

The Next Great Change

✠ SINCE education is concerned with the future, let us ask ourselves what we know positively about the future.

We know that all parts of the world are getting closer together in terms of the mechanical means of transportation and communication. We know that this will continue. The world is going to be unified, by conquest or consent.

We know that the fact that all parts of the world are getting closer together does not by itself mean greater unity or safety in the world. It may mean that we shall all go up in one great explosion.

We know that there is no defense against the most destructive of modern weapons. Both the victor and the defeated will lose the next war. All the factors that formerly protected this country, geographical isolation, industrial strength, and military power, are now obsolete.

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We know that the anarchy of competing sovereign states must lead to war sooner or later. Therefore we must have world law, enforced by a world organization, which must be attained through world co-operation and community.

We know that it will be impossible to induce all men to agree on all matters. The most we can hope for is to induce all men to be willing to discuss all matters instead of shooting one another about some matters. A civilization in which all men are compelled to agree is not one in which we would care to live. Under such circumstances one world would be worse than many; for in many worlds there is at least the chance of escape from one to another. The only civilization in which a free man would be willing to live is one that conceives of history as one long conversation leading to clarification and understanding. Such a civilization presupposes communication; it does not require agreement.

We know that time is of the essence. Every day we read announcements of advances in transportation and "advances" in destruction. We can now go round the world in the time it used to take to go from New York to Boston; and we can kill a quarter of a million people with one bomb. We are promised bigger and better instruments of mass murder in every issue of our daily papers. At the same time the hostility among sovereign states is deepening by the hour.

How can we prepare for a future like this?

We see at once that the primary, not the incidental, participants in an educational program designed to cope with a future like this must be adults. They are in charge of the world. The rising generation, unless the adults in charge of the world can find some way of living together immediately, may never have a chance to rise.

I do not wish to exaggerate the possibilities of adult education through great books and the liberal arts, or by any other means, as a method of preventing war. If all the adults

in America could suddenly realize their full human potentialities, which is the object of liberal education, and the government of Russia remained what it is today, we might merely have the satisfaction of being blown up with our full human potentialities realized instead of unrealized. In view of the prevailing skepticism about the immortality of the soul I cannot expect American readers to regard this as more than a dubious consolation.

Yet there will not be much argument against the proposition that, on the whole, reasonable and intelligent people, even if they confront aggressively unreasonable or stupid people, have a better chance of attaining their end, which in this case is peace, than if they are themselves unreasonable and stupid. They may even be able by their example to help their opponents to become more reasonable and less stupid.

The United States is now the most powerful country in the world. It has been a world power for a very short time. It has not had centuries of experience in which to learn how to discharge the responsibilities of a position into which it was catapulted against its will. Nor has it had the kind of education, in the last fifty years, that is conducive to understanding its position or to maintaining it with balance, dignity, and charity. An educational system that aims at vocational training, or social adjustment, or technological advance is not likely to lead to the kind of maturity that the present crisis demands of the most powerful nation in the world.

A country that is powerful, inexperienced, and uneducated can be a great danger to world peace. The United States is unlikely to endanger peace through malevolence. The people of this country do not appear to bear any ill-will toward any other people; nor do they want anything that any other people have. Since they are devoted to their own kind of society and government, they do not want any other nation to threaten the continued prosperity of their society and

government. Any military moves made by the United States will be made in the conviction that they are necessary for the defense of this country.

But this conviction may be mistaken. It may be hysterical, or it may be ignorant. We can easily blunder into war. Since we may have committed such a blunder even before these words appear in print, I must repeat that I do not wish to exaggerate the importance of these books, or any other means of adult education, as a method of preventing such a blunder. The time is short, and education is long. What I am saying is that, since education is long, and since it is indispensable, we should begin it right away.

When Marshal Lyautey was in Africa, he asked his gardener to plant a certain tree, the foliage of which he liked very much. The gardener said that a tree of this kind took two hundred years to reach maturity. "In that case," said the marshal, "there is no time to lose. Plant it today."

The Great Conversation symbolizes that Civilization of the Dialogue which is the only civilization in which a free man would care to live. It promotes the realization of that civilization here and now. This set of books is organized on the principle of attaining clarification and understanding of the most important issues, as stated by the greatest writers of the West, through continuous discussion. Its object is to project the Great Conversation into the future and to have everybody participate in it. The community toward which it is hoped that these books may contribute is the community of free minds.

Now the only defense that any nation can have is the character and intelligence of its people. The adequacy of that defense will depend upon the strength of the conviction that the nation is worth defending. This conviction must rest on a comprehension of the values for which that nation stands. In the case of the United States those values are to be found in

the tradition of the West. The tradition of the West is the Great Conversation.

We have repeated to ourselves so much of late the slogan, "America must be strong," that we have forgotten what strength is. We appear to believe that strength consists of masses of men and machines. I do not deny that they have their role. But surely the essential ingredients of strength are trained intelligence, love of country, the understanding of its ideals, and such devotion to those ideals that they become a part of the thought and life of every citizen.

We cannot hope to make ourselves intelligible to the rest of the world unless we understand ourselves. We now present a confusing picture to other peoples largely because we are ourselves confused. To take only one example, how can we say that we are a part of the great tradition of the West, the essence of which is that nothing is to be undiscussed, when some of our most representative citizens constantly demand the suppression of freedom of speech in the interest of national security? Now that military power is obsolescent, the national security depends on our understanding of and devotion to such ancient Western liberties as free speech. If we abandon our ideals under external pressure, we give away without a fight what we would be fighting for if we went to war. We abandon the sources of our strength.

How can we say that we are defending the tradition of the West if we do not know what it is? An educational program, for young people or adults, from which this tradition has disappeared, fails, of course, to transmit it to our own people. It also fails to convince other people that we are devoted to it as we claim. Any detached observer looking at the American educational system can see that the bulk of its activity is irrelevant to any of the things we know about the future.

Vocationalism, scientism, and specialism can at the most

assist our people to earn a living and thus maintain the economy of the United States. They cannot contribute to the much more important elements of national strength: trained intelligence, the understanding of the country's ideals, and devotion to them. Nor can they contribute to the growth of a community in this country. They are divisive rather than unifying forces. Vocational training, scientific experimentation, and specialization do not have to supplant liberal education in order to make their economic contribution. We can have liberal education for all and vocational training, scientific experimentation, and specialization, too.

We hear a great deal nowadays about international understanding, world community, and world organization. These things are all supposed to be good; but nothing very concrete is put forward as to the method by which they can be attained. We can be positive on one point: we are safe in saying that these things will not be brought about by vocational training, scientific experiment, and specialization. The kind of education we have for young people and adults in the United States today will not advance these causes. I should like to suggest one or two ways in which they may be advanced.

We should first dispose of the proposition that we cannot have world organization, a world of law, without a world community. This appears to overlook the obvious interaction between legal institutions and culture. As Aristotle pointed out long ago, law is itself an educational force. The Constitution of the United States educates the people every day to believe in and support the Constitution of the United States.

World community, in the sense of perfect understanding among all peoples everywhere, is not required in order to have the beginnings of world law. What is required is that minimum understanding which is sufficient to allow world

law to begin. From that point forward world law will support world community and world community will support world law.

For example, there are those who oppose the discussion of universal disarmament on the ground that disarmament is an effect and not a cause. They say that, until the tensions in the world are removed, disarmament cannot take place and that we shall simply deceive ourselves if we talk about it instead of doing something about the tensions.

Actually one way to do something about the tensions is to talk about disarmament. The manifestation of a general willingness to disarm under effective international regulation and control would do more to relieve the tensions in the world than any other single thing. Getting together to see whether such a plan could be formulated would relieve tension. No doubt there would be disappointments, and the risk of exacerbating international irritations; but to refuse to discuss the principal method of mitigating tensions on the ground that they have to be mitigated before it is discussed does not seem to be the best way to mitigate them.

What are the best ways of promoting that minimum of understanding which is necessary to permit world law to begin? If community depends on communication, we must ask what kinds of things can be most readily communicated to and comprehended by the largest number of people, and what kinds of things tell the most about the people who are doing the communicating? It appears that the kind of things that are most intelligible and most revealing are ideas and artistic objects. They are most readily understood; they are most characteristic of the peoples who have produced or stated them.

We can learn more about another people from their artistic and intellectual productions than we can from all the statistics and data that can ever be collected. We can learn more,

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that is, of what we need to know in order to found a world community. We can learn more in the sense that we can understand more. What we have in this set of books is a means by which people who can read English can understand the West. We in the West can understand ourselves and one another; peoples in other parts of the world can understand us.

This leads to the idea that Scott Buchanan has put forward, the idea of a world republic of law and justice and a world republic of learning mutually supporting each other. Any republic maintains its justice, peace, freedom, and order by the exercise of intelligence. Every assent on the part of the governed is a product of learning. A republic is a common educational life in process. So Montesquieu said that as the principle of an aristocracy was honor, and the principle of a tyranny was fear, the principle of a democracy was education. Thomas Jefferson took him seriously. Now we discover that a little learning is a dangerous thing. We see now that we need more learning, more real learning, for everybody.

The republic of learning is that republic toward which all mere political republics gravitate, and which they must serve if they are to be true to themselves. No one saw this before yesterday, and we only today are able to begin to measure what we should do about it tomorrow. The immediate inference from this insight is a utopia for today, the extension of universal education to every man and woman, from childhood to the grave. It is time to take education away from the scholars and school teachers and to open the gates of the republic of learning to those who can and will make it responsible to humanity.

Learning is in principle and should be in fact the highest common good, to be defended as a right and worked for as an end. All men are capable of learning, according to their abilities. Learning does not stop as long as a man lives, unless

his learning power atrophies because he does not use it. Political freedom cannot last without provision for the free unlimited acquisition of knowledge. Truth is not long retained in human affairs without continual learning and re-learning. A political order is tyrannical if it is not rational.

If we aim at a world republic of law and justice, we must recover and revive the great tradition of liberal human thought, rethink our knowledge in its light and shadow, and set up the devices of learning by which everybody can, perhaps for the first time, become a citizen of the world. The kind of understanding that comes through belonging to the world republic of learning is the kind that constitutes the world community. The world republic of law and justice is nothing but the political expression of the world republic of learning and the world community.