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The Young Men Shall See Visions, 1957.

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THE YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS

What the next generation hopes for the future and what this portends

Sunday, December 29, 1957

The Temple

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

The present generation of American college students is certainly the most questionnaire-ed and aptitude-tested in all of history. Hardly a month passes without the publication of some new analysis and study of their political ideals, their religious attitudes, their dating habits, their life ambitions. I have even recently seen a conceivably premature study of their plans for retirement. All these studies and analyses and tests testify to one idea, and that is that we, as a nation, are terribly concerned with the development and the training of our young and with their education. Now, one has only to read the dialogues of Plato or the practical advice of the Confucian Analects or the sound worldly wisdom of our own Biblical Book of Proverbs to realize that concern with the upbringing of the next generation is coeval with civilization itself. What separates most of this past discussion on the philosophies and practices of education from today's discussion is a sense of urgency which seems to permeate today's worries. There is a sense of urgency which can be seen in the fact that for the first time speeches about philosophic and practical concepts in education have made the front pages of our papers. We have only to remember that just a month or so ago the President of Columbia University spoke on the theme of higher education in America here in Cleveland, and though his somewhat acid remarks made good copy, similar remarks have been made by many a previous speaker, and for the first time the press saw fit to emblazon his speech, or a synthesis of his speech, in the front page of our

press. Presidential commissions have several times in the past few years been concerned with the programs for the development of higher education, and we are told that there will imminently be announced a massive program of governmental subsidy in scholarship to supplement the private benefactions at our great universities.

This sense of urgency, of course, is born out of Sputnik and the intercontinental ballistics missile and the realization that has been driven home to the American people that survival as a prosperous nation in a peaceful world depends upon our remaining in the forefront of scientific advance. As long as the arms race of the cold war must be prosecuted, we now know that it will be won in the silence of the laboratory or of the research study rather than on the noisy drill fields of the armies. Hence America is today greatly disturbed about the future of its educational plants and policies because it is greatly disturbed about its own future.

Many a thoughtful man and woman has, however, had this sense of urgency for a long time. They realize that the basic problem of today is not necessarily whether we will be atomized or whether we will succeed in harnessing atomic energy for peaceful constructive use. They realize that America at mid-century stands at the dawn of a new era. A great scientific revolution has changed radically all of our methods of manufacture and production and communication and distribution, and hence inevitably all of our political and economical and social institutions must be adjusted and changed to meet these new facts of life. They realize that all the sanctities of democratic living, our affirmation of basic civil rights, our knowledge that man has the privilege of being politically self determined, our espousal of the inalienable rights of men even if they are in a minority or if they stand as individuals against the overweening will of the majority, our promise of equal justice before the law -- all these, the sanctities

which we cherish politically are threatened by the new force which we have unleashed and which our inventiveness and our knowledge and our insight has made available to us.

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The scientific age will be first of all an age of bigness, of corporatism. Big business, big labor, big government, all these are undoubtedly the economic units which alone can survive in the new world. Basic research can no longer be carried out by individuals financing themselves or being financed by some small stipend or grant. Basic research in science requires today unbelievable sums of money and these can be granted only by prosperous businesses or probably, more probably, by government itself. And as business, labor, government pyramids, power tends to flow more and more into the hands of the few and away from the decision of the many. And finally, in communication we have discovered new means of propaganda, new means of advertising which tend to make us feel that increasingly the will and the desires of the individual can be suborned by those who control these mass media.

We have only to think of the new techniques of sublimal suggestion which are being developed in our land to realize that almost against our will, or certainly without our knowledge, we can be made to vote or to buy or to espouse a cause that someone else thinks we should. The erratic British genius, George Orwell, described for us not so long ago in his novel "1984" a nightmarish future, a future of thought control, tyranny and dictatorship. And there is undoubtedly and unquestionably the danger that the new scientific revolution which we have precipitated makes it easier and more probable that such a society can and indeed may come into being.

Graphically our present situation might be illustrated by that delightful tale from the Arabian Nights about the fisherman and the Djinn. You know the story -- how an impoverished Arabian fisherman, lured by what meager fare he

could catch from the waters of the Red Sea, and one day his nets, in addition to some few fish, brought up a small brazen vessel, stopped by a leaden seal on which was embossed the signet of King Solomon. His curiosity got the better of him, and he opened the seal. And then, in a puff of smoke, there poured forth a Djinn, tremendous overweening evil spirit. The fisherman fell down on his knees in terror and fear. He cried out to the evil spirit to spare him, he had no intention to do the spirit harm, he prayed that the spirit would do him no harm. "Unfortunately, oh fisherman," the spirit replied, "thy death is imminent. I was imprisoned in this vessel by King Solomon when I disobeyed his orders, and I promised then that he who would be my liberator I would grant three great wishes, all that his heart might desire. But as the centuries passed and no one freed me from my imprisonment, I became embittered, and I made a new vow, and I promised myself that my liberator, so long delayed, must die. Choose then, oh fisherman, the manner in which you must perish." Frightened, terrified, somehow the fisherman yet managed to keep his wits about him, and he said, "If die I must, then so be it. But allow me one boon before my time has come. I cannot believe that one so gigantic, so powerful as thee couldst indeed contain yourself and be contained by this small leaden vessel. Allow me to see this miracle, and I will die a happy man." The djinn puzzled over this request for a while, but the fisherman appealed to his vanity, and finally, as you remember, he vaporized himself and returned into the bottle. And quickly the fisherman corked again the bottle and imprisoned the djinn and did not allow him to escape until he promised to rescind his vow and to serve him faithfully the rest of his life.

We have unleashed a terrible, awesome force. It is a force which threatens us with destruction and with death. And unless we learn to master that force, unless we learn to control it, unless we keep our wits about us and in this predicament of ours manage to adjust our institutions so that though

their form be changed their essential protections, their essential purposes, not be changed, we are in danger of destroying either through warfare or from within all that we hold precious.

It is no wonder, then, that the American people are so concerned with the education of this oncoming generation, because they recognize that in them must be wedded not only a dedication to the basic humanistic and religious values on which our society depends but also a knowledge of the political and scientific realities of life which will permit them each step of the way, at each decision which must be taken, at each crossroad where some plan must be formed, to make the right decision, to lead our society hopefully and healthily into the new scientific age.

Now, every social change which has been achieved by mankind has been achieved primarily because man has succeeded in refashioning and reformulating the basis of education in his day. Originally education was the vested interest, a monopoly of the privileged few. The nobility and the priest group alone knew the astronomical lore, the timing of the seasons and of the tides, the suggested timing for planting and for harvesting. This knowledge gave them power, and they jealously and zealously guarded that power. And when men revolted against an aristocracy of religion or an aristocracy of government, they had to formulate a new and broader educational base to make it possible for others to judge and to decide and to govern themselves adequately. And so we have the interesting case in our own Jewish life when the Pharisees and teachers of our people determined to destroy the aristocratic priesthood, the priesthood by blood, which controlled the Temple cult and alone was privileged to offer the Temple sacrifices, and to substitute in its stead the democratic synagogue, worshippers who could equally and openly and without intermediaries pray to their God. To achieve this peaceful revolution they discovered a new

concept in education, the universal public school. And as the Jews poured into these public schools and learned to read their sacred lore, the teachings of their times became open books to them. The Torah became indeed the inheritance of the whole congregation of Israel, and they were able then to depend upon an educated religious electorate to allow them to make this change, this dramatic conversion of Jewish life.

The same is true about political democracies. Had it not been for the great universities which were established in Montpelier, in Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge in the high Middle Ages, and the fact that little by little these universities had to open their doors to the upper middle class, to the bourgoisie beyond the nobility for whom they were created, and that gradually there was a proliferation of knowledge into all courses of society, I doubt very much whether the successful democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century could ever have taken place.

Similarly today, a new base of education is being developed and must be developed to meet the needs of the scientific age. We in this country are most fortunate that for a century now we have been laboring to make it possible for all those who are able to drink deeply at the fountain of higher education. This was the dream of President Jefferson, and President Jackson it was who developed the scheme of a network of great state universities throughout our land for all those who wished, whatever their creed, whatever their religion, whatever their race, might come, might learn, and might depart the better for it. We have come far along the way. There are today three millions of young people at our universities and colleges. This represents forty percent of the young people in the seventeen to twenty-two year age group, a strikingly high percentage when you consider that not all in this group would be capable of gaining anything from a college education. Compare this, if you will, with

the record of the British Isles. There, only eight point six percent of their young people are today at college. You will see how far we have gone. And with the decision of the Supreme Court of several years ago, it seems probable that, with the exception of a few quotas which still remain, legacies of a more intolerant age, it will not be long before all those who are able can come and drink from the fountain of knowledge.

There is, of course, a danger here. There is a danger that mass education will become education in mediocrity. There is a danger that the gifted student will be sacrificed on the altar of democracy. This has been especially true at the secondary level. Fortunately, many colleges have each their own concept of educational philosophy. Many of the colleges have maintained an aristocracy of learning, and even the great state universities have shown signs in recent years of tightening their standards and requiring a great deal of those who come to them.

Now, this broadening of the educational base augurs well for America's future. It means that we are making it possible for our country to use to the utmost our greatest natural resource -- our people. There have, of course, been changes in the content and curricula of education alongside this changing concept of the educational group. Basically we in America have gone into applied education. Seventy-four point six percent of all those who are today enrolled in the universities of our land are studying, not the basic disciplines, whether they be in the sciences, the humanities, or the liberal arts, but applied subjects -- business, engineering, education, and the like. They want to apply directly and immediately some skill mastered at college in their careers and in their communities. No longer is it possible for our universities to be content with producing the educated gentlemen, so important let us say in western Europe, where the educational group is drawn primarily from the upper classes, from those who will return to the government, to the army, and to the

church, who were born to rule and return to rule. Here our universities are reaching all the segments and all classes of society. It is not to be held against them. They have come increasingly to want to produce technicians as well as educated citizens. The hope and the prayer is that they can weld together these two ideas, that they will not deny those who go to college to learn a particular skill, the opportunity to grow in mind, in values, in ethical and philosophical and political knowledge, in humanistic ideas. And especially at the great engineering and scientific institutions of our country there is evidence of a wrestling with this problem, of an attempt to wed into one single whole practical knowledge of having and getting, and impractical but allimportant knowledge which concerns being and becoming. As the curriculum has changed, and as the colleges themselves have changed, so have the students. The devil-may-care, carefree gentleman-seen student of the twenties and thirties, who cut as many classes as he attended, who took most of his education as an opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities, and who was content to allow these four years to be happily dissipated on the football field and at the fraternity dance, this gentleman or lady no longer, fortunately, sets the standards at our universities. There is a new seriousness, we are told, all about us on the campus, and to visit the campus is to realize the truth of this statement. Courses in art appreciation, in music, discussions of religion and of philosophy gain listeners and discussants where absence would have been the rule, not the exception, a generation ago. Courses are being attended. The average grades are higher than they have ever been. Time after time, as you visit the colleges throughout our land, you are impressed by the reports of the deans and

of the presidents and of the faculty that with the exception of those veterans who return for a year or two sobered by the experiences of the Second World War, in all of their experience they have never had to deal with a generation of young people so eager to learn, to know, and to absorb the facts of the course. And this, too, augurs well for our future.

There is, however, one disquieting note in the reports which come to us from the campuses of our land. It was suggested in that book, "The Organization Man," by Mr. William White, which made such an impression during the past year. He spoke of the unbecoming passivity of today's college students, their indifference to the political and economic and social crises in the world about them. He said that it was unusual for a college dormitory to break up in the evening into small political bull-sessions such as he remembered from his youth. He pointed to the fact that when the Saccho-Vanzetti case had broken, when the Scottsborough case was being discussed, when the Spanish War was being prosecuted, the campuses of our land were in turmoil, men rose on the soap-boxes, there were torchlight parades, petitions, speeches, volunteering, and the like, and he compared this with the record of our American campuses during the segregation-integration crisis, when there was not a single act of youthful impetuosity, when not a single student was arrested for subversive speech or for meddling in an affair in which he was not directly concerned. This points up, perhaps, the maturity of today's student, but it also points up a disturbing indifference to the political climate and the political crises among which they live.

I spoke recently here in Cleveland at Fenn College to the Freshman class. I had luncheon afterwards with the Deans of this

college, and they told me that they, too, were alarmed by the complete indifference of their students to life itself. They were vitally concerned with their careers, with absorbing all the know-how and the knowledge which will enable them to earn a living and to contribute in their given field, but they seldom read the newspaper; the enrollment in political clubs of the right, center, or left was anemic. And they pointed to another fact. They stated that there is a growing patina of pessimism, a posture of frustration and futility developed by these young people. They are espousing, at least overtly, some of the neo-orthodox and existentialist pessimistic philosophies popular in Europe in our day. They seem to feel that the problems which surround them are either incapable of solution or certainly beyond any positive concrete contribution on their part. They look down on the heroic. They want a good society, but they certainly do not seem to be vitally concerned by the means, ends by which it will be achieved. I was reminded as I listened and read to this criticism, of our present generation of our college youth, of a passage which comes from our Bible, from the prophet Joel. We know very little about this man. He comes from that stern line of Biblical moralists who spoke in the sixth and seventh and eighth centuries before the Common Era, and spoke to Israel of their foibles and weaknesses and of their sins. But he also was an optimist. He had great faith that Israel would repent of the evil of its ways and return to God and the good. And in one of his speeches he portrays the future, in which God and man will walk together to a paradise on earth which will rival the imaginings of the Garden of Eden, and he says there that poetic imagery, "Thy young men shall see visions. Thy old men shall dream dreams."

Our old men today have been dreaming dreams. It was nine old

men who dreamt the dream of an integrated public school system. It is old men who are still today guiding the fates of the great nations of our world. We are troubled that our young men are not seeing visions sufficient to the hour, that they are settling for less than the stars. They are earth-bound. And yet it is the vision, the dream, which makes man more than an animal. It is by means of vision and through dreams and ideals that all the great and noble creations of human society have been achieved, and it is when man ceases to dream, when he compromises with his ideals, when he settles for security and for a pittance, that life becomes for him constricted, a mass of continuous frustration, and even if he achieves the bargainbasement dreams of his college days, his life remains a bit too colorless, a bit too unfulfilled and incomplete to be satisfying. I pray that this posture of indifference, of apathy, this unwillingness to dream the glorious dreams and see the wonderful visions of youth may quickly disappear, that once again our young generation may sense the excitement and adventure of life and may learn to know that the fertile valleys can be plowed and seeded successfully only when the forests which surround them have been explored and when the heights which surround them have been conquered.

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