

¶Does schooling really educate a person?

A TEACHER STOPS TO THINK

FOR nearly 20 years I have been engaged in teaching writing and literature. And never until recently did I stop to consider the value and effectiveness of my work.

I see clearly now that I belong to a generation whose entire concept of education was conditioned by nineteenth-century idealism. We had abundant faith in both scholarship and education. Scholarship was the search for truth and education was the making of truth known. We believed, literally, that we were going to help build a better world and a freer humanity. Progress was something that actually existed. It was not only a greater abundance of physical comforts made possible by the miracle of science, but a deeper awareness of man's place in the universe and of his right to understanding, justice, and tolerance. And although I began teaching when War like a universal blight had descended on the spirit of man, I carried with me into the classroom an unquestioned faith in humanity's ability ultimately to solve all its problems and in education as one of its main weapons for that end.

Today, I cannot help smiling

a bit sadly at the young dreamer that entered that first classroom. So many college generations have sat under me and my colleagues since then, eager youths who have gone forth into the world to become doctors and lawyers and chemists and sellers of stocks and bonds; joiners and boosters and politicians. All of them "college men" and most of them as visionless as clods, as apathetic to things of the mind as Caliban himself.

I know, of course, that we expected too much, that we were unrealistic in our conception of the world, that we were blind to the inevitable collapse of the unregulated industrial "Progress" which made possible the expansion of our educational system. I know that economic forces are stronger than ideals, that greed and hatred are not eradicated by soft words, that things have a way of getting into the saddle.

Ours is a tragic role. As I see it—when I interrupt for a moment the routine of roll-books, grades, records, assignments, committee meetings, and faculty politics—we have fallen victim to two fallacies which have destroyed our usefulness to humanity. The first is that edu-

cation, in the humanist sense of Erasmus, is synonymous with education for a trade. Every skillful engineer or surgeon or accountant is a useful citizen but he is not necessarily an educated man. Our imprimatur upon him as an "educated" person is a misrepresentation, and permits him to play a part in society for which he is totally unprepared.

The second fallacy is both possible and desirable. We have created a new career, that of the scholar, and have encouraged thousands of mediocre careerists to go into it. We have extolled research as an accomplishment until we have lost sight of the fact that research is only necessary for the purpose of discovering truths by which humanity can live. To uncover petty facts which have no meaning, but merely attest the industry of a careerist, so that he may achieve a promotion, is to reduce research to an absurdity.

For a moment just now, I am thinking of the "leadership of the world," whom presumably we have trained, and of the trainers. I am thinking of humanity, which is the real subject of our learning and teaching not verbs and kennings and metrics and biographical crotchets—but humanity, even the least of these. And I am thinking of the appalling cheapness of human life everywhere. I am

thinking of new doctrines and political systems, of social and "cultural" institutions, of wars and rumors of wars, of the glorification of cruelty and hatred and intolerance, of the spread of exclusiveness and snobbery, of ignorance and prejudice and pride, of the cynical and joyful manifestations of man's savage instinct to hurt his fellowmen. We teachers have not, I want to believe, encouraged this darkness, but neither have we done anything to discourage it. We have simply done nothing.

For I am wondering how it is possible for thousands of people to be exposed to the works of Lessing and Goethe and Schiller and Heine and yet, when a crisis came, forget them so easily and accept the hysterical canard that *all* Germans were "Boches" and wanton perpetrators of unspeakable atrocities. We who have taught these thousands *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* and *Fathers and Sons* have not dissuaded them from believing that *all* Russians are bearded, unwashed barbarians. We have given them *La Debacle*, *What Price Glory?*, *Journey's End*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and they have learned nothing. They have been moved neither to grief nor reflection, neither to indignation nor action, for they have not understood. We have taught them Literature, but we have

not taught them to understand Man, neither themselves nor their neighbors, who still remain for them "Wops," "Bohunks," "Reds," "Jews," "Catholics," furriners," New Dealers, hoboes, heathens.

Anyone who writes as I have written is expected to offer a solution, a remedy, a panacea. I do not profess to know any. The truth seems to be that any system of education is but a reflection of the society which supports it, and that only by

changing society can we hope to change education. But an equal truth seems to be that in every state of society there exists "anachronistic" teachers whose scale of values is determined by Time rather than the times. If enough of them can be made conscious and articulate of the spiritual heritage of mankind, they can have a measurable influence on the shape of things to come.—
Norman Grey, condensed from Educational Forum.