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COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND STUDENTS

ARE
THEIR
HEADS
EVER
IN THE
SAME
PLACE?

HESBURGH OF NOTRE DAME

At the University of Notre Dame, all roads lead to or from the Golden Dome which shines atop the Administration Building. The campus is, given its fame, surprisingly small; the buildings are mostly yellow, and one would think himself on the grounds of any midwestern school were it not for the minicathedral near, yes, the Golden Dome. The university's president, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, is a spectacularly public man, involved in civil rights and the National Education Association. Dick Krashna, the graduating senior to whom we spoke is president of the student body and being black is outside the school's old "Fighting Irish" image.

What is college for?

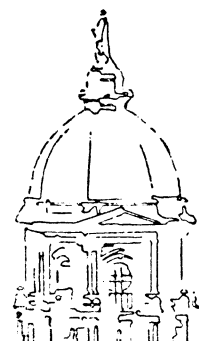
There are just so many things going on today, in such a wide spectrum, that I think the answer is—it's for almost anything. If you ask me what it *should* be for, I might give you a different one.

What?

I think it's to enlarge people's minds, to give them a capacity in a given area whether it be in science or the arts, or humanities, or in business, or the law or in engineering. It's not just an esoteric, abstract place though. I would hope that it does something for the person, the whole living community here, that it would give people a sense of compassion in the face of so much suffering in the world and some competence to do something about it. Compassion without competence can get you into meddling. On the other hand, competence without compassion gives you a kind of standoffish attitude toward the world's ills today, so that you live in a vacuum. *When you speak of an education enlarging one's mind or widening one's vision, how do you reconcile that aim,*

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which is in a sense classic, with today's concern for relevance?

I think that is a great distraction in most university discourse today. Relevance in the narrow sense is really a dead-end road. I was here at the university in the early '30s, and if I had been taught the most relevant thing at that time, it would have been how to survive in the depression, something relevant at that moment but irrelevant for the rest of my life. The things that are relevant are philosophical and theological. Basically, they have to do with the meaning of life. They have to do with big issues like love and hatred and war and peace, beauty and ugliness and values and valuelessness. They have to do with time and eternity and hope and despair. They're at the heart of all the human questions, and the human questions will always be with us. They come in different forms. They come at the moment in the shape of Vietnam or a ghetto or an underdeveloped country in Africa or Latin America or Asia. They come in the form of hunger or population, but no matter how they may seem, they all ultimately get down to some very fundamental things, such as big words in our Constitution or Declaration of Independence, about life and liberty and pursuit of happiness. These are the really relevant things for human beings. And if you don't get those questions opened up for you in the university, you're really not getting very much. The other thing to remember is, that in the sciences, everything that is relevant today can be irrelevant ten years from now because the whole of human knowledge is doubling every 12 to 15 years. You'd better learn how to *think* today, how to cope with new knowledge, how to cope with evolving situations because that's the kind of life that every youngster is going to have to live. What's relevant is relevant to the human situation in every time and age.

Have you ever had to make that believable to a large group of people who would think very counter to you? It's a hard one.

I think it's hard, but it can be gotten across, because it's so obvious if you look at the kind of world we're living in. This is not the kind of set, stable, agricultural, institutionalized world of the kind that existed, say, in medieval times. We're living in a world where change is rampant; you can read Toffler's *Future Shock* to see the dimensions of change. Unless people have a few ideas that are universal, in the sense that they will then carry throughout time and space in their lives, they're going to be lost and anchorless. If all the kid has learned in school is how to cope with Vietnam,

or how to cope with People's Park, say, that isn't much. There are many values that underlie a Vietnam, such as an understanding of war and peace and the futility of violence. Those are lessons that may be viable the rest of a person's life. But just to bear down on the philosophical, or political, or historical reasons of why we got into Vietnam is, in a sense, a very small page in a total history of mankind, and a page from which, like all history, you can learn something but not all that much.

How do you feel about students breaking up the educational experience?

I've told our own students that if I had my druthers, I'd have the educational system so organized that at any given point, where the youngster tends to get bored with the whole system and the whole long trek behind him and ahead of him, he can just go out to find himself. I think often you find yourself in service to other people, instead of simply being a sponge in the educational system.

How about the kids who are not involved in any kind of activist program but who are, say, living in communes, or living off the land, trying very hard to be relevant to one another, and also trying to be relevant to themselves?

I can see some value in it, although I think many of them are trying to reinvent the wheel. When I was 19 years old I went to a novitiate—part of the training to get ready to join the religious life—and spent 13 months on a farm. I was as far back to nature as you could get for a city boy. We practiced silence all but two hours a day so that we could listen to the voices within us, and hopefully be open to the grace of God and to the kind of drumbeats one gets in this kind of contemplative life. There's a time in life when everybody could stand a little bit of that. We're surrounded by noise instead of silence, loneliness instead of community, by ugliness instead of the kind of beauty of being out in a field that's just been plowed and the smells are rising from it and the dawn is coming up and you think of the corn going to begin to grow soon once you get it planted and the rains come in the springtime. These are the kinds of experiences a kid who grows up in a ghetto or a slum never has. I can understand people trying to get away from that kind of jungle.

But the dropouts I know are often refugees from white suburban ghettos.

They can be just as killing; it's just a different set of the same kind of realities.

Why are they just as killing?

You can be just as lonely in a white suburban ghetto as you can in a black ghetto. It may be a little more plush, but there is such a thing as plush loneliness, and there is such a thing as plush emptiness, and if your whole life doesn't have a single challenge in it, a single link that is human and warm and loving you're just as empty in an affluent area of society as you would be in a poor one.

I know that as an educator your problems here are with relatively activist groups but

have you also had a concern with the conservatives? In trying to wake them up?

I don't think this is a very conservative place to begin with. There are conservative elements, because you have the whole spectrum of philosophical points of view about human progress. The fact is, though, the peace movement, at the moment, is being carried on by very liberal Catholic priests and nuns.

Is there much of that liberal strain here?

I think there is a good deal of it, through the faculty and the student body. I think any good movement for human progress is represented here. But there are two elements that complicate any discussion which uses the tags liberal and conservative. I'm a very liberal person as far as achieving human justice, which is a question of means and strategies and scenarios. I'm fairly conservative about what I think is valuable to human life. I don't change my point of view on that very often because I established my convictions at a fairly early age and I confirmed them through many years of study. I feel at ease with the things that I think are important and I'm not about to change them.

What do you think about what some call the politicization of the church?

The good Lord talked about feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked and visiting those in prison. These are not strictly political acts . . . a lot has to do with one's motive. One can do something of political order, but one does it for spiritual reasons. It's a reverse of politicization; you are spiritualizing things which by themselves are perhaps purely political.

Would you like to see Notre Dame graduate 2000 Berrigans every year?

I would like to see Notre Dame turn out a wide spectrum of people. I don't think the world could stand 2,000 Berrigans. But there should be some. I'm quite high on the young people we're turning out.

And you think religion is very much a concern of theirs?

I think it is. But many of them have turned off the institutional church and some of its works and poms.

Does that bother you?

Well, I don't think one should confuse this with religion. You'd have to say that the very kids that turn off the institutional church in some ways, are the very youngsters who are becoming more and more interested in theology and ultimately in religion.

Twenty or 30 years ago, if you had said that at some Catholic colleges, you might have had lightning bolts coming at your head. . . .

But that was 25 years ago, and 25 years ago was a different kind of placid world. Now we're in a world of revolution and evolution and we have to live in the times we live in.

Father, do you have any heroes, living or dead?

Oh, I have a few dead ones. John the 23rd because he did the extraordinary thing of turning the church around in midstream

after almost 400 years of very little change. I must say I have very few political heroes either in this country or in the world today. Europe is run by groups of faceless people, Russia by a faceless Committee. Look at the beginning of our country and you see people like Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, Hamilton. Try, today, to find their equal in political life and they're just not there.

Who are your intellectual heroes?

There was an old man in France called Maritain. The world has run by him, but go back and read some of his early works and you'll find them tremendous for their day. They had enormous impact on revolution in Latin America, and the Christian Democratic parties in Europe and Latin America. Thomas More. He was an author, a lawyer, a linguist, a judge, Lord Chancellor, a great Christian. He was a martyr. He did things in each of these areas that were absolutely extraordinary. Young people need heroes tremendously, and the saddest thing one hears from them is that all their heroes are dead, and most of them have been assassinated.

Hitler crops up as a hero.

You can say this for Hitler, if you want to say something. He took a country which was bankrupt, which was disorganized, had no position, no maneuverability in defeat and he made it into a country which menaced all the world. He did it at an enormous cost of human life, by the most despicable actions toward the Jews. He did it on a phony area in philosophy, Nazism, which I think is repugnant to anyone with any sense of humanism. The fact is, however, that he did it. But you have to distinguish between people who have impact on history, and whether or not that impact was good or bad.

I suppose it is a comment on the absence of contemporary heroes, that his name does crop up—because he did something. He did something . . . but so did Napoleon, and Genghis Khan. You know, we live in an age of midgets.

4) Dick Krashna, Student

What is college for?

I can only answer what it is for me—a preparation for a profession that I hope I can get into. A necessary four years for me to prepare to get into law. From a perspective as a black person who knows that he has to have some skills too, well, to help others, I know I have to be a professional and that's why I'm here at college.

How would you describe Notre Dame?

The student here at Notre Dame is, in many ways, like the student at Notre Dame 25 years ago, and unlike students at other places. He comes here from his Catholic high-school upbringing, and many times isn't challenged to see other ways of life. He doesn't necessarily have to throw away his Catholicism, but he should be challenged. But many aren't, and continue as they were in high school.

Are they basically conservative?

Basically conservative, or part of this

quasiliberal movement we have now where it isn't fashionable to be conservative or reactionary. But a lot of the white students in my class are very narrow-minded about all the issues.

Do they feel at all threatened by what's going on in the Catholic Church?

Surely. I would imagine these students see everything that's going along with other young people as basic threats to their security.

Don't their teachers challenge them?

Many of them do, but I see Notre Dame as unchallenging academically. You get out of Notre Dame as much as you put into it. And the teachers, for the most part, don't challenge you.

Is there no radical Catholic element here, by which I mean both politically and religiously?

We have that element, but it's not readily recognizable. There's a large group of students and a few teachers associated with our Non-Violence Program with other disciplines. That might be considered a radical Catholic group, but they're very much in the minority and not very vocal.

From what one reads about Father Hesburgh, he sounds considerably more liberal than your description of the student body and faculty.

Father Hesburgh does come off, oftentimes, more liberal than his students. But I think anything liberal or progressive here has been done by a very few students who have been able to push Father Hesburgh into making some very dynamic changes in his whole outlook.

But when Kennedy was President didn't he threaten to resign from the Commission for Civil Rights because he didn't feel they were implementing laws quickly enough?

Father is absolutely superb on the national level, but here, he is, if not reactionary, close to it. Two years ago, at Notre Dame, there were only 25 black students out of 6,500. Now there are approximately 125 on both campuses, including graduate students and special aides. This increase is quite large and came about by forcing the University to recruit more blacks. Father has always been pushed into doing things, finding money, finding money for scholarships, and he knows how to get it. Father is a superb politician as well. He knows what looks good for the University. On the national level I admire him. I read both of his civil rights reports and I think they tell the story of one white man in America. *Do you think his position as a college president makes him naturally resistant to pressure?*

Sure. Father often talks about that also, about how he's the last of the old-time college presidents. And I think that is so. He knows that he has to resist pressure in order to survive. He does it well.

Is religion ever discussed here?

I would say theology. Catholicism is discussed very seldom. When the University was on CBS "First Tuesday," every other

film showed students at Mass. But it isn't a reality. Catholicism just isn't practiced here as much as the University will say it is. The students don't even think of Notre Dame as a Catholic school anymore, even the ones caught up in the same way of thinking as students 25 years ago.

What, in terms of college, is relevant now?

I avoid the term completely because it's one of those bad words like community. What's meaningful to me is this mechanical establishing of skills. Even the word skills doesn't have too much meaning. Just learning how to read and write and talk and articulate things is what I'm talking about. And law. . . .

Were there any courses, outside law, that involved you especially?

One in sophomore year on "God and the Modern World" offered by Father Jefferson, who was an outcast in the Arkansas Seminary because he preached that Jesus Christ wasn't necessarily God but a good man who came into his divinity as he got to be a better one. Christianity meant something to me when I heard and thought about this. I've done a whole lot of work with antiracism. And this is meaningful to me because it is something that has to be done regardless of how frustrating or how apparently unfulfilling it is. About relevance, I have a couple of things to say. The modern white college student cannot afford to commit the great sin of irrelevance. So you'll see, particularly on campuses like this one, a lot of long haired, pot-smoking, drug-taking students who just take on the new paraphernalia of the old-time all-American student. These same students will go into long tirades on relevancy. Absolutely sickening.

Do you have any heroes, living or dead?

The first is Mahatma Gandhi. Ralph Ellison is another. Martin Luther King is the obvious one for me. He went through a lot of crap, and was able to stand above it. And I admire Hitler in many ways.

Why?

A terribly sincere man, and I admire sincerity.

Even when it takes corrupt forms?

I don't admire his particular mode of sincerity, but the fact that he was a man of action, a man who made decisions.

But is being a man of decision an excuse for those decisions?

No, but so many people don't know how to make decisions when in a crisis situation. And this is why I admire a man who could.

Do you think the decisions he made were positive even though they involved complete negation, the denial of life?

O.K., I'm not talking about the ends, though I see the more you get into it that you can't divorce them from the means. *So many decision-makers have been monsters.*

Sure. I'm not separating the man from his actions. I'm taking blatant examples of different things and I shouldn't be doing that, especially in the case of Hitler. There is a lot of Hitler in all of us.