

by: Dorothy Thompson

It is an ancient custom that on an occasion such as this, a respectable elderly person, presumably endowed with learning and experience, should congratulate you on having completed such education as an institution for that purpose could provide, and, inviting you into the adult world, should present some guide-posts for the life you are commencing.

I do, indeed, congratulate you. But I think an honest person of my generation will be hesitant to advise without also confessing. My generation, like yours, has this in common that we have lived in an epoch marked by more radical and drastic change than any in the recorded history of mankind. Some years ago my son, then a child of twelve, remarked dolorously, "Mother, I object to having been born in the twentieth century." When I ~~s~~asked him why - since the century had thus far been very kind to him - he answered wonderingly, "If I had been born in the eighteenth century I could have imagined the nineteenth; and in the nineteenth I could have imagined the twentieth. But I just can't possibly imagine the twenty-first century."

One may wonder that a young child should be concerned about an epoch in which he will not live; nevertheless his remark pointed up a fundamental reason for the present psychological insecurity which we share with the rest of mankind. It has been a psychological necessity to be able to envision the future, even a future beyond our own lifetimes. As it is a necessity for anyone who claims to be an educated person to be able to give a coherent account of the past - so he is compelled, in his mind, to see the present as a bridge between that past and a future. He wants to

be able to see at least the outlines of a pillar on the other side of the bridge; he wants it especially, if he holds a little child by the hand. If he suspects that the bridge has been bombed, and that what awaits him and his child in the midst of the bridge is an abyss, he becomes afraid, even if he is momentarily completely secure. And that, I think, is the malaise of our times: We are uncertain where we are going.

Although all life is change - a continual process of becoming - yet there have been eras of relative stability, when contemporary history appeared to most of those living in it to be the pattern of all history, and when most people believed that they could graph the future as uninterrupted evolution and fulfillment.

Into such a time I was born, in the last decade of the nineteenth century. An age of Faith had been giving away for a century to a new concept, of startlingly attractive brilliance - the concept of infinite progress, accompanied by infinite material expectations. I cannot remember, as a young girl, that the problem of economic security ever concerned me, or that it occurred to me to wonder what might happen to me in my old age. This was not because I was born into a home of wealth and material security. My father was a small-town minister, whose salary never exceeded twelve hundred dollars a year. My mother had died when I was seven and my father's health was frail, and actually I was orphaned in my twenties. A modest poverty was our lot. I knew, from childhood, that it was expected of me to become an educated person, because I belonged to an educated family, and education was the bright path to advancement. But I also knew, and accepted the fact, that I would have to earn most of the cost of my education.

Nor was the society around me secure. There was poverty. The year before I was born had seen a great world's fair, followed by a dreadful depression. In an industrial town where my father had a church when I was quite small, a strike of lumber men, many of whom were members of my father's congregation, paralyzed the town, <sup>for months</sup> and halted, also, payments to the pastor. I remember that for weeks practically all we had to eat was rice - rice with a few vegetables cut up in it - or rice with milk - or just rice, because rice was the cheapest food. We had not heard then about calories and vitamins; we were not afraid that our teeth would fall out - we just always felt a little hungry. But I remember my father's cheerfulness and humor. "Well, my dears," he would repeatedly remark, "Three fourths of the population of the world live on rice." If the Chinese and Indians could, why so could we. There were ups and downs in life, of course; we wished there were a little more rice, but a mere absence of meat and butter from our table was no indication that there was anything really wrong with the world. We accepted with simple confidence, that the system of competitive industry offered everybody a chance, if he just worked hard and served his employer well; that democracy was the best of all forms of government, and the American the best of democracies; and that working men would advance as the economy advanced. Anybody could see that a breathtaking world of science was opening a vista of infinite benefaction. There were already automobiles on the streets; even Methodist parsonages had electric lights; scientific journals were saying that there were magical sources of energy in the world which would be discovered and put to use in our own times; of course there were foreign countries still benighted that had old kings and ought to be republics.

and that had wars every once in a while though there hadn't been any very big or serious ones for a long time. But none of those, anyway, would affect America. And after the Wright brothers put the first airplane in the air, people nodded sagely and said, "You can depend on it, the airplane will mean the end of war."

In the university that I attended, our idols were H.G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. We read with excitement Wells's early scientific novels, predicting a universe where everything would be present in abundance, and his later ones in which everything, naturally, would be planned for the benefit of all mankind. Shaw introduced us to socialism - a wonderful socialism, to be directed by an elite of brains and character, people just like Mr. Shaw himself, bringing in a world where there would be hardly any problems at all. Heaven was right around the corner, closely resembling the Biblical picture of it, or of Eden before the fall of man. Since everyone would have enough, everyone would be naturally good and cooperative...a sort of world of angels, except that the terrestrial angels would go on giving and taking in Marriage. We were going to have it even better than the angels in some respects!

And all this was to be accomplished by pure scientific reason, throwing off the fetters of past superstitions. We were not going to believe in anything that could not be proved. Were not moral principles merely rules and rationalizations justified or unjustified, according to whether they worked and contributed to the survival of society in any one of its stages? Was not God an invention of man, rather than the other way around? Was not justice merely what might work in one form of society and be useless in another? Like Pontius Pilate we all asked ourselves "What is truth?" and

did not stop long for an answer. For history was moving and we with it, moving into the millenium. Well, I walked out of college into the First World War. The time: 1914. Perhaps from this date, we should mark the beginning of the twentieth century.

But voices were raising doubts concerning both the concept of infinite progress, and the directive power of reason in human society. In Europe Schopenhauer and Nietzsche had proclaimed that not reason but will was the force directing mankind. Bergson had declared the vital forces lay in the instinctual life. Freud -- and others -- had declared that human behavior is dictated by dark, submerged, unconscious forces. All these certainly modified the concept of infinite free will, and therefore, of infinite human progress.

But there was always, through all these influences, a dissident voice, in my own life. It was the voice of my father. It was a compelling influence, because he, himself, was an example of a kind of life that exuded faithful serenity. It was a centered life - centered in the love of God and service to the example of Christ in every relation to man or nature. My father did not believe that man was naturally good, but that goodness required great and continuous effort. He thought man was a fallen angel who would not be lifted from his fallen state by the bootstraps of his own mechanical inventions or by prosperity. Deeply perturbed at the agnostic frame of mind into which the idols of current scientific analysis had plunged me, he pointed out aspects of our life which he believed would lead, not to progress, but to decay: the growing love of luxury; the decline of philosophy; what he called "the impious worship of man of himself, in the

elevation of Humanity as the measure of all things"; the cheapening of public decorum; growing disrespect for law and growing tolerance for crime; and a growing carelessness about means in the struggle for even idealistic ends. He had, too, a very different notion of freedom than that which occupied my own restless and rebellious mind. He believed that the price of freedom is restraint; for, he ~~would~~ <sup>would</sup> say, "No man can be free in a jungle; he can be free only in an order of restraints which he freely accepts, because he acknowledges the restraints as founded in conscience and the voice of God." And when I once dared to wound him by saying, "But I suspect God is a human invention," he answered robustly, "If that were so, He is the greatest expression of human genius. For it would but prove that Man knows that he must have something better than himself as an example to emulate. But that would seem to be a contradiction in terms; man recognizes the existence of God because he recognizes the existence of evil; he sees that there are contradictory forces in society and in himself, pulling on the one hand toward disintegration and chaos and on the other toward order and harmony. Without God it is impossible to make any coherent order of the moral universe. And without a coherent moral order man returns to the beast."

Now you may ask me how I remember things from so far back - a time when I was a young girl, as young as you. There are times in ones youth when every seed falls into fertile ground. A word, a book, a sight, a ~~sound~~ <sup>sound</sup>, a conversation, may lie for years in an oubliette of memory, only to spring out, years later, when one is in need of it. I have been in need of these remembered words, because, with horrified ~~eyes~~ <sup>eyes</sup>, I have seen the progressive collapse of the century of progress.

I have seen the nation most scientifically advanced in Europe, rationalize wholesale murder, and conduct it in the most meticulously organized and sanitary way, making a boneheap out of millions of men, women, and little children.

I have seen the crowns of Europe fall, not to platonic democracies but to ruthless despotisms based on servile indoctrinated masses.

I have seen socialism, that bright hope of our generation, create a slave state worse than Egypt's in its decadence -- and create it in the name of Humanity.

I have seen the concentration camp established as apparently a permanent feature of civilization.

I have seen persons staggering on the roads of Europe, under the back-borne burden of their last pitiful belongings, driven from their homes like cattle - no, not like cattle; cattle are valuable - driven like -- like human beings; and I have known they numbered many millions. I have seen that happen as the inevitable result of the decisions of leaders of nations who went to war against inhumanity and terror!

I have seen a passion for economic security grow which cannot possibly be satisfied, because it does not arise primarily from economic causes at all. It arises from the universal realization that we live in a world where anything can happen to anybody, because the world has forgotten the difference between right and wrong. At no time has there been so much talk of Humanity and Human Rights. At no time since the blind ages following the fall of Rome has there been such savagery. We feel driven to depend on the security of the State because we can find no security in the society of our fellowmen. But the State can never be <sup>better</sup> ~~better~~

than society. It always expresses it.

I have seen science ~~make~~ achieve the greatest triumph of human reason, discover the secret of the universe, and use it to blow hundreds of thousands of people to bits or dissolve them into vapor, after their enemy had put out feelers in Switzerland, to surrender.

I have heard a President boast that by the year 2000 we would have a trillion dollar income. And I have heard the promise of a new weapon of destruction, 1000 times more powerful than the last.

I recall the closing words of Kipling's Recessional:

"For heathen heart that puts her trust  
In reeking tube or iron shard,  
All valiant dust that builds on dust,  
And guarding calls not Thee to guard,  
For frantic boast and feeble word,  
Thy mercy on thy people, Lord!"

So you see, I have come to discover through the living experience of our times that my father was nearest the truth. There are imperatives of human conduct as valid in the atomic age as in the age of bronze or steam. (The primary education of man must be in the knowledge of virtue. The primary problem of every one of us is how, and in what image to order our own lives.) Science cannot answer that question. It can tell us how to achieve material values. It cannot tell us why we should live at all. (For that we must go to those geniuses of the spirit who throughout the ages have warned mankind what would happen to it, if it departed from the knowledge and service of God and the moral order.)

It is given to you youthful graduates to live your lives, as I have lived mine, in the twentieth century. Each of you will have an exterior personal problem - the problem of finding work, by



which you may earn your living. If I may encourage you on that, let me tell you that it took me six years even to enter my chosen profession, during which I turned my hand to many things - and they were not wasted years. All experience has a value, if one but digests it.

(But I crave for each of you that you will find an answer to the great internal problem - the problem of what to make, not ~~out~~<sup>out</sup> of your life in terms of earning a living, but out of yourself in terms of faith and being. Every one of us, in whatever walk of life has influence. Every one of us emanates thoughts and feelings that affect the spiritual climate about us. Every single person who lives his life under moral imperatives, not to lie, or steal, or bear false witness, or kill; and to honor others not for what they are but for what they might become; every person who hungers and thirsts after righteousness <sup>and truth</sup> helps to create that spiritual order, within which alone, anyone can be either secure or free. To the creation of that new moral order, based on virtue and humility to the laws of God, I invite your dedication -- as a commencement.