gives way to fanatical fury, and the objective is distorted

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The Educated Person In an Untidy World

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into sheer greed, the deviation from the liberal premise becomes a complete shift of position.

The great French historian, Fustel de Coulanges, had a motto which he gave to all his students. That motto was, *quaesto*, search. That, in a word, is the method that the great liberals bequeathed to us. If we use this method diligently in our treatment of the problems that we face, if there is among us the genius to squeeze significance from the facts that we find, if we can rid our minds of slogans, of over-generalized formulae, of easy explanations, then we, like the great liberals, will be educated men.

The conditions of our time do not mean that the relations of man to man and of nation to nation can never again be free. It even seems clear that there lies before us, if we seek it with sufficient purpose, a more abundant liberty than men have ever known. We have only begun to realize, for example, the great liberalizing benefits of modern science. And we also have begun to achieve that greater liberty of the mind and the spirit which is the glory of the educated man. It is easier to mouth slogans, and to play that formulae are wisdom; we have to get our education the hard way.

How perfectly the necessities of education conform to the ideal of liberty! How perfectly they accord with the ideal of individual responsibility! Masses and mobs can never be educated; only individual men can be. Nor can masses and mobs consist of educated men; mob-minds and educated minds present a contradiction which no dialectic can evade and no sophistry can explain away.

The freedom and existence we aspire to win are the freedom and existence of educated men. They can be conquered only by each person for himself. It is only through his own inner urge, under his own direction, and by virtue of his own criticism of himself, that any man ever is educated. Without the last of these, a passion for purposive self-criticism, no strength of inner urge, and no astuteness in direction, can yield an educated man.

The point at which any person can start in trying to remove the untidiness from the world is with his own education. Any start that he may make that leaves this foundation step must fail; it can result only in greater untidiness rather than in less.

We are confronted constantly with men of small soul and great ambition who offer themselves as personal embodiments of Plato's ideal. They pretend to be philosophers because they want to be kings.

They set their pretensions persuasively before us, first, by denying all those generalizations from the past which no longer serve to explain or to justify the particulars of the present, and then by promising us, in a new set of generalizations, a future of peace, security, abundance, and brotherly love.

Here again the educated person must seek to pierce the generalizations and to discover the relevant particulars. Some of these particulars are immediately apparent; they are detailed conditions of greed, of tyranny, of treachery, of murderousness. The generalizations which are proclaimed are seductive; the voices which proclaim them are those of baritone sirens. To know these pretenders in detail for what they are, to denounce them and resist them, is the most immediate moral obligation of educated people in our time.

If we practice the arts of education until we seek liberty, truth, justice, beauty, and love in their particular manifestations and as ends in themselves, then we will have become philosophers in the sense of Plato's ideal. When enough citizens have become philosophers there will be no place for kings.

Can we do this, and in so doing rid ourselves of the narcotic craving for slogans, for over-generalized formulae, for too simple explanations? If we can we will emerge from a past that was what it was without regard to us, into the future of the only free person—the educated person.

We can, that is, if our educated minds are wise and if our educated hearts are strong.

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Watch Towers

The Norman Transcript in a recent editorial concludes that there is no reason why a university cannot perform purely scholarly functions and at the same time work with the people of the state on practical means of social betterment. The Transcript's editorial stated:

The accusation has frequently been made that universities are too much devoted to a purely academic scholarship, and that professors and students withdraw into an ivory tower remote from the world of blood and toil, there to contemplate abstraction and split scholastic hairs.

The average college campus is fairly roomy, and there seems no good reason why it does not offer space for both an ivory tower and a watch tower as well. To build the latter, President Dykstra of the University of Wisconsin has called a conference at Indiana University to see whether colleges may not co-operate more actively with citizens' organizations in their own vicinities.

It seems a good idea. There is no reason why the scholarly achievements of colleges should not be placed at the disposal of any who want to use them, including practical politicians and all who work for social betterment. If ivory towers are not themselves suitable for watch towers of democracy, there is no reason why the watch towers can't be built right along side.

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