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ABSTRACT

The live and taped portions of a speech concerning human needs, particularly the need to find one's own identity, and the responsibility of educators in helping young children answer the question "who in the world am I?" are presented. (KM)

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WHO IN THE WORLD?

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LIVE

"Hello, I'm Allee Mitchell - we have assembled tonight to explore a phenomenon -
A relationship between children and those of us in this room whose concern and
responsibilities for their development has brought us to this conference."

How many of us in the past year, month, even today have asked ourselves the
question, "WHO AM I?"

TAPE

For to answer the question "WHO IN THE WORLD AM I?", it is not sufficient to
look out your back door, your neighborhood, or your region. It isn't even
enough to look at your nation. For to answer the question "WHO IN THE WORLD
AM I?", requires truly a global understanding.

Traditions in India forbid men to touch women in public and non-violence is as
sacred as prayer. How do I fit into a world of open sex and easy violence?

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Presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children
Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, November 15, 1972.

The Near East is my home, where it is a practice as old as the pyramids to extend hospitality and courtesy to the stranger. How shall I adjust to the big cities where every stranger is seen as a threat to one's security?

European blood flows in my veins and careful craftsmanship is part of my way of life. I am struggling to learn what "free artistic expression" means.

The source of my heritage is Africa. The drums gave me rhythm and thousands of gods made me deeply religious in nature. I am just learning not to apologize for these things. I have always had a black skin -- I am just getting a black psyche -- black outlook.

As a native American, my roots on this soil are deeper than any other man of any color. I began very early learning the ancient skills of my mother. Why doesn't anybody look pleased when I say I want to grow up to bear children and have a fine crop for my husband?

I am an American; all the virtues and evils of the world's nations are mine. They flow like streams into a single body.

I gather up into my nature the mystery of the East, the gentleness of the tropics, the fierce energy of Europe, the deep wisdom of the native soil. I am many, but I am one.

I am an American.

It is curious.....I am and you are.....are defined by an infinite number of variables...

I am the sum total of my own particular past, of my national or ethnic background -- of my family's social and economic status, and of a repertoire of strengths, weaknesses, experiences and fantasies. All together there is only one person -- "ME".

BUT THAT IS ONLY HALF THE ANSWER, ISN'T IT?

I am unique -- but I am also universal. There is no one exactly like me -- but there are billions like me. We did not burst suddenly into existence; rather we reflect all the influences that shaped us and directed us. All that we are, we received from somebody else, whether it is our round faces and black hair -- our walking upright -- our use of language to communicate. We do not stand alone -- we belong to the total family of man.

TAPE

Certain universal factors make us a part of all mankind.

We have physical needs regardless of where we live. Among these are food, water, and shelter.

Our need for physical safety establishes defense patterns.

We have psychological needs that determine in part, how we behave and respond.

We need a sense of belonging.

We need love -- We cannot survive long without it.

We learn to use language, because that is a vital link between us.

We learn which deeds and actions attract others...and which repel.

We need a sense of control over our destiny. Therefore, we must harness nature -- must compete against other people -- must develop skills for survival -- and must even accumulate surplus for a sense of security. The control over your destiny is a distinct human trait -- and it appears before we learn to talk.

We need to feel that life is in proper order -- and have a kind of instinct about morality, about ethics and about justice. Because of this sense of morality in the universe, we develop laws of ethics -- hero myths and religion -- and establish right-wrong delineations for ourselves.

And I cannot understand you until I put all these factors together. And I cannot help you until I understand you -- and you cannot help children until you understand "YOU".

WHO IN THE WORLD AM I? A child doesn't ask such a question -- at least he isn't likely to use words to ask it. But much of his early exploration and self-discovery is really a day-by-day inquiry of "WHO AM I?"

What do children say about the unique and yet universal identity of themselves?

TAPE

LIVE

Our entire professional identity is directed at helping them express the question, "WHO AM I?" and then to find their own answer. We must establish and internalize the question, "WHO AM I?" and its double answer. Each of us is unique and each of us is inescapably bound up in the family of man.

TAPE

Each of us born is totally dependent upon an adult's care...genetically full, crying out to grow -- sleeping, crawling, laughing, cooing.

The one year old - He's toddling, testing the world through his mouth, his feet, his toys, anything he can get his hands on. Struggling to feed himself.

At two, he explores -- is curious -- inquisitive. He is discovering that the world is bigger than his play pen, so he's into everything. He begins to show his self-identity.

Three years old - He's really making it -- trying to tie his shoes, getting his clothes on the wrong way... He wants to do what you're doing and refuses help.

Climbing, humanizing, painting, mixing, doing everything -- a typical four year old. He has better control of his body and mind; and is beginning to form friendship patterns...he has decided he can do everything an adult can do and more.

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Five years old - One of the most delightful years of a child's life. He can listen, explore, cut, paint and build big structures. He has better balance, better coordination. He formulates friendship patterns...doing real things...doing ME things.

The child meets a teacher somewhere along the line, hopefully when he is 3, 4 or 5 and begins a new relationship -- the first of many relationships with teachers.

TAPE

Together they embark on a learning relationship. When Socrates passed on the advice, "KNOW THYSELF", he was not spouting any easy formula.

For the real key to that child is in knowing him. It is the natural edge that a parent has. It is our responsibility to know him so that we can help him.

TAPE

I am black or brown or red and since most faces I see on television and in books are not like my own -- I don't like my color.

I speak Spanish or Indian or some other foreign tongue and don't understand my schoolmates and friends. My friends don't understand me.

I was born different and don't know why.

I was born without and can't understand why I can't have what others have.

These children, wherever and whoever they are, depend on voices outside themselves to direct them toward who they can become. We as educators must arrive very early among those voices and set the aim very high. If we succeed, they may take control of their environment and circumstances. If we come too late, other voices will have already drowned out the delicate music of potentials.

Above all, we must be careful to maintain a clear line of demarcation between the two questions: "WHO IN THE WORLD ARE YOU?" and "WHO IN THE WORLD AM I?"

You see, when you or I approach a child today, we must try to see him in his own setting. He is not a miniature of you and me. This child was born only four years ago; -- his permanent philosophies of life are to be formed during the next decade -- not shaped by the ones formed during the forties and fifties.

"WHO IN THE WORLD AM I?"

I am a child of the Depression.

I learned my first words during a World War.

I was a teen-ager when we fought without declaring war,
in far flung places whose issues we could not understand.

I fought on one side or the other of massive civil rights battles.

For me, national revolutions were daily occurrences, new nations born almost every week.

I learned politics when you never questioned elected leaders.

For me, science was a god and Nature a mere store house to empty.

For me, man was all-powerful with his medicines, his weapons, and his rockets -- and we needed no God.

Will today's children feel like this? Should we impose on them these foreign notions because they are familiar to us? Or should we help them to answer their own "WHO AM I?" questions in their own ways?

Who I Am is really decided by Where I Am. My total environment plays a huge part in shaping my personal identity. That view is the theory that Skinner calls "encapsulation". But it means simply that if I am surrounded by joy, I am likely to be happy. If I am immersed in hope, I will want to be somebody. Our task -- yours and mine -- is not to fake joy or hope so we can sell it to children.

The whole purpose of the research presented during this conference is to know better who we are. We know much about the technology of our universe, but not nearly enough about the people in our universe. If our research can help us to learn about human relations, as our technology has helped us to learn about the mechanics of Nature, then you and I have not labored in vain. Self-understanding is the first giant step toward self-esteem.

Byron's contention that he was a part of all he experienced is attuned to Skinner's theory of encapsulation. The child, you and I along with the world's billions of people are also a part of all we experience.

As we become personally involved during the conference this week, let us keep in mind who are the children, families and people who will be affected by our reactions and experiences. Less we forget our experiences are only instruments to be used for the family of man.

Well...you and I and all the children we serve are members of a family. And because we are, we are inescapably involved in the process of transmitting what we received from our fathers to our children and to our children's children. The entire enterprise of child development is based on sound human relations and even more personally on sound self-esteem.

If I can learn who I am, I can accept myself---I may even like myself.

If I can like myself, I can develop harmony with you; when you and I can harmonize we can cooperate to improve the quality of life for ourselves and others. If we work together, stereotypes wither and prejudices fade.

This means power can be used positively for mankind, rather than dissipated in conflict.

Together we can call a moratorium on the processes of destruction of nature and society, and set into motion the processes to which our children give their lives.

All each of us needs to know is "WHO AM I?"