

SHOESTRINGS OR STARS

An Oration

by
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An Oration

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From the speech "Patriotism Revisited", delivered at the Opening Convocation, Rockford College, Rockford, Illinois, September 17, 1969. Permission granted by the author to the WETMORE DECLAMATION BUREAU, Sioux City, Iowa.

We are looking at our shoestrings when we should have our eyes fixed on the stars. Pollution is a subject of some concern nowadays. This morning I would like to suggest that the pollution which may well be our greatest curse, even a greater threat to the survival of mankind than the contamination of air, water, and food, is the pollution of ideals. A man without aspirations is not a whole man. A society without a shared and cherished vision of what might be is a desolate society.

In the Godkin Lectures at Harvard University last March, John Gardner asserted, "A high level of morale is essential if a society is to succeed in the arduous tasks of renewal."...

In the concluding remarks of an interview, Arthur Burns, a top advisor to President Nixon, said, "What worries me more than all the financial questions--I think a great sickness has gripped our society. I think a great many citizens have lost faith in our institutions."

James Reston writes of the "new pessimism."

In an essay in the Saturday Review, Archibald MacLeish writes of the loss of belief in man...

"The arts have deadened the soul, or rather they reflect a deadened soul," says MacLeish. When I read his article, I was reminded of a conversation with a distinguished man of the theater from the west coast who stopped here en route home from a visit to New York. He had attended a dozen or more of the most highly regarded plays in the city of the theater. He was asked if any of the plays he attended had a plot that accorded man any basic dignity. He thought for a moment, and said, "No, they really didn't." In times gone by, there were those who thought that great art should ennoble or exalt. Now, many prize that art which "tells it like it is," not like it could be. We are raising whole nations of young people whose steady musical diet has been the complaints and the protest and the focus on physical gratification of rock music; never even exposed to the exhilaration of Beethoven, or the tranquillity of Mendelssohn or the sheer joy of Mozart. Talk about poverty and underprivileged...

The arts, philosophy, religion, patriotic devotion, were all once powerful persuaders for man to dream, and aspire and reach out for greater stature for himself and for mankind. They have greatly defaulted such a role in our society and as a consequence, man's aspirations atrophy. People find themselves in the prison of a meaningless and irrelevant life. A meaningless life is indeed a prison and tends to affect the human being accordingly. Remember Oscar Wilde's comment about Reading Gaol:

The vilest deeds like poison weeds
Bloom well in prison air
It is only what is good in men
That wastes and withers there.

With no hopes, no dreams, no vision of what could be, man becomes petty and quarrelsome and ruthless.

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