

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the 54th Annual Meeting of the American Council on Education, Washington, D. C., October 7, 1971)

RESURRECTION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

During the past few years higher education in this country -- and indeed throughout the world -- has undergone a baptism of fire. Many books have been and will be written to assess why it happened. More thoughtful persons will ask what might be learned from all that happened. Those perennially endowed with hope, as all of us must be, will now inquire: Where do we go from here?

All of this assumes, of course, that internal revolution, violence, vulgarity, and disintegration within the institutions of higher education have peaked out, that the high water mark has been reached and that the waters of contradiction are subsiding. No one can be certain that this assumption is true. One can only surmise that a phenomenon that came upon us unsuspectedly, with the speed of Summer lightning, and all of a sudden engulfed the whole world of higher learning might very well leave us in the same rapid way. Whether it will or not is still surmise and assumption and hope at the moment.

All we can be sure of at this point in time is that there has been a lot of wreckage left behind from the onslaught of these past four or five years. Many, if not most, of our past distinguished presidents are no longer with us. The last two or three years saw

most of them leave their posts. What is worse, many of them, after long years of service, presiding over unprecedented growth in their institutions, must now experience some bitter memories of their final days, when everything seemed to become unglued all at once, when a life of reason was suddenly smothered by blind emotion, when a place of calm civility was engulfed by violence, bombings, burnings, vandalism, and vulgarity.

I would hope that in a calmer future moment we might have an honor roll of those who received the brunt of the attack. They have often and irresponsibly been characterized as weak, incompetent, even stupid men and women. I knew most of them personally, cherished almost all of them, and have deeply regretted their departure from our scene. Let at least one word be spoken today in vindication of their valiant, if belated, efforts in an almost impossible situation. They were the inevitable scapegoats for all that happened and they have suffered greatly for all of us and our common enterprise. For that, I salute them in absentia.

I believe that what went wrong, went wrong globally. The universities in Tokyo, London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome were as disturbed and disrupted as Berkeley, Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, and Wisconsin. Some of this was due to a wave of history, still not well understood; part of it was due to serious mistakes on the part of the total enterprise of higher education. It could be called a crisis of credibility, of legitimacy, of authority, or of frustrated expectations. In large measure, it was the kind of abnormal convulsion

of heightened tensions and conflicting convictions that characterize every revolution, when the traditional consensus is eroded, and the supportive pillars that depend upon free consensus become suddenly unglued, and total collapse ensues.

It was difficult to be standing there when the dam gave way and not get wet. I recall one brief period when one president was unhorsed because he called in the police, and another fell because he did not. I asked one great president how he had survived a difficult crisis and he answered with great humility: "Each morning when I dragged myself from bed, I asked myself, 'What is the worst thing I could do today?' and I didn't do it".

However one explains the worldwide revolution in higher education, in the case of the revolution in American higher education all the usual problems were exacerbated by the Vietnam war, racial conflict, sudden realization of the plight of the poor in the midst of plenty, wastage and pillage of our national resources, the horrible state of national priorities as reflected in the federal budget, and, in general, by the increasingly dismal quality of our national life. Having made little progress in their assault on racial injustice and the inanity of the Vietnam war, the young -- an unprecedented proportion of whom were now college and university students for a variety of right and wrong reasons -- turned their frustrations on the institution closest to hand, their college or university. The other problems continued to grind away, so that the new revolution fed upon itself as frustration here was heightened by impatience there, and impatience there by frustration here.

There was enough wrong within the colleges and universities, too, so that we soon had an ever more explosive mixture awaiting simple ignition. There were plenty of volunteers to light the match. Every succeeding explosion on one campus ignited others elsewhere. And so it went across the country from West to East, and back again. Few institutions escaped unscarred, some were profoundly changed, and all were affected in one way or another. Some looked in the face of death, and that more than anything else may have accounted for the detente.

What really was wrong within the colleges and universities that fueled the fires of revolution? Strangely enough, we were the victims of our own success. Higher education in its earlier American version grew slowly, from the founding of Harvard in 1636 to a total of 50,000 students in 1900. For the last century, this student body doubled every fifteen years. This was hardly a herculian task when the doubling meant going from 12,500 to 25,000 students, or from 25,000 to 50,000, or even from 50,000 to 100,000.

But by the early 1950's, we had a base of 3,000,000 which in doubling to 6,000,000, and then moving towards 12,000,000, meant doing educationally in fifteen years more than had been done in the last 330 years. We were all so busy growing and expanding, reaching towards the enrollment of half the age group in higher education, that we did not have time to ask whether what was good for 50,000, or 2% of the college age group in 1900, was equally good for 8 1/2 million, or 40% of the college age group, in 1970.

Moreover, change during all these decades has meant simply and mostly expansion and growth, externally, but not necessarily internally, more of the same for ever greater numbers of students, more of the same kind of faculty teaching, the same kinds of courses. This may make sense in the production of more hot dogs, but growth in higher education certainly must mean more than simple reduplication of what is and has been.

Suddenly, the students asked the question we had all been too busy to ask -- does this whole enterprise, as presently constituted, really provide a good education for everyone? I grant that their suggestions for internal change were not always an obvious move towards certain educational improvement, but they did start us looking more seriously at what we were doing, and it is no secret that we were not always greatly pleased by what we saw within our institutions.

Some of our most distinguished and most highly-compensated faculty were teaching less and less and seeing students only when unavoidable, while graduate students carried on the bulk of teaching for slave wages. New faculty, by the tens of thousands, were trained annually for research, engaged to teach, and most rewarded when they could negotiate lucrative contracts from government, industry, or foundations that took them away from both campus teaching and on-campus, course-related research that involved their students as well as themselves and their careers. Four distinguished Midwestern universities once boasted that almost 400 of their faculty were presently overseas, and the standard joke was the Pan-American Faculty Chair that took the distinguished holder somewhere, anywhere but to the university.

Administrators were getting their share of the bounty too: not only balancing their budgets with the ever-enlarging research contract overhead funds, but traveling about to see how the overseas or off-campus enterprises were coming along, and finding additional time to lend their distinguished presence to all manner of industrial, governmental, military, or other activities. Meanwhile, at home, liberal education, the core of the whole endeavor, became fragmented, fractured, and debilitated, as sub-specialty was heaped on sub-specialty, and students learned more and more about less and less, and next to nothing about the great humanistic questions, such as the meaning of life and death, war and peace, justice and injustice, love and hatred, art and culture, to mention a few.

Few educators even averted to the fact that this enormous growth in their student bodies did not include those who needed higher education most -- minority youngsters and children of the lower socio-economic quartile of the population, for whom a college degree was the essential ingredient to upward mobility and who, whatever their talent or native intelligence, had only one-seventh of the chance to enter higher education as did the youngsters from the upper socio-economic quartile, whatever their intelligence or promise.

The total structure of higher education remained largely the same, although the enterprise doubled every fifteen years and quadrupled every thirty years. Student questioning about governance caught most colleges and universities flat-footed. In their

eagerness to reform, many institutions overcompensated so that, from being badly governed, they now emerged as largely ungovernable. Every decision now has to run the gauntlet of many potential vetoes from every conceivable quarter within and outside the university. This, too, compounded the internal problems, since a wise man with some plausible solutions to assist the ailing institution could die of old age before seeing them realized.

My account of internal problems is far from complete, but before leaving this first point of: "Why the revolution of the past few years?", may I add one more potent factor of failure. Most colleges and universities during, and possibly because of their rapid growth, simply ceased to be communities. Almost everyone was culpable. Trustees were often simply unrepresentative of the total endeavor they ultimately sought to govern. One distinguished Western university had a Board of Trustees that was consistently wealthy, male, white, aged, Western, Republican, and Protestant. Read backwards this means that there were generally no middle or lower class Trustees, no blacks or Chicanos or Orientals, no women or younger people, no Catholics or Jews, no Middle-Western, Southern, or Eastern members, and, generally, no Democrats. One might ask how such Trustees can provide wisdom for a community that contained reasonably large numbers of all the elements not represented on the Board.

One might wonder why presidents and top administrators in higher education did not see the storm coming and strengthen their communities to meet it effectively. An obvious answer would be that

the storm burst suddenly and that the community had been already badly eroded. Rather than strengthened, the community had to be recreated and this is no easy task when part of the crisis was a lack of community, or an external quasi-community that lacked credibility, legitimacy, or even the will to govern itself.

If one must fault presidents and chancellors among others, and we must, it would have to be for a lack of moral leadership, not just in time of crisis, but more consistently in earlier and peaceful times. We too often were blind to the moral implications of unbridled educational growth that was certainly spectacular, but questionably educational. We did not use our influence to move for more representative Boards of Trustees, greater rewards for those faculty concerned with students, teaching, and true educational reform and growth, more minority students, and stronger words at times for those students who clamored for responsible freedom without being responsible once granted greater freedom. We might also have labored more aggressively in the continuing education of our alumni who have their own new problems understanding each new age and change.

Once we washed our hands of any moral concern for all that was happening in our academic communities, we reaped the harvest of a disintegrating community. I grant you that the great wisdom and courage required for moral leadership are not common qualities among men and women, but then neither are college or university presidencies

common tasks. I grant as well that, in its early stages, disintegration of a community is almost imperceptible to all but the very wisest and, as disintegration brings on a crisis of legitimacy and credibility, super-human courage and charisma are needed to recreate what has been largely lost.

In any case, most presidents paid their individual price for a situation created by many, not least of all by the wild men among the student body, most of whom have now successfully graduated, and by some irresponsible faculty members who are still around now that the scapegoat has been driven into the desert. No need to lament further, only to learn from all that happened. There is an interesting Gospel story of the man from whom a devil was driven, only to have him later repossessed by seven worse devils.

What then can we learn from all that has happened? First, I think, that moral leadership is as vitally important to a community as the participation of all its members in its healthy life and growth. Participation has been the word most popularly voiced following the crisis, but there has been all too little said about the moral imperatives of this participation. I have a strong belief, nurtured no doubt by my own prejudices, that the central person in exercising moral leadership for the life and prosperity of any academic institution must be its president. He must, first and foremost, speak for the priorities that really count in academia. Presidential leadership demands that, for his speaking to be effective, he must somehow enlist the support of the various segments of the community.

Otherwise, he is only speaking for himself and to himself, which is good posturing, but bad leadership.

There is no magic formula for presidential leadership. Each president must establish his own credibility. He will do this best by the goals which shine through his own life and activities. The day of Olympian detachment for presidents is over. If justice needs a voice, on campus or off, he must have the wisdom and courage to say what must be said, and the president must not be the last one to say it. If faculty or students need defense, he should be the first to defend them. If either or both need criticism, the president cannot avoid saying honestly and clearly what is wrong. If the learning process is lagging because of glacial progress in reforming curricula, structures, teaching, and inflexible out-moded requirements, the president must remind the community of what is needed for educational growth and survival in an unprecedented changing world. He must blow the trumpet loudly and clearly, because the times demand it. There was a time when a president was expected to be a lion abroad and a mouse at home. No longer.

The president, above all other members in the community, must portray respect for the mind and its special values, for true learning and culture, for humanity and humane concerns, for academic freedom, for justice and equality, in all that the university or college touches, especially the lives of its students, faculty, and alumni. Of course, the name of the game is good communications on every level, at every

opportunity, but I must insist that the president communicates best by what he is and what he does with his own life. If he has credibility, then the goals he proposes will be the extension of that credibility and the means of glueing the community together.

While the community is primarily academic, I submit once more that its basis of unity must be of the heart, as well as of the head. It was not merely intellectual problems that recently unravelled great institutions of learning across the world, but rather the dissipation of moral consensus, community, and concern. When members of a college or university stop caring about each other or their institution, or become unclear about personal or institutional goals, then community ceases to be and chaos results.

The mystique of leadership, be it educational, political, religious, commercial, or whatever, is next to impossible to describe, but wherever it exists, morale flourishes, people pull together towards common goals, spirits soar, order is maintained, not as an end in itself, but as a means to move forward together. Such leadership always has a moral as well as an intellectual dimension; it requires courage as well as wisdom; it does not simply know, it cares. When a faculty and a student body know that their president really cares about them, they will follow him to the heights, even out of the depths.

Moreover, good leadership at the top inspires correlative leadership all down the line. Participatory democracy cannot simply mean endless discussion. Rather, if it is to work at all, it means

that every member of the community, especially within his or her own segment of the community, exercises moral responsibility, especially when it hurts and when it demands the courage to say and do what may be unpopular. Student judicial courts will not survive if they never find anyone guilty or never impose adequate sanctions for obvious wrong-doing. Student government will soon enough lose all credibility and acceptance, even from students, if its only concerns are freer sex, more parking, education without effort, and attainment of the heights of Utopia without climbing. Faculty senates will only be debating societies if they never recognize the central faculty abuses and move effectively to correct them. Vice presidents and deans and departmental chairmen do not exist to pass the buck upwards and to avoid the difficult decisions. Leadership may be most important at the presidential level, but it is absolutely essential at every level -- trustees, faculty, administrators, students, and alumni -- if the community is going to be equal to the task that lies ahead for each college and university and for the total enterprise of higher education in America.

This brings me to my final point: Where do we go from here? First, I think we should clearly understand the climate that results from the events of the past five years in academia. For the first time in more than a century, the end of quantitative growth in higher education is in sight. Having doubled in size every fifteen years during the last century, we now see higher education leveling off by 1980, possibly slipping downward a bit. This latter movement is already perceptible in graduate education.

However, there is a more serious aspect to the climate in which we in higher education now live. After a century when the society at large could not do enough for universities and colleges, when these institutions represented the epitome of just about everyone's hopes, a degree being the closest earthly replica of the badge of salvation, suddenly the great American public, our patron and faithful supporter, is rather completely disillusioned about the whole enterprise, let down, as they say, by the weak, vacillating, spineless presidents, their former darlings, disgusted by the ultra-liberal, permissive faculties, who were going to solve all of the world's problems, but could not solve their own, and, needless to say, they find the students revolting in more ways than one, despite the fact that these are their own sons and daughters, the products of the most primordial education of all that does or does not take place in the family.

It is paradoxical that at a time when the universities are being asked to solve more problems than ever before -- urban blight, racial tensions, minority opportunity, generation gap, overseas development, environmental pollution, political participation by the young, forward motion in atomic energy and space, and a whole host of other concerns, at this same time we are misunderstood, abused, and abandoned as never before by government and foundations, by benefactors, parents, and alumni, and generally by the public at large.

From what I have said already, it is obvious that we are not blameless at this moment in time. I will not repeat our faults. Most dramatically, in the eyes of the public, our institutions who were supposed to have answers for everyone and everything had few answers for ourselves and our own troubles; the citadels of reason fell to the assaults of mindless emotion; the centers of taste and civility spouted obscenities; the havens of halcyon peace and pranks saw within them violence, destruction, and even death.

We must admit that we were given magnificent coverage in the media when we were at our worst and, although the worst, in terms of delinquent persons and horrible events, represented a very small corner of the total scene, the stereotypes came through clearly and tended to be universalized. The centuries-old love affair of American society with higher education suddenly turned to ashes. And now, at our time of greatest opportunity and direst financial crisis, we are spurned by the very people who created us, confided their children to us, supported us, and looked to us for a solution to everything difficult.

Perhaps one central problem is that we encouraged and allowed the public to place too much hope in us, to expect too much of our endeavor, to be too confident of our apparent omnipotence when, in fact, there are simply many important tasks that we cannot do without perverting what we were established to do. We are not the State or the Church, the Red Cross, or the Peace Corps, not the Overseas Development Council, or the Legal Aid Society. Our members may be

active in any or all of these bodies, but we are not these bodies and we cannot institutionally do their work. No wonder that hopes were frustrated when we suggested or allowed hope to transcend the reality of what we are and what we really should be doing.

Not only our supporters in government and the private sector, but our students expected from us something far beyond higher education and, of course, received less.

A Harvard professor has stated it well:

"The dissolution of family and community life and the decline of secondary education have produced a generation of college students, many of whom no longer seek at the university learning and social pleasures, but also and above all affection, attention, moral guidance, and an opportunity to become personally involved in adult affairs. The universities are not equipped to provide these things." (Richard Pipes, New York Times, April 25, 1969, p. 28)

Personally, I believe we have come out of the crisis more disposed to provide for our students affection, attention, moral guidance, and an opportunity to become personally involved in adult affairs. The vote for eighteen-year olds looms more important than military service. We have been listening harder to our students which spells attention. We have learned that it is difficult to educate those we do not really love, and I trust I have already said enough about the moral dimension of higher education.

Perhaps during that period of rapid growth, we grew beyond our potential to be personal and human. High on the list of our agenda now must be how to correct this. As mentioned above, the faculty, the heart of the whole endeavor, were often seduced by the possibility of being rewarded more and more for teaching less and less. Tenure too often became a safe opportunity for somnolence rather than a call to be different, to dare, and to excel. Trustees and presidents were too often too busy with the wrong things. Students were generally on target, but not always on the right one, especially when autocriticism was required. Let us admit it, we were all less than we could and should have been. We were all caught up in unusual historical currents in a very troubled, unjust, and unpeaceful world, yes, but we still must answer for ourselves and our personal responsibility to remake our own world of higher education in a better image.

Anyway, I began with the hope that the worst may be over. Ours is a resilient enterprise -- see how it grew -- and we may well be better for the many tragedies we have experienced during the past five years. Clark Kerr recently said that American higher education has entered its second climacteric in more than a third of a millennium of its existence. That may be fearsome, but it is also exciting. According to Kerr, the last climacteric lasted fifty years, roughly from 1820 to 1870. Those fifty years were difficult; they saw many changes, but they were the prelude to the century of extraordinary growth that we have just experienced. May our second climacteric also be the prelude to better days ahead.

It would be consonant with the rapidity of change in our times, as compared to the last century, that our climacteric might be compressed from fifty into five years. Apart from hope, at least we must believe that we are, in large measure, the masters of our own destiny. If we have unwittingly disestablished our credibility, we can also consciously re-establish it. If we have tarnished our integrity of purpose, we can learn from our frustrated and impossible hopes and refurbish our central purpose. If we grew slack in moral leadership, spoiled by affluence and prosperity, we will surely have some lean years ahead in which to rededicate ourselves to what is right and just. We cannot undo the past five years, but we can learn from them.

There is little profit in just licking our wounds or feeling sorry for ourselves. We still represent the best hope for America's future, provided that we learn from our own mistakes and re-establish in the days ahead that which so often testified to the nobility of our endeavors in times past. All is not lost. We are simply beginning again, as man always must, in a world filled with ambiguities, the greatest of which is man himself.

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Resurrection for Higher Education

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During the past few years higher education in this country--and indeed throughout the world--has undergone a baptism of fire. Many books have been and will be written to assess why it happened. More thoughtful persons will ask what might be learned from all that happened. Those perennially endowed with hope, as all of us must be, will now inquire: Where do we go from here?

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