

Address delivered by
Dr. Robert M. Hutchins, President, Fund for the Republic, Inc.
at the Hunter College Commencement, June 13, 1957.

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Members of the Graduating Class:

Not long ago a young woman at a co-educational college in Oklahoma was asked why she was depressed. She replied, "I come here to be went with and I ain't."

Although the narrow, discriminatory practices of Hunter College, by which a whole sex was once arbitrarily debarred from its advantages, have now been somewhat relaxed, the proportion of the fair to the strong is still such as to justify us in saying that the Oklahoma girl's ambition could not have led you here.

Because of the reputation and standards of Hunter College we may suspect that you came here to get an education. This means that you have had a chance for the last four years to learn to think. In fact, since it has just been publicly stated that you are educated, we must assume that you have in fact learned to do so.

The only question now is whether you will keep on doing so. The question is legitimate, because it may be that the reason you have thought up to this point is that you have had to. How can we tell what you will do when you don't have to? You are already in a position to testify that thinking is hard work. As Aristotle said, "Learning is accompanied by pain."

We know, too, that whereas a great deal of thinking is required to get through Hunter, none is necessary to get through life. By definition a moron is a person who cannot think, and one of the benefits conferred upon us by the Industrial Revolution is that it has made it possible for morons to be successful. In 1948, Dr. Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, sociologist at the Connecticut College for Women, reported to the American Association on Mental Deficiency that the typical male moron earned as much as \$3.50 a week more than the average industrial wage and that the female moron uniformly made more money than the normal woman industrial worker.

These figures should not surprise us, for it is obvious that the aim of mechanization is to get the operation simplified to the point where only his presence, and very little of that, is demanded of the operator. A capacity to think, and still worse, an insistence on doing so, may in such operations be a positive handicap.

We here begin to discern one of the reasons for the prevailing anti-intellectualism in this country. People who think do not fit in easily. If you say that you do not intend to be an industrial worker, but a commander of such corks, or if you say that you do not intend to enter the industrial system at all, but that you plan to be a suburban housewife, you should read Holly Whyte's book, The Organization Man, before concluding that such a shift in your economic role will improve your chances to keep on thinking. Mr. Whyte reports that the General Electric Company's training manual for manager instructs these industrial commanders that they are never to say anything controversial; and his description of life in the Chicago suburbs leads one to suspect that the housewife is happiest there who most closely approximates the definition of a moron.

The trouble with thinking is that it leads to criticism. As Professor Yves Simon, of the University of Chicago, has put it, "I do not know, I cannot imagine, any group which does not include amongst its current ideas an enormous dose of lies. That being the case, the alternative is inevitable: either one must like falsehood, or one must dislike the familiar setting of daily life." A person who thinks is one who dislikes falsehood. And since it is impossible to dislike it and never say anything about it—a fit of absence of mind must occasionally overtake the most taciturn thinker among General Electric managers—it is impossible to think and never say anything controversial. The consequences appear in the remark of a great industrialist in Detroit to a friend of mine: "You are either a Communist or a thinker."

The unpopularity of thinking has a good deal to do with bringing about the alteration in the aims of education that has taken place in the thirty-five years that I have been employed by educational institutions. We exhibit a certain shyness now when we talk about those aims, intellectual training and intellectual activity, which were accepted as a matter of course in my youth. The young woman from Oklahoma whom I quoted to you at the beginning had doubtless heard and relied upon the current doctrine, that the aim of education is to adjust the young to the group. Its failure to perform its proper function is her case justified her disappointment with it.

William Berkeley, Governor of Virginia in the 17th century, said, "Thank God there are no free schools or printing,.....for learning has brought disobedience and heresy....into the world, and printing has divulged them....God keep us from both." The doctrine that education is for the purpose of adjusting the young to their environment is an attempt to combine Berkeley's ideal, no schools at all, with the contemporary American ideal of schools for everybody. The combination is to be effected by having schools without education. In the same way we seek to combine Berkeley's ideal of no printing at all with the contemporary ideal of print for everybody by printing more and more that is not worth reading.

The only way to get along with falsehood is not to think. This is easier than you may suppose. I have already demonstrated that thinking is painful, unnecessary, and unpopular. The din of public and private propoganda in which we live, the pressure exerted by the institutions in which we work and have our being, and the tyranny of our neighbor's lifted eyebrow making thinking next to impossible. Under these circumstances the habit of not thinking, of not caring, or not protesting is the easiest in the world to acquire. The most common statement you can hear today is, "I don't want to get involved."

Thinking proceeds in the effort to raise and answer questions. The Socratic dialogue is the model of civilized society. Certain technical and economic changes have placed the present generation at a disadvantage. The forum and the general store, which used to be the centers of discussion in this country, are being driven out of business by television and the supermarket. There can't be much conversation when you are watching that little screen or pushing your cart down those unending corridors of cans.

Far more serious are the fashions in silence with which we are afflicted. As recently as 1920 the Vice-President of the United States called attention to the radical tendencies in the women's colleges by pointing out that the Radcliffe girls had held a public debate in which they had taken the affirmative of the question, Resolved: that recognition of the labor unions is in the public interest.

Only the other day the commandants of the Military and Naval Academies thought it dangerous to have their young gentlemen on either side of the question whether Red China should be admitted to the United Nations. Nobody would care to ask today what is the precise degree of danger that the American Communist Party constitutes in the United States; for it is an article of faith that the Communist Party in America is not only dedicated to overthrowing the government by force, which of course it assuredly is, but also that it is capable of doing so. Nobody would care to ask today whether our conviction that we need to spend twice or twenty times the amount of money on education that we now devote to it is justified by the quality of education that our children are now receiving or precisely how the quality of education is to be improved by the expenditures proposed. It is now tacitly understood that American education needs nothing but money, that all teachers, all subjects, and all schools and colleges need more money, and it would be rude to ask whether it is absolutely certain that they all deserve it. Yet two or three weeks ago the organization called Connecticut Citizens for the Public Schools announced that per-pupil costs of public schooling in 51 Connecticut towns show no correlation with the scores of the students in those towns on achievement tests and that the longer the average teacher has been in the profession the less likely it is that the students in that town will achieve a high score on such tests.

If it is possible to ask a question, it may not be possible to get an intelligible answer. The world is hidden from us by the cliché curtain. Just as the question of the actual danger from the Communist Party in America can't be raised because the Party is a treasonable conspiracy, and the question of educational expenditures can't be raised because education is a good thing, so the question of Strontium 90 is disposed of by saying that if leukemia doesn't get us the Russians will, desegregation in the South by saying that everything takes time, inflation by saying that we must reduce Federal expenditures, and the problems of labor organization by referring to the right to work.

According to the law of contradiction, it is impossible to say that the same statement is at the same time in the same respect both true and false. One reason why the Civilization of the Dialogue is so hard to attain is that constant efforts are made to repeal this law. So the great historian of freedom, Lord Acton, had no difficulty in concluding that slavery was necessary to democracy, because, he said, the lower elements in the population would degrade it if they were allowed membership in the political society. According to Acton, slavery is essential if a democratic state is to be free.

So the other day the Secretary of Defense remarked that the reduction of military expenditures would retard disarmament.

So, in spite of the fact that Christian congregations, it has been said that segregation reaches its peak in this country at 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings.

Consider the possibilities in a local wit's report that the cigarette companies are about to embark on a national advertising campaign with the slogan, "Cancer is Good for You." The more one ponders this suggestion the more probable it sounds. If the cigarette companies did enter upon this campaign, who can doubt that it would succeed? The genius and the devices at the disposal of private and public propaganda have made smooth the pathway to 1984, where slavery is freedom, war is peace, hate is love, and disease is health. We are so used to violations of the law of contradiction that we are startled when the Supreme Court upholds it and rules in civil liberties cases that the Constitution means what it says.

If thinking is painful, unnecessary, unpopular, and, under present circumstances, next to impossible, why should you do it? Consider what our problems are. They are how to make democracy work, how to survive in the nuclear age, and what to do with ourselves if we survive.

The first of these questions, how to make democracy work, involves much more than the establishment of civil rights in the South, which is the most pressing domestic issue of the present day. It is basically the question of how we get the information and intelligence to cope with the totally new economic, social and political situation in which

we find ourselves. When it appears likely that \$175,000,000 was spent in the last national election, when fewer and fewer voices can be heard through the media of mass communications, when those media are chiefly devoted to mass entertainment, and when the educational system is dedicated largely to adjusting the young to the group, we see that discussion has been replaced by private and public propaganda and that the kind of education we are offering is unlikely to provide a defense against it.

Nor can we suppose that without thought we can survive in the nuclear age. Since we know that the simultaneous explosion of a finite number of bombs can make the world uninhabitable, we must recognize that in two hundred years we have moved from polite wars for limited aims fought without disturbing most of the population to the point where we can all go up in one big megabang. To suppose that we can avoid this fate by preparing to make the bang bigger or by talking about the reduction of one or two kinds of forces in one or two kinds of places is as absurd as it was to imagine that the last wars could be avoided by an armament race or by endless conferences about whether the armor plate permitted on battleships should be reduced by one-quarter or one-eighth of an inch.

And what shall we do with ourselves if we do survive? We have almost reached the 36-hour week, and as automation and atomic energy are brought into industrial use the proportion of our time that we shall have to devote to earning a living will decline still further. James Warburg has suggested that if we were to achieve disarmament, we would have surpluses of manufactured goods that would match the present oversupplies of agricultural products. In my lifetime the hours of labor have been cut by a third. We don't know what to do with ourselves now. Some think that there is no limit to the capacity and willingness of people to seek and enjoy entertainment, relaxation, and recreation. I do not believe it. It is more likely that the alternatives presented by modern technology are either that we shall all be killed or we shall all be bored to death. Russell Lynes intimates that the do-it-yourself movement may combine these alternatives. He reports that last year the movement caused 600,000 accidents. Fifty-seven thousand people fell off their roofs.

There are two ways to get through life that the educated person cannot permit himself, and they are to fill the time with aimless, and hence thoughtless activity, or to sink into a vegetable torpor. The reasons why these pastimes fail is that neither one is human. Every human being sooner or later has to feel that there is some meaning to his life. He must have a purpose, He must consciously direct his life toward it. It must be a purpose that can be rationally defended, for, since we are rational animals, we cannot long be satisfied with irrational courses of action.

You must think for your own sake, and also for your country's. St. Augustine said, "A nation is an association of reasonable beings united in a peaceful sharing of the things they cherish. To determine the quality of a nation you must consider what those things are." We can be contented with nothing less for this nation than that it should cherish the best things there are. It seems altogether likely that these are art and education, freedom and justice, courage and compassion--the things the ancients summed up under the three heads of truth, beauty and goodness. And what are these but the fullest development of man's highest powers in their individual and social aspects?

Through such development the educated person becomes a center of illumination. When we despair of the power of such centers in a mechanized, polarized world overshadowed by the threat of impending doom, and ask ourselves what any individual, however enlightened, can do, let us remember that there have been dark days in the past. There was a famous one in New England in 1780 when the sun scarcely appeared at all. Thousands of people took it for the end of the world. Among them were many in the Connecticut Assembly, in which Colonel Abraham Davenport was sitting. It was proposed that the Assembly adjourn. Colonel Davenport said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought."