

What I Have Learned

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If the world is not destroyed--any writing about lessons and goals for the future must be prefaced by these words. Fifty thousand nuclear weapons now exist, some a thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb. The world's nuclear arsenal is now 6,000 times larger than the total air bombardment by all sides in World War II.

I am as old as Kappa Delta Pi, for we were both born in 1911. What have I learned? As to the world, that this is the only planet we have got. That we are all members of one family, the human family, and all members of one race, the human race. That more than science and high technology will be needed to make a liveable world. That there must be a colossal gathering of forces for caring and survival.

From living I have learned something about human society. That democracy, however imperfect and beset by problems, is far preferable to any form of authoritarianism. That Edmund Burke was right: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." (As a reminder, his words are posted over my desk.)

I have learned from personal experiences also. That the family is one of humanity's most rewarding inventions and that I have been lucky in mine. That traveling while young widens horizons. That social action though risky, can be deeply satisfying. That hard work in fields to which one is devoted can be as joyful as play. That perfectionism is an unattainable and neurosis-creating goal; so let us stop worrying about our inevitable mistakes.

I am both a writer and an educator. My writing ranges widely--travel, yearbooks, textbooks, professional books, and recently my autobiography. As an educator, my specialty is curriculum, particularly the question of what knowledge is of most worth. I learned early that significant educational programs must meet the needs of learners, throw light on social realities, and foster humane values. From these curricular sources, relevant knowledge should be derived and utilized. John Dewey knew this; alas, some of his disciples and all of his opponents do not.

Generation after generation, many educators underplay some of the necessary interacting factors in curricular development. Instead, they overemphasize a favored component. For instance, the child-centered progressives of the 1920s stressed the felt needs of the learner. Social demands schools of thought of the 1930s focused on social functions and problems. Values-oriented educators of the 1940s emphasized moral and spiritual values of democracy. One wit has commented that educators have difficulty in bearing in mind more than one thing at a time.

As to knowledge, structure of the disciplines proponents of the 1950s and 1960s called for teaching concepts from the separate academic disciplines and neglected crucial interdisciplinary areas. The compassionate critics of the 1970s advocated teaching whatever the student, not the society, deemed relevant. Back-to-basics pundits of the 1980s define their basics narrowly and ignore other knowledge essential in modern life. Some educational reform reports of the mid-1980s ask that more skills in mathematics, science, computer, and language be mandated so that the nation will not be at risk from industrial/commercial competition from abroad; meanwhile, other goals are minimized.

In the closing paragraphs of my autobiography, I try to sum up for educators some lessons I have learned and some goals I hold:

If I were living my professional life again, I would give more of my time and resources to collaboration of educators and the general public through community action and state and national legislation. If citizens believed that good education was too expensive, I would urge them to consider the costs of ignorance. I would insist that education is much more than schooling and would foster social travel, work experiences, and community participation by the young. I would oppose even more strongly than I have authoritarian education marked by rote recitation, absorption of inert knowledge, and imposition of fixed answers to controversial questions.

I'd try still harder for wide acceptance of the kind of education I practiced and advocated. I would work for schools in which every child and youth is seen and treated as an individual, each with a unique personality, each with personal and social needs. I would try to persuade educators to teach about the pressing social problems of their day so that human beings might survive in a world at peace, with better human relations in an environment conducive to personal growth. I would ask my colleagues to help children and youth to understand and experience a democratic way of life through applications of the method of intelligence in their studies, respect for individuals in their relationships with others, and concern for the common welfare in their social thought and action.

I would recognize that massive common effort would be needed to put even a fraction of these educational aspirations into effect. But I would refuse to believe that the individual doesn't count and can play no role in making a better world. I would still try to make some difference through having lived.

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