WHICH WAY THE PROMISED LAND?

Education is in the news these days. On the whole it seems to be getting a rather bad press, but that it is getting a press no one can deny. Pick up any daily paper and you are likely to encounter at least half a dozen suggestions as to what's wrong with American education and what should be done. The more familiar suggestions include federal aid, higher pay to teachers, less method and more subject matter, the training of teachers, greater attention to the superior student, more parental responsibility for education, and a general tightening up of the curriculum. Behind this flurry of concern, of course, lies Russia and her Sputnik. It is natural, therefore, that the dominant proposal is that more attention be given to science. This may be valid. But we err if we suppose that the secret of Russia's educational vitality lies in its emphasis on science or in some other educational gimmick. It lies, rather, in the clarity of Soviet objectives, her sense of historic mission, and her confidence in her world view. It is clarity on these points that gives direction to Soviet society and motivates its citizens. This doesn't mean that we should duplicate Soviet goals. At critical points we believe these to be mistaken. But it does mean that more important than any change in educational technique, we need to clarify our objectives and deepen our motivation. So I think that the theme you have chosen for this conference - - "Values We Live By - - Choices We Make" - - is the right one. These are grand questions, yet they are the ones to which we seem to be paying the least attention.

I must tell you, however, that if you read the title of this conference in its normative sense - - namely, as values we should live by - - choices we should make - - you will not find these values lying around self-evidently in our culture today. The most sensitive barometer of the human spirit in any culture is its literature, its art, and its philosophy, and the report of these in the
recent West has not been a report of clarity and light. It has been, rather, a report of confusion, meaninglessness, alienation, and estrangement.

Let us quickly call the roll.

Art: In many ways ours is a creative age in art, but it is often a chaotic and broken creativity in which artistic creations express with poignant accuracy the crisis in our spirit. In much of the best contemporary painting and sculpture everyday things are twisted and broken beyond recognition. The surface structures of reality are disrupted. Solid objects are twisted like ropes, their edges jagged as a saw, the causal interdependence of things disregarded. The organic structures of life are cut into pieces and arbitrarily recomposed. Things are dispersed, colors separated from their natural carriers, and we are left dizzy.

Music: In popular music the dominant expressions are bop and rock 'n' roll. We get used to the noises involved in these, but if we were to hear them out of the framework of our normal acceptance we would detect the anguish and frustration they reflect. This came to me abroad when suddenly, in an Arab village or Indian town, the cries of an American crooner would break upon my ears. You can get the same effect without leaving home by tuning in one of these crooners visually on your TV without turning up the sound. Having thus broken through your routine response, watch his tortured facial expressions. Even in classical music, harmony is replaced by cacophony and dissonance — one thinks of the raucous sounds of Strindberg and Bartok. These are creativeness and vitality but clarity and serenity are not their motifs.

Literature: Alan Ginsberg may be extreme when he howls "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked ..." but despite all the differences between Hemingway and Joyce, between Aldous Huxley and Jean-Paul Sartre, their heroes have in common a nagging dissatisfaction with the range of their everyday experience as they senses the lack of spiritual tension in our materially prosperous civilization.
Philosophy: Current concern seems to be divided between the
minutes of linguistic analysis on the one hand, and on the other, an existent-
ialism which holds that there are no cosmic standards for life, the only abiding
value being that of pure common naked decision. Is it any wonder that a research-
er, asking college students what would outrage their sense of values, found that
the answer was appreciably less than had been obtained when the same questions
was asked approximately thirty years ago?

When I was young and bold and strong,
Ah, right was right and wrong was wrong.
With standard high and flag unfurled
I rode away to right the world.
Come out you dogs and fight, cried I,
And wet thy head but once to die.

Now I am old, and good and bad
Are woven in a crazy plaid.
I sit and say the world is so
And he is wise who lets it go.
The battle lost, the battle won,
The difference is small, my son.
Inertia rides and riddles me
And calls itself philosophy.

If it be true that we cannot today find our value directives self-
evidently present in the culture that surrounds us, what should we do? Let me
suggest that there is something we can do with respect to the past, the future,
and the present.

1. With respect to the past I would propose that we recover the great
moral platitudes. Let us frankly admit it: what I shall speak to in the next
few minutes will not be new; I will be uttering platitudes throughout. But
let us not scorn the thoughts for this reason; they have become platitudes be-
cause they are true.

Before enumerating some of these moral platitudes, let me say that I
am hopeful about their recovery. Two things in this century have worked against
value convictions of any sort. One of these is ethical relativism. When the
anthropologists began seriously to study the various cultures of the world, they found their moral codes startlingly divergent. This discovery seemed to force the conclusion that all moral values are relative. The notion has taken root among college students. But one of the most encouraging signs in theoretical ethics has been the tempering of this notion as anthropologists are discovering that their initial judgment was premature, that beneath the welter of surface differences there are certain values essential to human living, to say nothing of human living on a high and rewarding plane. There is not time here to detail this point. If you wish to look into it let me simply cite the latest book by one of the two "deans of American anthropology," Professor Robert Redfield's *The Primitive World and Its Transformation*.

The second force working against value conviction has been science. Its incredible success has aggravated the theoretical distinction between fact and value with the supposition that judgments of fact are capable of verification but judgments of value not. Here again I sense a tempering of this half-truth as the developing science of psycho-therapy discovers that there are certain principles of inter-personal relationships that make for mental health and to this extent at least have the backing of science.

For our example of some of the great moral platitudes on which civilization has built thus far, let me suggest three. First: that life is worth living. This conviction has nothing to do with the Pollyanna smile. It does not require enthusiasm for the status quo or the way things seem to be going. I am not talking about being cheerful before breakfast, and I don't think that I am thinking about positive thinking. The attitude I have in mind is compatible with the soapbox Cassandra and the acid iconoclast; certainly it is content with the wonderful character in *Screwy* who was "born with the gift of laughter and the sense that the world was mad." The point is simply that the human spirit requires a circulation of faith just as much as the body requires the circulation of blood. If the intangible, creative currents which make for vitality are stopped, life falters and ultimately fails.
If the first great moral platitude is that life is worth living, the second is that life's law is love. I want to try to speak of love in an unsentimental way. This is going to be difficult because Hollywood and the popular songs have almost destroyed the word. Of all the worn, smudged, and dog-eared words in the English vocabulary, certainly love has become the grubbiest and clumsiest, yet it cannot be abandoned. Let me simply say that by love I have in mind the outreaching of the human spirit that finds its joy in persons and things apart from their relation to himself. In this sense, beyond the eye of persons, there is a love of things as they are in their own right which we call beauty. Sometimes this sense of beauty can become almost overpowering, as when a poet wrote "I am so filled with ghosts of loveliness that to gaze, and memorize, and duplicate." When love passes to a love for life in reality as a whole, we call it sanctity.

The third example of a great moral platitude is that things of the spirit — that is, those not directly connected with material objects or bodily appetites — are worthwhile. The values of the spirit may not be as obvious as material values but they are real. Often their rewards come in the depths of night when the spirit sings. But whenever they come, knowledge, and insight, and extended vision, when real, bring joy. The wave of illumination, the wave of understanding — exultation follows in their wake.

It is difficult to give resonance to platitudes, but the three values we have enumerated have at least this characteristic of profundity — their simplicity. We have come to recognize that science has postulates: that nature is intelligible and that truth is good. What infirmity of spirit keeps us from recognizing that the moral life, too, has its postulates? Aristotle said that the aim of education is to make the people like and dislike what they ought. When the age for reflective thought comes, the pupil who has been trained in proper affections and just sentiments will easily find first principles in ethics. To those who have not been thus trained, however, they will never become visible. Plato had said the same before him. Unless we affirm these great moral platitudes
with our lives, a portion of the human heritage will quietly slip from our students before they are old enough to understand; before they have reached the age of full discretion, the possibility of having certain experiences which the wise in every age have held to be generous, fruitful, and humane, will have been cut out of their souls.

2. If our responsibility towards the past is to recover the great moral platitudes, our responsibility towards the future is to explore the great value differences which the meeting of cultures is making us aware of. Here again I would mention three. In each case the East and the modern West seem to diverge.

On the whole the West in modern times has emphasized progress or the improvement of the world whereas the East has emphasized the acceptance of it. Our divine discontent with things as they are and our determination to make the world a better place to live in, has, I believe, contributed greatly to the human venture. Today the East is learning from us on this score as with great energy it seeks to raise its standard of living. But have we not something to learn from the East too? No one has more than one life to live, and if in the midst of our endeavors to transform it, we cannot sense the goodness of our imperfect lives, the worth of this imperfect world, we will have forfeited the only chance of joy on earth that we shall have. I was greatly impressed when my Zen teacher in Japan insisted that until an individual has attained the power of seeing the worth of life when he is alone and doing nothing more than being aware of life, no further endeavors on his part will make a net contribution to man which is positive. There is a Zen poem on this matter of acceptance that is to the point.

My daily activities are not different, 
Only I am naturally in harmony with them. 
Taking nothing, renouncing nothing, 
In every circumstance no hindrance, no conflict. 
Drawing water, carrying firewood, 
This is supernatural power, this marvelous activity.

The second great value difference in our day pertains to the dichotomy between individualism and community. We in the West have emphasized the former,
Here again I think we have made a positive contribution. Competition, assertion, these qualities can be productive. But have we not gone too far? Certainly the East has explored the concept of community more fully than the modern West. One thinks of the kibbutzim, the collective farming communities in Israel. One also thinks of the Far East where each individual is caught up in a web of controlling social relationships. The pattern may stifle spontaneity in individuality, but it also achieves values we have lost. It is instructive to note, for example, that in the severest test of values life can afford -- namely, the transplanting of life through immigration -- Chinese and Japanese hold their value systems intact better than any other national groups. There are virtually no delinquents among the immigrants from the Far East to America.

A third great value dichotomy between East and West is that between reason and intuition. Here again the West has favored the former. It has achieved wonders, especially in developing our science to the point where it is the envy of the East. But is reason all there is to mind? There is a profound conviction in the East that ultimately intuition is a surer guide. Here again let me refer to my Zen teacher in Kyoto. When I persisted in trying to answer rationally the problems posed for me at length become impatient. One day he said to me: "The trouble with you is that you have philosopher's disease. I know about philosophy; I have a philosophy degree. But philosophy is restricted to reason. Reason is a wonderful instrument, but it can work only in terms of the experience that it has had. You have the reason; it is the experience that you lack. Deepen your experience and your reason will reveal different ranges of reality than before."

My own feeling is that truth lies somewhere between the dichotomies on each of the above-mentioned points. But whereas with regard to the great moral platitudes, truth points clearly to unanimity, in this area of the great differences free and full experimentation at both ends of the spectrum of
values should be encouraged until the world moves towards clearer understanding of where the greatest value rests along the continuum.

3. We have spoken to the past and to the future. A word in closing with respect to the present.

There are some who find themselves incapable of exploring either the past or the future because right now, at the moment, their lives are so enveloped in a sense of life's meaninglessness that they have almost no motivation. I am right now working with a person of this type. Everything he does, even those things that for most persons would be utterly routine, requires will power, for with respect to every act he has first to argue whether it is worth doing. If only he didn't have this incessant struggle just to keep his nose above the water-line of meaning, he estimates that he would have the equivalent of about three hours more in time and energy each day.

With those who find themselves in this predicament — and it is not an uncommon one in our time — the only relevant truth I know of is that it is easier to act one's way into right thinking than it is to think one's way into right acting. This means that American culture as a whole will gain in significance insofar as it responds to the two leading moral challenges that face it: first, that of accommodating Negroes more fully in our society; and second, that of redressing the world's impossible economic imbalance in which at present 70% of the world's goods are in the possession of 17% of its population. As far as the individual is concerned, the most promising road out of his present meaninglessness lies through doing each day the duties that lie at hand without comprehending at the time precisely why or for what.

In all the great undertakings of mankind there must in the beginning be a belief that what has to be done can be done. I believe that if we give ourselves with a will to reconstruction our values, we can rise to what our times demand.

= Preston Smith
27 March 1956