

Santayana once remarked that those who neglect history and its lessons are condemned to repeat all the mistakes of the past.

I would submit that we were at our worst in the past history of higher education (and lower too) when we allowed inequality of opportunity in education and when we were passive about the low quality of our educational efforts. Restated positively, we were at our best when we pursued educational quality on all levels and when we extended educational opportunity to all our citizens, no matter how poor, how depressed, how low on the economic and social scale they were. Poor foreign immigrants became American citizens of high success, a story unheard of in the old world from which most of them came. Children of illiterate immigrants became Ph.D.'s and university professors in one or two generations. Education was at the heart of progress in America and all of us in education today are the beneficiaries of the American educational experience. Without it, where would we be?

It is a curious fact that both of these lessons coming from our past can be expressed in two words differentiated by only one vowel: quality and equality. Despite this minimal differential, the two words express quite different concepts, even concepts which today might be considered antithetical or inimical, one to the other.

Quality has an elitist sound; equality a populist overtone. Quality seems to characterize something achieved by a few, whereas equality means open to everyone. Is not the one, quality, the

enemy of the other, equality, and vice versa? It may be so in some endeavors, say creating concert pianists, but in the matter of educating humans, who will settle for anything but the best for one and all? At the very least, the best must be available to everyone. I do not say that everyone will, in fact, perform well, but everyone must have a chance to try and, in the case of those educationally deprived, there must be special help for them to catch up with those who have had much greater educational opportunity. This is to say that while quality education is an ideal, never to be compromised, equality speaks to the opportunity to have the best, and even to be specially prepared to have the best if one starts life deprived of such preparation because, for example, one was born in a ghetto.

I am not speaking of equality of performance. That depends on the individual. Those who have talent and strive harder generally perform better. That is not a given, but the result of greater effort and, of course, greater talent. But no one should be deprived of equality of opportunity. Once given a chance, hard work and talent make the difference.

An example of what I am saying is worth a thousand words. A young girl in Mississippi had talent but no opportunity because she was a black woman in a state not given, at that time, to education for blacks. However, a white family of some influence recognized her talent and made it possible for her to have the highest quality education in music. She had talent and she worked hard.

I once heard this young black woman sing Aida and Madam Butterfly in the Staatsoper in Vienna. What is perhaps one of the most demanding musical audiences in the world gave her fourteen standing ovations, even though it kept them from dinner for over an hour!

At the time, she could not have entered the University of Mississippi, stayed at a good hotel, or eaten in a good restaurant there. Yet, because of a good education, she was the toast of Vienna. Her name is Leontyne Price. Without quality education, her singing would have been restricted to a small town Baptist church. Because of quality education, the whole nation recently celebrated her retirement from the Metropolitan Opera.

America is at a kind of educational crossroads today. The great lessons of the past, quality and equality, were never more pertinent. A whole spate of recent reports have indicated that American primary, secondary, and university education leave much to be desired, which is a nice way of saying that we are doing badly. I have said earlier that education deserves nothing but the best. We can do better. We can raise standards of performance for both teaching and learning. We can and we must. Nothing less than the best, which is another word for quality, is appropriate for American education on all levels. Equality of opportunity to attend a poor school is no favor. As Groucho Marx once said: "Any club that would admit me isn't worth joining."

In the matter of equality, we have made great strides, but there is yet much to be done if equality of opportunity for all Americans is to be made a reality for all Americans. We are not a standard nation, like Sweden full of Swedes or Italy full of Italians. As the land of opportunity, we have more blacks than any nation in Africa, except Nigeria, many more than South Africa. In fact, we have more blacks in America than there are Canadians in Canada. We have more Hispanics than there are Australians in Australia. For the recent past, the nations contributing immigrants and refugees are not European as in the past century, but Oriental, Koreans, Chinese, Filipino, and Cambodians. Their children, too, are hungry for education.

Curiously, of all of these groups, blacks have the greatest problem to succeed in America, even though they have been here the longest. Partly this may be due to the heritage of slavery and almost three centuries of oppression. Also, prejudice seems to be a function of color rather than race. In any case, if America is to be true to its promise, we cannot stand by idly and watch each new wave of Oriental and Hispanic immigrants move ahead of black Americans who have been Americans for three centuries. Here is where quality of education and equality of educational opportunity really count for America of the future.

Almost twice as many blacks as whites are unemployed and among unemployed teenagers, more than half are blacks. Why? Because they mainly grow up in depressing ghettos with terrible

schools. Each year, about 500,000 move out into the most technological society in the world where they are not only unemployed, but unemployable. They cannot speak, read, or write standard English; they cannot use numbers or cope with modern science. This is true of poor whites and Hispanics, too, but especially true of blacks from ghettos. Over a decade, we are speaking of 5,000,000 young black Americans with their whole lives ahead of them, but nowhere to go.

What to do? It certainly bears on the future of America. It has a lot to do with providing equal access to good education, whatever the cost and effort involved. Otherwise, we are creating a time bomb within America. Our past experience is clear and informative. Wherever we have provided quality education for minorities, they have obtained good jobs which made possible financing for good housing in good neighborhoods with good schooling for their children who, with good education, continue the spiral of upward social mobility. In this way, we have, in fact, created a black middle class in the past two decades, but it is all too small.

To make it larger is one of the greatest challenges to America in the years ahead. And the key is both quality and equality of education. Nothing less will do it.

Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.
President, University of Notre Dame