

"Education as an Adventure"

Address given by Dr. George Nauman Shuster, President of Hunter College
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June is a month dedicated, since relatively immemorial time, to brides and commencements. I do not wish to suggest that there is any sort of connection between the two, or even to surmise that in days like ours a good husband may be as difficult to acquire as a good degree. It is merely worth noting, I think, that as one contemplates entering upon either family life or a career of service one is going away from oneself, is making a commitment to others, is forming a bond of union. The image of a windmill seems to suggest itself. Any leaf, any loose streamer of ribbon, will stir in the breeze. It will do so in a great variety of ways. Outside my window at home there is a maple tree, and I have often been fascinated by the movement of its leaves. Some wave to and fro with what can only be diagnosed as poise and dignity; others are steady bustlers, indeed; and still others career madly, as if they were modern and had learned the art of jitterbugging. But in the wheel of a windmill strands of wood or metal are buckled together, in a sort of mesmeric circle, so that although the whole moves and spins on the tide of air, it can be harnessed to a task -- to an old and honorable task, indeed, helpful to millers and husbandmen since the dawn of history.

It seems to me that the only truly exciting and rewarding decision a human being can make is cheerfully to become part and parcel of some windmill. To flutter about aimlessly and alone may seem agreeable, but those who have tried it are the great malcontents -- the idlers whose idleness weighs more heavily in the end than even the curse of prison labor. It may be true that man is master of his fate and captain of his soul, but the poet who wrote

those words happens to have been/^{an} indefatigable social worker. Sometimes the great creative artists seem recluses, but it is clear that their work is the fruit of exacting community effort in association with other artists, living and dead. And it would be quite improper to cite the mystic as evidence against me, for his companionship is the most inescapably friendly and passionate of all. The only thing that really matters is that one be interested in, find a decent reward in, the work of the windmill of one's choosing. And here one must concede that unfortunately a great many people are not at all content, and that in particular there is dissatisfaction among the educated.

The educated person is quite naturally prone to feel that he wants to move and be and act in an educated way -- that is, with a feeling that he is sharing in an intellectual experience. He tends to be snobbish in his own fashion, because he believes in his definition of himself. Like everybody else, he wishes to embark upon adventure, and when he has that word in mind he means acceptance of risk. Risks are of two kinds. There are those one unexpectedly runs into. You walk around a corner and something like the Leaning Tower of Pisa falls down for your special benefit--- or there, as it was with Romeo, stands the very Juliet of your dreams. Second come the risks one consciously seeks out. Like Lancelot you ride in quest of monsters and damsels in distress -- become a reformer, in other words; or you set up shop as an insurance broker and begin to stalk your prey. Now it is to be expected that the educated person will appreciate intellectual adventure, whether it be fortuitous or calculated. He may dream of meeting a girl who knows all about the Platonic ideals, or is able to predict within the fraction of an inch what the ultimate effect of the Bretton Woods agreements will be. She wants to teach, to marry Einstein's younger brother, to offer sage advice to the Secretary of the Interior. Contrasting models present themselves for her consideration. There is the feminine Senator, busily planning the future of the world; and there is

Molly Simkins, dusting the furniture and feeding the twins little tins of peas and spinach.

I am not going to argue that feeding the twins is the more important enterprise. It is, of course, because plainly if there were no children, there would be no world to plan. The point to be made is a somewhat less obvious one. To speak of education at all, in its higher sense at least, is to reckon with the impact of great literature upon the mind. And great literature -- that is writing born of profound feeling and deep insight into what the intellect can discern of the meaning of life, -- is concerned with the sharing of very simple, elemental experiences. No man worth his salt, for instance, ever resurrects to his memory the thrill of having once held thousands of persons at rapt attention when he discoursed on some problem of assumed moment. But he does recall with deep gratitude those rare hours when he felt and could express the pulse of the common man beside him. I am certain that when Mr. Roosevelt sensed the meaning of the four freedoms, for example, he saw before his mind's eye a real man wanting to go to church and not being allowed to go to church; a man eager to work and yet unable to find any work to do; a man anxious to speak to his neighbor about the way things were going, and yet forced to remain dumb by reason of spies and secret police. In short, he had for a time the simple comradeship of the common man and in that comradeship there was kindled a sort of light by which significant things were made plain. Then the great statesman became greater than his time. Then he also became greater than himself. He became a mouthpiece through ^{whom} ~~which~~ the whole world spoke.

The great books are not about so-called great things. Perhaps the only volume of speeches anybody in his right mind reads was written by Cicero, and he merely happens to be preserved in academic alcohol. But who that has ever read Horace can have enough of him? In Amherst town there lived a little

spinster whose name was Emily Dickinson, who made poems for the grown-ups and cookies for the children. But today she is more deeply beloved by more people than any other person of her generation save one alone. He is Lincoln, who knew that wars must be won but also that people suffer during wars -- that wounds must be bound up by those who survive. I could go on endlessly. There is no wisdom in Shakespeare, for instance, which is deeper than his insight into the meaning of farewell and finding anew; for that wisdom has to do with the making and breaking of the great, the elemental communities upon which society rests.

Therefore I should like to put to you a question: Would it not be better to instil into one's living some of the spirit of great art than to stake everything on elbow room for one's ego? Suppose you find employment and it seems very trivial employment. You teach English, finding it a vast accumulation of very bad themes and no opportunity to expound as only you, of course, could, the hidden intent of Amy Lowell. Yes, but is it not a glorious chance to offer something far more precious than anything else you can give -- namely yourself? Is not your teaching a ^{splendid} ~~glorious~~ opportunity to watch with wonder beside the expanding flower of each child's soul, wondering why dearth and evil should be here and glory there; to know that for a moment you have held other groping fingers in your own; and to see the luster in the eyes of those before whom the horizons of life loom up for the first time? Or you work in an office where after three weeks you feel woefully like a rubber stamp. Where, you wonder, is Keats in this place or a platform for Montesquieu? But the whole of the laboring world drums out one monotonous rhythm. Even the kisses of rapturous love are ditto marks. You may find other, more varied work to do, but remember that even a powerful statesman's life is one handshake and one speech after another. And even so the rhythm is beautiful.

Certainly this world would be a far happier place if there were less shouting and more silence; less taking and more giving; less of ^{personal} victory and and more of ^{personal} surrender. For a hundred and fifty years, almost all the great poets have been trying to say just that because of their awareness that for lack of insight into this truth their age would risk destruction. Wordsworth and Keats, Tagore and Hopkins are agreed and we now know that they were right. But it is not merely that the collectivity has been at war and in chaos. The single person, too, has been tragically unsettled. For so long a time we have preached the doctrine of flexing muscles, intellectual and physical, that the human scene looks, even in a free society, like an assemblage of pistol packers, each taking the other for his target. At the family hearth fire, the drama is far, far too often not one of the discovery of unity, of the wrestling over differences for the sake of agreement, but rather that, apparently, of the boxing bout. Does any one wonder that there should be strife between groups and so-called races when the dominant individual philosophy is one which holds that training the mind means training a weapon? Let us say in reply only that a weapon does not heal; and if we need anything, you and I and all of us, it is healing. Healing of ourselves through the healing that comes to us from others may well be the recipe for happiness which the great teachers of humanity have left us as their legacy.

Oh yes, there is a discontent, sometimes termed divine, which continuously spurs us on. But we should be very careful what we mean when we speak of being spurred on by that discontent into making room for ourselves. In a little while the space may be large but there may also be nobody else there. What symbol of all this could we desire on a grand scale that would be more effective than Hitler's example? He struck about him with mighty arms, and the blows he gave seemed almost like those which the Prophets once

ascribed to the vengeance of the Lord. But in a little while there was emptiness inside the realm of the New Order and only Hitler was there. Do not take Hitler lightly. His kingdom is served by all who follow his principle and his rule. But the end of his kingdom is always the same end.

If you asked me to pray for you on this day so rich in meaning and and hope for you, my petition would be this: When you know suffering, may it be such as quickens your sympathy for all living things that breathe so much in pain; when you find joy, and may that be very often, let it prove gladness like unto a choral song of many hearts and hands; when love comes, may he paint for you a landscape which he and you have chosen together, tracing every shadow and draining the precious vials of sunlight to the last drop; and when you find work, may it be toil which brings bread first blest and broken together with other workers who have become your friends. I shall hope that your footstep will be gladly heard at many other thresholds, but that inside your own a fire may always burn.

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