

THE NEW LEISURE AND THE COLLEGE

Address of Mark Eisner, Chairman of the Board of Higher Education, at Commencement Exercises of Hunter College, January 24th, 1934.

Dr. Colligan has the singular good fortune to assume the Presidency of Hunter College coincident with the inauguration of a new era in the field of higher education which, within the limits of the brief period allotted to me, I will attempt to describe.

The same economic causes which are producing a silent, but none the less effective, revolution in this country are influencing inevitably the future of education, and they are the true leaders in this field who can best observe and interpret conditions and trends so as to include the newer philosophies and ideas in the college curriculum and its other activities.

I recall a conversation I had during the World War with a cultured and most imaginative gentleman, himself a product of European universities. He was convinced that one of the results of the terrible conflict would be a radical change in the habits and customs of the people. He foresaw, once the rigors and horrors of battle were behind us and peace would again bless the nations, that a period of romanticism would ensue. Minstrels and troubadours would again wander from city to city and village to village; romance and art command universal interest; music and other forms of culture flourish and a new golden age would dawn.

You who have seen what the World War really did bring about may smile at the childish hopes which my friend expressed, but those who lived under the dreadful pall and unnatural excitement which the war atmosphere and spirit

produced see nothing out of the way in such expectations and in fact the promised resultant benefits from the war were being dinned in our ears by statesmen the world over.

We do not fully realize the true demoralizing extent of the war or how it dislocated the balances and the counter-balances that cause a civilized society to function smoothly. Morally, spiritually, and in fact economically, the nations of the world after Versailles were as rudderless and anchorless ships upon a storm-tossed sea.

Among other errors which bound us was our pride in mechanized industry. We became engaged in a desperate struggle to supplant the labor of man with that of the machine, and that industrialist was indeed happy who could recount to his board of directors the savings in labor he had been able to effect. We gloried in the machine as a labor saver without giving a thought to the improvement of the condition of him whose labor was retained, or to the suffering of the many whose employment was dispensed with.

Leaving the fields of commerce and industry and observing for the moment literature and the arts, we find that they too, shortly before and for a long time after the war, had been seized by the same hectic and abnormal influences.

The musical glories of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy and Wagner gave way on our programs to dubious themes suggested by the rush and pounding of railroad locomotives, the throb and beat of heavy machinery, or the clash and clamor of a May-day revolt.

The portrayal of form and beauty, the grace of line, and depth of color of the classic and of the impressionist schools have since the war yielded to the planes and to the abstractions of the ultra-moderns, many of whom venture to paint before they learn how to draw.

Post-war prose composition delighted in jerky, sensational sentences without verbs, with more dashes and asterisks than words. Rhyme and rhythm were banished from the field of poetry, and excitement, emotional instability and eccentricity supplanted the beauty and the flow achieved by earlier poets.

Today in the arts and in literature we find a manifest swing in the opposite direction, presaging a return to the purer forms of the past. An American artist has recently gone far on the road to fame with a portrait of two Iowa farm characters, which has all the stark realism and detailed fidelity of a Holbein. I need not emphasize to a group of college graduates the fact that within the last five years the characteristics which affected literary work in the earlier post-war period are disappearing and we are approaching saner and truer standards. The programs of our symphony orchestras today show a marked difference from those of even three years ago. Even our much-maligned jazz music, which ten years ago was nothing but a rhythmic clash of brass, drums and over-strained wood-winds, is today exemplified by the soft harmonies devised by Paul Whiteman, Guy Lombardo and other popular favorites.

Having outlined to you the evolution that is taking place in those departments of human endeavor which contribute so much to our spiritual happiness, I think I can safely say that, to a moderate extent, the idea which my friend expressed during the war as to what might take place thereafter is being partially realized at least by a return to a correct sense of values and a better understanding of what is really essential to human welfare. But transcending all this in importance, in the economic field something is current which brings the prophecy of my friend still closer to realization. I refer to the thirty hour week for all industry which is

regarded by many as certain of adoption. What this new leisure-time means to millions of people who have been forced to labor sixty and seventy hours a week is apparent. There has been some sporadic action taken in America and some leisure-time committees have been appointed and programs discussed. But nothing comprehensive and serious has been attempted.

This is where I envisage a great future activity of the college and especially one that is training the teachers of our youth.

Our institutions of higher learning must prepare for the new economic order by making it possible for their graduates adequately to enjoy the leisure which a future economic necessity imposes upon industry. Nay, this leisure-time must be enjoyed not only for the gratification of the graduate, but should be turned seriously to useful ends for the benefit of the community. Our teachers must be trained to be able to impart to their pupils those things which contribute to a well-employed leisure. I do not go too far when I say that a place should be found in a modern curriculum for training in the work of organizing dramatic societies, music and choral singing, motion picture work, radio, for adults as well as for the young. College-trained leaders in athletics and ^{all} forms of healthful sports will have to be employed. A widespread lecture system utilizing the motion picture should be placed in the hands of specially trained college graduates. Furthermore, these should not all be at public expense, because large industrial enterprises are surely interested in aiding their countless employees in the useful spending of their after-work time and should lead in promoting such a national program. All in all, a thirty hour week, with its implications, offers a fascinating study and a necessary revision of our college curriculum.

I cannot refrain while on the subject of the curriculum, from commenting on an additional feature. Why is it that there are so many wholly unemployed doctors, lawyers, engineers, not to speak of school teachers? Why has it become necessary that graduated teachers, many from this very institution, have been forced because of the inability to obtain employment in their professional capacities, to take jobs as waitresses, governesses, and the like? Is it not because the age of specialism in which we have been living has made us place all our educational eggs in one basket? In a course leading to the degree of electrical engineer, a man perforce studies chemistry. If, upon his graduation, he finds himself unable to secure employment as an engineer because of a period of depression, he has nothing else to turn to. Were his study of ^{truly professional} chemistry, instead of being just barely sufficient in its intensity to warrant the granting of his degree as an electrical engineer, ~~truly~~ ~~professionally~~ there might be a possibility of half a dozen different openings available to this man until conditions in his own chosen profession might change for the better. So, too, might some of the various subjects leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science in Pedagogy be taught so that they might be something more than merely a means to an end, but indeed an end in themselves.

The thoughts that I have expressed today have suggested themselves only by an observation of current events and the trends that are notable to him who would study them. This college and other colleges will be useful to the community just so long as they keep step with changing conditions. By this, I do not mean every passing phase;

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on the contrary, the merely ephemeral should be ignored, but those long range tendencies which the alert can discern and prepare for must be acted upon with courage and, if need be, with originality and frank experimentation in order that our colleges may be not merely repositories of the ideas of the past, but living, active and guiding elements in the ever moving ferment which is life.

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