

ED 027 851

HE 000 694

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America: No Promise Without Agony.

American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.

Pub Date 2 Mar 69

Note-9p.; Paper presented at the American Association for Higher Education's 24th National Conference on Higher Education, Chicago, Ill., Mar 2-5, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.55

Descriptors-Higher Education, *Moral Values, *Objectives, Racism, *Social Change, *Social Responsibility, Violence

We may discover signs of promise in the midst of agony if we make some shifts of perspective. (1) "Our fear of overt violence must be countered by our acknowledgement of covert violence." Covert violence is subtle and more destructive than physical violence because it is the "denial of personhood"--the insinuation by an act or by neglect that a person doesn't count. "Institutional racism" is a telling example. (2) We must recognize that "the abuse of power must be countered by the creative use of power." Students are contemptuous of the older generation because of its monstrous abuse of power, the most glaring example of which is Vietnam. Priorities should be reallocated or a holocaust will result. (3) "Misplaced materialism" dedicated to providing unnecessary and soon obsolete luxury items should be replaced by "transformed materialism" dedicated to sharing the earth's goods. (4) Within education, we must move from academic detachment to moral compassion. To help make these shifts, educators can force people to confront choices and to point out the consequences of given choices so that fresh decisions may be made. To be strong and visionary enough to undertake commitments in new directions, one must cultivate the quality of "standing outside oneself"--in essence, have a sense of humor. (JS)

ED 027851

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AMERICA: NO PROMISE WITHOUT AGONY 3-2-69

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HE 000 69d

Opening General Session
Sunday Evening, March 2

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AMERICA: NO PROMISE WITHOUT AGONY*

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen: There are various vocational hangups I have had to sort out in preparing to speak this evening, since I wear a variety of hats. I speak to you on the one hand as a professor, an educator among educators. But part of the reason I was chosen to deal with America's moral dilemmas is surely because I am also a professor of religion, and a clergyman to boot. Indeed, this fact, coupled with the fact that it is Sunday, may already be giving some of you qualms. And I forewarn you that I do want to prescribe as well as proscribe, though I assure you that I shall do this from as broad a base of shared concerns as possible, and that I disavow any sectarian pleading. Indeed, I shall probably never again have a chance to talk about the American present to people so able to influence the American future, particularly when I reflect that my own political commitments make it highly unlikely that I shall ever be among those clergymen invited to preach on a Sunday morning in the White House.

In the old days, the preacher spent most of his time telling good decent people what a terrible state the world was in, and how they'd better hop to it before Satan got a stranglehold on the future. Both preacher and analyst could afford the luxury of announcing doom. But that's not news any more. We don't need to be reminded that 1969 might be worse than 1968. Our most extravagant hope is simply that it won't be too much worse. Furthermore, no educator has to feel guilty any more that he has fled from the "real world" to the "ivory towers of the university." Everybody knows about the agony. We don't need a description of that. The real question is: is there any promise? Can we believe in more than the agony?

I am going to suggest that if there is any promise for America, it will be only as we go through, and not try to circumvent, the agony. Mr. Nixon, in a curiously contradictory metaphor in his inaugural address, said, "The American dream will not come to those who sleep." Somewhat intoxicated by that figure of speech, I respond that the American nightmare, in which we are now caught, will be creatively appropriated only by those who are wide awake, and who can, from the very midst of the nightmare, see from within it some pointers to hope. No promise, then, without agony.

Let me suggest some shifts of perspective through which we must go if we are to discover signs of promise in the midst of the agony, centering on the words violence, power, materialism (in the treatment of which I hope to surprise you) and compassion, and keeping two further prescriptive words up my sleeve for the conclusion.

1. The first shift involves a deeper analysis than we usually make of the quality of contemporary life that usually scares us most. Our fear of overt violence must be countered by our acknowledgement of covert violence.

*Address presented to the Opening General Session at the 24th National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, Chicago Sunday, March 2. Permission to quote restricted.

When I refer to "the fear of overt violence" I am pointing to something all too real to the middle class white American. If he has not yet been the victim of violence he fears that he soon will be. Even if he is on a campus, he fears a sit-in, maybe in his office, during which his files will be destroyed. If he is in a computer center, he fears what might be called a smash-in. If he is in a classroom, he fears a disruptive teach-in. If he is white, he is scared silly when he sees as many as three blacks with Afro hair styles, black jackets and dark glasses, moving in his direction. He is sure he is about to be clubbed. When he hears angry rhetoric by members of any minority group, he is sure that the verbal overkill is just about to escalate into the unveiling of hitherto hidden knives, clubs and guns.

And this is not just a white middle class hangup. The protesting student cannot but fear the stock-in-trade of his opposition - mace, billy clubs and tear gas, used to put down what the student thinks are the legitimate concerns for which he is protesting - fearing, if I may say so, the kind of treatment his fellow students got last August not too many blocks from the site of our meeting tonight. The black or the Puerto Rican or the Mexican-American has every reason to fear the violence that may be perpetrated against him if a cop or a white gang happens to catch him in a secluded spot.

But I suggest that we will not advance from agony to promise, until we recognize that such an analysis of violence is superficial. Our fear of overt violence must be countered by our acknowledgement of covert violence. By "covert violence" I mean something more subtle and destructive than physical violence, terrible as that is, and the common threat that links together the two kinds of violence I am describing is the denial of personhood. The violence manifested when Sirhan Sirhan squeezes the trigger, and the violence manifested when a white man denies a job to a black man, are finally cut from the same cloth. In each case, the perpetrator of the violence is saying, "You don't count. I will get you out of the way." When a city re-zones its school districts to make sure the black students won't get into the good schools and thus "lower standards," that is covert violence. When landlords pile up tremendous profits from rat-infested slums, that is covert violence. When society gives a dole to minority members but won't restructure itself to provide jobs for them, that is covert violence. When we send an 18-year old to jail for five years because he says, "I refuse to kill Vietnamese peasants," that is covert violence.

The report of the World Council of Churches' Geneva conference commented, "Violence is very much a reality in our world, both the overt use of force to suppress and the invisible violence (violencia blanca) perpetrated on people who by the millions have been or still are the victims of repression and unjust social systems...the violence which, though bloodless, condemns whole populations to perennial despair." (p. 115) That unfortunately describes America. We are not only committing overt violence in Vietnam, but we are committing covert violence in Oakland, Chicago, Memphis, Detroit, Seattle, Jackson and Boston.

What has come to be called "institutional racism" is a particularly telling example of covert violence, illustrating that even though as individuals we may be very open and understanding and unbigoted, we participate in institutions whose very structures guarantee that they will perpetuate the things we think we are opposing. Individually as educators, we believe in a fair shake for all students, regardless of race, color or creed, but our entrance examinations have tended to cater to middle-class, white, suburban Americans, so that de facto it has been exceedingly difficult for members of minority groups to gain admission by our "normal" standards. That is covert violence. In principle, we believe that military service should not exempt certain classes of people, and yet we condone a Selective Service system that de facto

discriminates in favor of white middle-class kids who lived in good enough parts of town to get good enough high school educations to get into colleges, and whose parents can pay the tariff to keep them there, so that those who actually get drafted are more likely to be the disadvantaged who don't have enough education to get a 2-S deferment that will enable them to dodge the draft for four years. That is covert violence.

Until we see the agony in such terms as these, we will be in no position even to begin to look toward any promise.

2. A second shift is called for, if we are to find signs of promise in the midst of agony. This is the recognition that the abuse of power must be countered by the creative use of power. Let nobody in this day and age try to argue that power per se is evil - or good. Power is what we make of it, and the choice is in our hands. And it is the abuse of power that has led not only to the overt, but also to the covert, violence, we have been examining.

Why are students so turned off by the older generation? Surely a major reason is their feeling that we of the older generation have engaged in a monstrous abuse of power. Without turning this talk into a panegyric against the American presence in Vietnam, let me use that simply as the most glaring example of the point, since it is the event most responsible, I believe, for the great disaffection the young presently feel for the old (and for "old" read "anyone over 26," which is when you become non-draftable). How does the student view our presence in Vietnam? He sees the most powerful nation on earth using overwhelming force to pummel one of the tiniest nations on earth. He sees incredible technological resources being used almost solely for destruction - pellet bombs timed to go off sporadically and destroy civilians, napalm melting the flesh indiscriminately of young and old alike, biological ingenuity being used to defoliate tens of thousands of acres of verdant jungle, half a million men being deployed eleven thousand miles (forty per-cent of whom have been injured), more explosives being used in a single day than were used in the entire North African campaign of World War II, political and economic and military resources being used to shore up an oppressive dictatorial regime in Saigon, the verbal overkill of the former President and Vice-President being used to justify it all in the name of "moral commitments" - the student sees all this and he cannot help thinking, "Here is power, all right, and it is power that is being terribly abused."

And then he looks back over the last half decade and asks, "Who was opposing all this? Were the Catholic bishops? or the Protestant preachers? or the businessmen? or the Congressmen? or the trade unions? or the educators?" And after citing the few brilliant exceptions - the Bishop Shannons, the William Sloane Coffins, the Eugene McCarthys and the William Fullbrights - he has to say that the older generation has not been opposing all this. And the student verdict, justifiably, has become, America has abused its power, and become so intoxicated by the exercise of it that America has lost all sense of proportion and moral value.

But from that point on the answer is not to disavow power, though some, students included, tend at least temporarily to think so, and to move in that direction. But flower power won't feed starving peoples. No, the answer is to move from the abuse of power to the creative use of power. To some, such talk may sound utopian, but wearing both of my hats - that of educator and clergyman - I respond that if between them the universities and the churches and synagogues can't begin to work toward the creative use of power, we might as well throw in the sponge.

What would this involve? It would involve setting some new priorities, saying in effect, Very well, we do have the most power in the world, how are we going to use it? It would involve recognizing that the most important use of power in which we could engage would be the sharing of it. Suppose that instead of using our foreign aid to shore up corrupt dictators in southeast Asia and South America and the Caribbean, we were to use our resources to help the economies of younger nations get on their feet? Suppose we took seriously the very minimal goal that the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, and the World Council of Churches, have recommended - the contribution of 1% of our Gross National Product to an international monetary fund, the resultant pool to be available to developing nations for use in making their own economies more self-sufficient? Suppose we did that? We would at least be making the first beginning steps toward using power responsibly and creatively. Suppose that instead of spending 87 billion dollars a year on the military budget, and 30 billion dollars a year on Vietnam alone, we rethought our sense of priorities and realized how grotesque it sounds to the black man when in the face of those expenditures we tell him that we cannot find 6 billion dollars a year to implement the Kerner Commission Report? When our own increase in Gross National Product in one year is more in dollars than the total budgets of all the countries of South America combined, do we have any right to expect the South Americans to look at us in any but the most distrustful terms? Is it a creative use of power to be spending billions of dollars on moon shots and space exploration of other planets - exciting though those may be - when on this particular planet two-thirds of the peoples of the world will go to bed hungry this very night?

And I submit to you that if educators and churchmen are not willing to dedicate the finest hours of their lives to emphasizing the incredible reallocation of priorities that is called for by our present abuse of power, we have no reason to believe that anything less than holocaust and revolution will result. We either shift from the abuse of power to the creative use of power, or we face Armageddon - and possibly in our own lifetimes.

3. A third shift that is called for is from a misplaced materialism to a transformed materialism. It is a cliché both political and clerical that we have lost our sense of "eternal values" and that we must "recover the spiritual." Now I have nothing against eternal values, but my point just now is that they are expressed in and through the material. Thus if somebody talks about "the eternal value of the human soul," I want to remind him that in both Judaism and Christianity, persons are not viewed as having eternal souls and transitory bodies, but as possessing a kind of psychosomatic unity of body and soul, indivisible. This means that if you talk about a human being as having eternal or infinite worth, you are cheating on the evidence unless you are just as concerned with whether he has enough to eat as you are with whether he has experienced a presence that disturbs him with the joy of elevated thoughts. We have no right to be more concerned with a person's soul than we are with whether or not he has soles on his shoes. It is interesting that in Jesus' parable about the Last Judgment, the questions that are asked are not: have you had a religious experience? did you go to church regularly? were you baptized? can you recite the creed?, but quite simply: did you feed the hungry? did you clothe the naked? did you care for the sick? did you visit the imprisoned? Did you, in other words, concern yourself with the neighbor in need? That is the criterion for the life acceptable to God. Our neighbors' material concerns, if we may so put it, are our religious obligation.

And for reasons hard to fathom, an incredible proportion of the material goods of this world has been entrusted to the United States of America. For the first time in the history of the world, we now have the technological knowhow to see to it that

nobody in the world needs to starve or be cold. For the first time in history! And if you want a job as educators, if you want a challenge, look for ways to put all that information and technique to work. Let us train scientists who will increase our technological expertise to grow food and thus get greater productivity per acre; let us train economists who will find better ways to make capital available to underdeveloped nations; let us train political scientists who will help to develop regional economic and political alliances to increase trade within the third world and between the third world and us; let us train teachers who will instill the vision of the one family of man in our young; let us train politicians who will lead us rather than simply follow where the latest poll suggests the rank and file want to go. Let us do these things so that, as the richest nation on earth, we can shift from a misplaced materialism, dedicated to providing luxury items we don't need (complete with built-in obsolescence), into a transformed materialism dedicated to the task of sharing the goods of this earth with the two-thirds of the world that is ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed, so that such clichés remain clichés no longer, but merely epitaphs of a world we refused to accept and were determined to transform.

4. All of which leads to a fourth shift through which we must go if we are to transform the agony into the promise. This is a shift within the educational enterprise from academic detachment to moral compassion. It is high time that, self-consciously and determinedly, we addressed ourselves to the question "education for what?" and indeed "education for whom?" and that we took very careful stock of the ends to which our knowledge is being put. I take my cue for the moment not from the humanists and theologians but from the scientists. On Tuesday of this week, scientists will engage in a Day of Concern. By the hundreds, they will be leaving their laboratories and their field assignments to ask the question, "For what and for whom are we doing this work?" They are rightly disturbed that biologists are being paid by the government to do research in germ warfare, that physicists are hired to provide us with more efficient anti-ballistic missile systems, that money that could be going into cancer research is being diverted into poison gas research, that medical expertise that could be ministering to a ghetto is being hired to research more hideous forms of napalm. They are saying, "It is time we took a long, hard look at what society is telling us to do with our knowledge."

I hope their example will force the rest of us to take a similar look at what we are doing with our knowledge. There is a moral question to be asked of political scientists who devote their energies to devising new methods of counter-insurgency, when those methods will be used to stifle peoples' revolutions against tyrannical regimes. There is a moral question to be asked of educators who promote a school system in which students come to believe that the right of dissent must be stifled when it goes against the status quo (and I hope all Californians present will fight the attempts of a governor who would take academic policy decisions away from professors and hand them over to politicians).

Do not misunderstand me. I am not making the specious plea for "instant relevance," which says that I need not complete a book if it does not immediately turn me on, or says that history is a waste of time because only the twentieth century is important, or claims that every experiment, every discussion, every lecture, must equip me instantly to go outside the classroom or the laboratory and cope. Rather, I am pleading for the breadth of vision that can enable us to see that any study of any significant body of material will make us more usefully equipped citizens to cope with a world that continues to multiply problems even as we study. It is particularly true in our day that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. I am pleading for study that is infused with moral compassion - and I remind you that that word "compassion" means "to suffer with," to be alongside the other,

in his misery as well as in his joy, in his terror as well as in his triumphs, in his agony as well as in his promise. Let us not be embarrassed by this concern; let us rather see the nobility of it, and realize that it is the sense of compassion that makes us human, that makes us brothers, that separates us from the animals and from the machines.

Those, then, are four shifts that will be needed, if we are even to begin to move from agony to promise: (1) our fear of overt violence must be countered by our recognition of covert violence, (2) our abuse of power must be countered by the creative use of power, (3) our misplaced materialism must be countered by a transformed materialism, and (4) our sense of academic detachment must be countered by a sense of moral compassion.

* * * * *

All well and good, you may say, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or boredom, but how do we get from here to there? Let me, to conclude, suggest two qualities that I think could help us in that transition.

The first of these qualities is conveyed by the Greek word metanoia. This means an aboutface, a turning in an opposite direction, or, as theology has translated the word, a conversion. Do not be turned off by the word, I beg you. For nothing less drastic will suffice. It will simply not do to say to rich, contented and unconcerned Americans in the late 1960's, "Just go on being more of the same." No, what is called for is a change of direction, a fresh start. It means, "Take a fresh look at violence. You are so afraid somebody will beat you up that you don't realize that you are beating people up all the time." It means, "Take a fresh look at power. If you continue using it so destructively it will destroy you as well." It means, "Take a fresh look at your materialism. As long as you keep it for yourself you build up a head of steam that will soon explode and destroy us all." It means, "Take a fresh look at education. You are so busy describing life that you are stifling peoples' power to live." And at this point at least, we could afford to take a leaf from Karl Marx, appropriate his final thesis on Feuerbach, and see it as an indictment of ourselves: "Philosophers [for which now let us read "educators"] have interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

To all of this, the plea for metanoia means, "You are on the wrong track, or at least you are going the wrong way, a way that leads only to mounting agony. You may be fooling yourself, America, but you are fooling nobody else. The rest of the world sees through your rhetoric, your self-justifying talk, your cloaking of your own vested interests in the name of pious double-talk."

Can education demand conversion or force it? Of course not. But what education can do is to force people to confront choices, to point out the consequences of given courses of action, so that a decision can be made to turn about, to begin again, to make a fresh start, to undergo (and I don't apologize for the phrase) a conversion experience. Will we learn from Vietnam that backing a dictator is no way to liberate a people, and that destroying a city is no way to save it, so that we do not make the same mistakes in Latin America? Only as we become wiser than we were before Vietnam. Will we learn from the escalating race riots in this country that white people cannot indefinitely coerce and maim and destroy black people without a day of reckoning finally coming? Only as the lessons of Watts, Detroit, Newark and a dozen other brutal realities are learned more quickly than we have learned our lessons in the past. Can we move from agony to promise? Only by measuring the agony full scale, with no illusions and no sentimentalities, and then committing ourselves to

a new direction, again with no illusions and no sentimentalities, recognizing that we undertake great risks, but that they are risks infinitely worth taking, for they commit us not to narrow nationalism, but turn us about to the whole family of man.

And where do we find the vision and power to do that? Here I suggest a second quality. Let me sneak up on it by suggesting that perhaps the opposite of agony is not, as the conference theme suggests, promise, but (as the title of Irving Stone's biography of Michaelangelo suggests) ecstasy. Ecstasy is a situation in which one is in ex-stasis, or "standing outside oneself." That is to say, it is the situation of having perspective on oneself, of seeing oneself in relation to whatever is beyond oneself. It is the quality of - and here I must employ another theological word - it is the quality of transcendence. Now by this I am not insisting upon the image of a Great Big Being off somewhere in the sky, and I immediately remind you that Herbert Marcuse, whom nobody is about to accuse of being a theologian, can use the word to describe engaging in what he calls "the great refusal," the unwillingness to accept things simply as they are, the repudiation of one-dimensionality, the recognition that we make a judgment about the present in terms of something that is not in and of the present.

Maybe this could be described simply by saying that we are called upon to have a sense of humor about ourselves, to apply to ourselves the reminder Kierkegaard wished he could have suggested to Hegel, namely the comic fact that he who thought himself the infinite surveyor or all that is, had occasionally to turn aside from his manuscript to sneeze. The thing that most frightens me about the new left, or the radical right, is not that they threaten middle-class values. Middle-class values need to be threatened. What frightens me about them is the absolute humorlessness of their crusade. I do not mean this in a condescending manner. Quite the opposite. I mean simply that there is something terrifying about the crusader who is never for a moment aware of his own shortcomings, the partiality of his insights, the finitudes of his being, the actual narrowness of his angle of vision - for he has no resources to guard him against the fanaticism of taking himself with such utmost seriousness that it would be beyond his capacity to admit that in any particular instance he had been wrong. This ability to laugh at ourselves, to see something slightly comic in our pretensions, is a blessed gift, for it is an acknowledgement of some standard of judgment or value, beyond ourselves, in the light of which we can cut ourselves down to size.

And when we can do that, then we can experience metanoia, turning about, conversion. People describe this overagainstness, this "other" that judges them, in many ways. I'm not saying you have to be a Christian or a Jew to experience it, though I've found that in my case it helps. But I am saying that this sense is what makes one a human being - a person - and that only because of it, only because we feel confronted by it, can we know either agony or promise - or ecstasy.

W. H. Auden captures this mood in the closing chorus of his poem, For the Time Being. And although in it he is describing the pursuit of the Christ child, his theme is applicable to every quest on which we are called in this day and age. So make your own translation, into your own idiom, of the direction Auden offers us today, through agony to promise:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.