

Jan. 31, 1944 1945
Belgium

Darling -

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I have felt constantly inadequate, since I have been over here, in trying to evaluate the events and people I have seen, and the values involved. This is a function of what I take to be two deficiencies in my education;- one, a lack of some of the working tools of thinking, and second, a too hazy type of background against which to place experience. Today, and increasingly so in the future of diminishing transportation horizons, of disappearing geographical frontiers, an individual is becoming less and less a citizen only of a country - he must, if there is to be peace and understanding among men, become more and more a citizen of the world. I take it to be axiomatic for the future, that the measure of full and decent living by men the world over will depend on their ability and will to get along with each other. And this will depend on their ability to understand each other. In America, one of our strengths in the past, and, at the same time, one of our weaknesses today and in the future, is an inherent distrust and scorn of things foreign. "It isn't like Main Street, so it can't be very good, and it isn't worth bothering about."

Now, it may not be as good, at least for us, as Main Street, but it is the way things are "there", and as such, it certainly is worth "bothering about." I think we must come to realize that a "closed mind" policy cannot pay dividends when it comes to getting along with our neighbors in the world.

Now, these things are a matter of education, and imply at least three things: an attitude of mind, curious, acquisitive, open; a background of values and knowledge, some understanding of the history and development of man, his values, faults, and social attributes (history humanized); and thirdly, an adequate fund of working tools of the mind with which to work.

Now, darling, if you will go with me this far, you will ask what we can do about it. Obviously, I don't propose or even expect any great change in our educational system after the war. But I do think we can help our kids to wend their way through its maze so that they may get what we take to be the best it can give them. Will you agree with the following concepts for a starter?

The Tools: An American of the future should have two different types of thinking tools, that he may seek to understand other peoples.

a. Language. He should have a speaking knowledge of Spanish, French, and Russian (will you buy that?) and German.

(The corollary of this is this: no time should be wasted on the classic (or Dead) languages, Latin and Greek: toss 'em out completely. One can read the great Roman writers in translation to more advantage. In the time I spent on Latin I could have learned to speak both Spanish and German well.)

1. Sub-note on language. In the U. S., one seldom learns to talk a language. One reads and studies grammar. Over here and in France, from the very first, the teaching is by auditory methods - Kids start learning to talk English, for example, when they are seven. Language study should begin early and should be the spoken language.

b. A mind trained in processes of logic, that it may weigh, sift, and evaluate the merit of data acquired. This will be developed through: (1) mathematics, certainly carried as far as calculus, (2) a study of the basis of criticism, (3) a study of logic itself, (4) training of mental processes acquired in study of sciences.

The back-ground. This is such an immense subject that I will only comment on it in the form of criticism of my own, including its gaps.

1. My quarrel with the way I was taught history. a. History of other countries: a succession of military or other "great" men; no concept of the peoples, their powers, or the forces behind their actions. b. History of the U.S.: a succession of self-congratulation on how brave, strong, honest, we are, and always have been. I wonder is it possible to teach history as a study of the social pressures on man, and his attempts to solve them.

As part and parcel of this approach is a deliberate attempt to avoid getting lost in politics, intrigue, & campaigns, and to consider the problems of the life of the people. This to be put in a setting of the peoples around, not divorced from all surroundings. As a part of "history" is a study of "political science", i. e. of the forms of government - and an attempt to evaluate these forms. This should start early. "History should include a study of the ways of livelihood of the peoples - i. e. economics. (Not a study of economic theories, etc. which is something else again, but a general picture of how people lived.)

Maybe these things are impossible, in practise, but it would seem that when one gets through with one's formal education, one would like to be left with more than a vague memory of a few big men, who fought wars (for unremembered causes), who made edicts or coups or mergers.

2. Big gap: Anthropology. Really a course in orientation, the origins of people everywhere.

3. One very essential component: A pretty thorough working knowledge of physics. The wonders of the world of tomorrow from jet propulsion to electronics, will need to be understood.

4. Geography was a bore. It should be made to live. A concept of geo-politics should find its way into our teaching of geography. We should study geography again in high-school or college. It would include both the terrain and its resources as well as the peoples who dwell thereon. We know little enough about what exists and goes on in this world of ours.

5. The pure arts: literature, art, and music, etc., should receive sufficient emphasis to form a background for a lifetime's enjoyment, to help create taste. But, unless closely correlated with the study of the people of a country (i.e. the history of it) they should not be made a "major."

6. Government or political science: An eminently practical study of government in America, as it is done, not as it is written.

Don't think I have forgotten the personal elements of education, the fun, the comradeship, the hunting & fishing, basketball, etc. This letter is about the academic side of things. It is a protest against my own education, and a confession of ignorance. I would like to have had a more practical education; I would like to see Henry have one. I should like him to be educated to be a citizen of the world.

I shall be interested to hear your reactions to this. You have strong feelings about these things.

So much for tonite, darling. It is late, and I must to bed. The Reds are pushing into Germany tonite, pressing ever closer to the end of this phase of the business.
