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Beyond Student Unrest: The Breaking of a Symbol and a Plea for the Future, delivered at Grand Rapids Rotary Club on July 31, 1969

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BEYOND STUDENT UNREST: THE BREAKING OF A SYMBOL AND A PLEA FOR THE FUTURE

EVERY SOCIETY DEVELOPS SYMBOLS WHICH EXPEDITE LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION. THESE SYMBOLS ARE WORDS OR PHRASES WHICH CATALYZE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES. THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES ARE BASED ON ATTITUDES WHICH HAVE BEEN LEARNED OVER A LONG PERIOD OF TIME, SOMETIMES THEY EVEN EMERGE FROM CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES. POLITICIANS BECOME UNUSUALLY ADEPT AT USING SOCIAL SYMBOLS TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE PUBLIC. FOR EXAMPLE, A POLICY CAN BE MADE TO SEEM VERY DESIRABLE IF IT IS SAID TO BE "IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST." NOW, NOBODY REALLY KNOWS WHAT "THE NATIONAL INTEREST" IS, BUT THE USE OF THIS EMOTIONALLY LADEN SYMBOL TENDS TO EVOKE A FAVORABLE RESPONSE FROM A TRUSTING PUBLIC. ALL PROFESSIONS AND FRAMES OF LIFE HAVE THEIR SYMBOLS. MORE IMPORTANTLY, THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH THESE SYMBOLS AS LONG AS THEY ARE USED CONSTRUCTIVELY AND AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION. MURRAY EDELMAN, A WELL-KNOWN POLITICAL SCIENTIST, HAS INDICATED IN HIS CLASSIC BOOK, THE SYMBOLIC USES OF POLITICS, THAT IT WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT FOR POLITICIANS TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE ISSUES THAT FACE THE NATION WITHOUT THE HELP OF SYMBOLS TO SIMPLIFY THE POINTS AND ATTRACT ATTENTION TO THEM.

BUT EDELMAN ALSO POINTS OUT THAT SYMBOLS ARE HIGHLY VOLATILE ELEMENTS, AND AS SUCH THEY SHOULD BE HANDLED WITH SOME CARE. A WELL-EDUCATED SOCIETY SUCH AS AMERICA'S WOULD DO WELL TO PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE SYMBOLS TO WHICH IT RESPONDS. SYMBOLS CAN BECOME DESTRUCTIVE AS WELL AS CONSTRUCTIVE. SOCIAL SCIENTISTS INDICATE THAT WHEN A SYMBOL BECOMES FREQUENTLY MISUSED OR WARPED, AND THE DAMAGE IT DOES TO A SOCIETY OUTWEIGHS THE ADVANTAGES OF COMMUNICATION, THEN THIS SYMBOL HAS FAR OUTLIVED ITS USEFULNESS, AND IT MUST BE DISCARDED. SUCH A SYMBOL IS "STUDENT UNREST." EVERYONE WITH AN INTEREST IN NATIONAL EVENTS HAS BY THIS TIME HEARD DOZENS OF DIFFERENT EXPERTS GIVE DOZENS OF DIFFERENT REASONS WHY STUDENTS ARE PROTESTING. OUR SOCIETY HAS GONE INTO THE DEPTHS OF INTROSPECTION
ABOUT OUR YOUTH'S DISCONTENT. INEVITABLY, BLAME FOR THE DISORDERS IS LAID ON VARIOUS MEMBERS OF OUR SOCIETY. AND WITH THE BLAME COMES THE INEVITABLE DEMEANING HAGGLING AND RATIONALIZING. THE PARENTS CLAIM THEY DID EVERYTHING THEY COULD FOR THEIR CHILDREN, AND IT'S THE COLLEGE'S FAULT. NOBODY PAYS ATTENTION TO JOHNNY. THE FACULTY CLAIMS THEY CAN'T PAY ATTENTION TO JOHNNY BECAUSE THEIR CLASSES ARE TOO BIG AND THEY ARE UNDER PRESSURE FROM THE ADMINISTRATION TO DO SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION IN THEIR DISCIPLINE. THE ADMINISTRATION CLAIMS THEY DO NOT HAVE THE FUNDS TO INSURE PERSONAL ATTENTION TO STUDENTS. THE LEGISLATURE SAYS THAT THEY, TOO, HAVE CONSTITUENT PRESSURE NOT TO RAISE TAXES AND SPEND MORE MONEY. EVERYBODY BLAMES THE POLITICIANS. SOME POLITICAL ANALYSTS FEEL THAT PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON WAS FORCED INTO POLITICAL RETIREMENT PARTLY BECAUSE OF THE PROTEST ISSUE OVER VIETNAM. MANY NATIONAL LEADERS, IN TURN, DECRY THE LACK OF BACKBONE IN COLLEGE ADMINISTRATIONS AND OUR YOUTH'S LACK OF PATRIOTISM. WHO IS RIGHT? WHO IS WRONG? LIKE MOST ARGUMENTS, THE ULTIMATE ANSWER MAY NEVER BE KNOWN.

THE MAJOR POINT IS THAT THE DEBATE OVER THIS ISSUE IS BECOMING FUTILE. WE HAVE ALL BEEN OVER THE ISSUES A THOUSAND TIMES, AND THE SIDES ARE NOT DRAWING ANY NEARER. INSTEAD THEY ARE POLARIZING. OUR NATIONAL INTROSPECTION HAS BECOME NEARSIGHTED. IT IS TIME WE REALIZE THAT OUR ATTENTION HAS BECOME HUNG-UP ON PROTESTS. WE FOCUS WITH GLEE ON EVERY NEW OUTBREAK, NO MATTER HOW SMALL OR RIDICULOUS IT MAY BE. WE HAVE MADE "STUDENT UNREST" A SYMBOL WHICH IS NOT USED FOR COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING ANYMORE, BUT AS A BATTLE CRY. AS A RESULT OF THIS IMPASSE, WE ARE RAPIDLY BECOMING AN ALIENATED NATION. STUDENTS ARE ALIENATED FROM THEIR PARENTS, FACULTIES ARE ALIENATED FROM THEIR ADMINISTRATIONS, AND EVEN THE AMERICAN POPULATION HAS BECOME NOTICEABLE ALIENATED FROM ITS LEADERSHIP.
THE FAMOUS FRENCH WRITER AND PHILOSOPHER, ALBERT CAMUS, WHO WROTE
EXTENSIVELY ABOUT ALIENATION, CLAIMED THAT THE FIRST STEP TO CONQUERING ALIENATION
IS TO REALIZE THAT YOU ARE ALIENATED. AND WITH THAT FIRST STEP, A GOOD HEALTHY
DOSE OF SKEPTICISM TOWARD THE WHOLE STUDENT PROTEST ISSUE, LIES THE KEY, THE
KEY NOT TO THE SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM, BUT A DIRECTION OUT OF IT. MOST PROBLEMS
FACED BY SOCIETIES IN THE PAST HAVE NOT BEEN SOLVED, THEY HAVE BEEN TRANSCENDED.

ONCE ARMED WITH A LITTLE RESERVE AND REASON, WE CAN SEE THAT THIS
NATION HAS FACED ISSUES MUCH MORE DIFFICULT THAN STUDENT DISCONTENT, AND SURVIVED.
MUCH OF THE UNREST PROBLEM IS PANIC AT THE THOUGHT OF THE STUDENTS' SWEETING
CRITICISM OF THEIR SOCIETY, SCHOOLS, AND ELDERS. NOW, A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PANIC
IS UNDERSTANDABLE BECAUSE WE HAVE NEVER EXPERIENCED THIS ATTITUDE IN OUR YOUTH.
THE VIOLENCE ADVOCATED BY THE PROTESTERS ADDS TO THE UPSET. BUT THIS PANIC IS
LONG OVERDUE TO ABATE, AND REALLY IT SHOULD HARDLY SEEM SO OMINOUS ANYMORE.
WE KNOW THAT THE UNREST IS A VERY SMALL SEGMENT OF THE STUDENT POPULATION.
THE VIOLENT ACTIONS TAKEN BY SOME PROTESTORS HAVE LOST THE SUPPORT AMONG OTHER
STUDENTS. WE KNOW THAT PROTEST IS SOMETIMES A FORM OF IMMATURE REBELLION WHICH
RAPIDLY DISSIPATES ONCE A YOUTH IS EMPLOYED AND BEGINS RAISING HIS OWN FAMILY.
WE KNOW THAT IN MANY CASES THE LEADERSHIP OF THE REBELLION IS IN THE HANDS OF
DEEPLY BITTER AND HOSTILE YOUNGSTERS WHO DESERVE PITY, CONCERN, AND HELP, RATHER
THAN FEAR AND HOSTILITY.

GENTLEMEN, THERE IS SOMETHING LUDICROUS ABOUT A SITUATION WHERE SOME
MISGUIDED YOUNGSTERS PUT ON RAGGED GARMENTS, CARRY A FEW SIGNS, SIT IN A DOORWAY,
PERHAPS WRITE SOME VULGAR LANGUAGE IN A STUDENT NEWSPAPER, AND THEN COMMAND THE
ATTENTION OF THE ENTIRE SCHOOL, THE MASS MEDIA, IMPORTANT PERIODICALS, AND EVERY
CITIZEN IN THE COUNTRY. AND, AS A RESULT OF SOME HAGGARD EXHIBITION, DONATIONS
TO UNIVERSITIES ARE WITHDRAWN AND LEGISLATURES FAIL TO APPROPRIATE NECESSARY FUNDS FOR ESSENTIAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS. DOZENS OF RESPECTED ADMINISTRATORS, PROFESSORS, AND STUDENTS HAVE THEIR WORK INTERRUPTED, AND IN A FEW SAD CASES, ACTUALLY TERMINATED BECAUSE OF THE PITIFUL ACTIVITIES OF A FRUSTRATED FEW.

THE OCCASION HARDLY CALLS FOR THE CONSEQUENCES. IT IS THE ATTENTION PAID TO IT. IRRATIONAL MASS MOVEMENTS, WHICH SEEK ATTENTION, THRIVE UPON IT. IT IS THEIR FUEL. THE LEADERS OF REBELLION ON CAMPUS SEEK TO SHOCK, TO APPALL, TO INSTILL HORROR AND PANIC. WHEN THEY SUCCEED, IMPETUS IS GIVEN TO THEIR CAUSE. I CALL UPON OUR POLITICAL LEADERS, OUR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, OUR MASS MEDIA, AND LASTLY OURSELVES, THE CITIZENS, TO CEASE PROVIDING THE FUEL FOR DISRUPTION ON OUR NATION'S CAMPUSES BY ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE PROVOKED BY AN EMOTIONAL SYMBOL. MOST DISRUPTION ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES SHOULD BE MET BY WHAT PUBLIC ATTENTION IT DESERVES, AND IN MOST INSTANCES THAT IS VERY LITTLE. AND IN THOSE FEW CASES WHERE THE LAW IS SERIOUSLY AND DELIBERATELY BROKEN, WHERE THE RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF OTHERS HAVE BEEN ABUSED, WHERE THE NORMAL FUNCTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY ARE IMPAIRED, THE LAW SHOULD BE INVOKED TO RESTORE ORDER. THERE NEED NOT BE SUCH GREAT FUSS OVER IT, FOR THERE ARE MILLIONS OF OTHER INSTANCES IN THIS NATION WHERE THE LAW IS SIMILARLY INVOKED, WITH MUCH LESS CONCERN.

OUR SENSE OF GUILT OVER THE ENTIRE PROTEST ISSUE SEEMS TO BOTH STAY OUR HAND IN INVOKING THE LAW, AND YET MAKE US EVEN MORE ANGRY BECAUSE IT IS STUDENTS WHO ARE VIOLATING THE LAW OVER WHAT THEY CALL A MORAL GRIEVANCE. YET, THE DISSIDENTS THEMSELVES, BY THIS TIME, KNOW FULL WELL THE IMPLICATIONS OF WHAT THEY DO, AND WHILE THIS MAY BE THEIR CHOICE, THEY, THEIR PARENTS, AND THEIR FRIENDS MUST BE PREPARED TO FACE THE CONSEQUENCES. JACQUES BARZUN PROBABLY SUMMARIZES IT BEST IN HIS NEWEST BOOK, THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY: "(THE INSTITUTION GOADERS) . . . CAN SEIZE THE PRIVILEGE OF IRRESPONSIBILITY IF THEY WILL TAKE THE
CONSEQUENCES. BUT THEY CANNOT TURN IT INTO A RIGHT TO RUN THE BUDGET AND LECTURE
THE TRUSTEES. WHAT GOOD IS A REVOLUTIONIST WHO DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HE IS IN FOR?
REBELS WHO DEMAND AUTONOMY AND CODDLING FROM THE SAME PUBLIC HANDS SEEM ILL-EQUIPPED
TO TAKE THE REINS . . . OF THE UNIVERSITY THEY NEED SO BADLY."

DON'T GET ME WRONG . . . I AM NOT SAYING THAT THE STUDENT IDEAS AND
DEMANDS, AND SOMETIMES EVEN WELL-PLANNED AND LAWFUL DEMONSTRATIONS, HAVE NO MERIT.
QUITE TO THE CONTRARY, ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAS BEEN MOST PAINFUL ABOUT THE
UNREST IS THAT MANY OF THE POINTS MADE BY VERY BRIGHT AND PERCEPTIVE YOUNGSTERS
RING ALL TOO TRUE IN OUR EARS. TOO OFTEN, OUR OWN CONDUCT AS ELDER CITIZENS
DOES NOT MATCH THE STANDARDS THAT WE CLAIM IN OUR ORATORY. AT GRAND VALLEY STATE
COLLEGE, WHEN WE HAVE OUR PROTESTS, AND WE WILL HAVE THEM, WE WILL NOT AUTOMATICALLY
DISMISS AS REVOLUTIONARIES WHAT OFTEN TURN OUT TO BE VERY BRIGHT AND IDEALISTIC
YOUNGSTERS. WE WILL LISTEN AND QUIETLY DELIBERATE TO SEE WHAT WE CAN DO TO HEAL
THE WOUNDS OF OUR INSTITUTION AND OUR SOCIETY. WE ARE TAKING MANY STEPS AT GRAND
VALLEY TO INVOLVE STUDENTS IN THE POLICY MAKING BODIES OF OUR COLLEGE, SO THAT
THEIR VOICE MAY BE HEARD, LEGITIMATELY AND RATIONALLY OVER A CONFERENCE TABLE,
RATHER THAN A BULLHORN. OUR FACULTY AND OUR ADMINISTRATION AT GRAND VALLEY ARE
TAKING STEPS TO INSURE CLOSER CONTACT WITH STUDENTS ON COMMITTEES AND IN CLASSES.
WE ARE LISTENING WITH OPEN MINDS TO THE STUDENTS FEELING THAT WE MUST REVITALIZE
OUR SOCIAL CONSCIENCE, AND SUCH ADVANCEMENTS AS OUR NEW URBAN AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
GIVE OUR COLLEGE MORE RELEVANCE TO WHAT STUDENTS CALL "THE REAL WORLD" OUTSIDE
THE CAMPUS CONFINES.

YES, WE WILL LISTEN, AND WE ARE CHANGING . . . BUT WE WILL NOT BE
PUSHED AROUND BY IDEOLOGUES WHOSE AIM IS NOT IMPROVEMENT AND UNDERSTANDING,
BUT THE DESTRUCTION OF SOCIETY AND ITS EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. WE WILL NOT STAND BY IDLY TO BE TORMENTED BY THOSE WHO USE UNCIVILIZED TACTICS TO DRAG OUR COLLEGE INTO OBLIVION. BUT, MOST OF ALL, WE WILL NOT LET OURSELVES BE RILED INTO HARSH AND EMOTIONAL STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS, WHICH WE WILL LATER REGRET, TO QUELL THE COLLEGE'S TORMENTORS. AT GRAND VALLEY, WE ARE CURRENTLY IN THE PROCESS OF DRAWING UP FAIR PROCEDURES TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO VIOLATE THE CODES OF OUR CAMPUS, OUR STATE, AND OUR NATION. EVERY STUDENT AT GRAND VALLEY IS INSURED DUE PROCESS, AND JUSTICE WILL BE METED OUT AS IT IS IN THE REST OF AMERICAN SOCIETY, QUICKLY AND QUIETLY, AND WITH THE HELP OF THE PRESS AND THE FRIENDS OF GRAND VALLEY, WITH FEW HISTRIONICS. YOU SEE, THE EMOTIONALISM OF STUDENT PROTEST HAS PERHAPS IMPeded MOST SIGNIFICANTLY THE PLACE WHERE IT SHOULD HAVE ITS LEAST IMPACT: THE COLLEGE CAMPUS ITSELF. AT SOME COLLEGES, ARROGANT DEMANDS FROM STUDENTS ARE SOMETIMES AGREED TO BY THE PROVIDING OF POPULAR COURSES FOR CREDIT TO SATISFY MILITANTS. ARROGANT DEMANDS FROM OUTSIDE THE CAMPUS HAVE RESULTED IN UNNECESSARILY HEAVY-HANDED TACTICS TO STIFLE ANY STUDENTS WHO QUESTIONS HIS SUPERIORS. AT GRAND VALLEY WE ARE DETERMINED NOT TO BE COERCED BY SOME VAGUE SENSE OF SOCIETAL GUILT INTO FAwNING SYMPATHY FOR EVERY OVERGENERALIZED AND IMPRACTICAL STUDENT DEMAND. NEITHER WILL WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO BE RILED INTO HOSTILE REACTIONS TO STUDENT IDEAS WHICH DO CARRY INTELLECTUAL WEIGHT AND SHOULD BE HEARD AND ACTED UPON.

IT IS QUITE TIME THAT THE COLLEGE CAMPUS IS PREVENTED FROM BECOMING A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL FOOTBALL. IT IS OUR CENTERS OF LEARNING WHERE THE VALUES OF CIVILIZATION SHOULD BE LEARNED AND PRESERVED. IT IS THE LEARNING AND THINKING OF THESE HISTORICAL VALUES THAT TRAINS THE CRITICAL MIND, AND MAKES WHAT THE WORLD
HAS ALWAYS KNOWN AS AN EDUCATED MAN. THE UNIVERSITY HAS A CENTURIES LONG TRADITION OF INTEGRITY AND OBJECTIVITY TO UPHOLD. IT SHOULD NOT STAND AS A MOUTHPIECE FOR THE GOVERNMENT, EVEN THOUGH ITS RESIDENTS ABIDE BY THE NATION'S LAWS. NEITHER SHOULD IT BECOME THROUGH THREAT AND COERCION THE UNWITTING ALLY OF A CONTEMPORARY STUDENT IDEOLOGY OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT OR ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT VIEWS. STUDENT PROTEST HAS HAD ITS DAY, AND PERHAPS WE HAVE EVEN BENEFITED IN SOME WAYS FROM THE TREMENDOUS INTROSPECTION AND QUESTIONING THAT ACCOMPANIED THIS TRYING TIME. BUT NOW, I SAY IT IS TIME WE GATHERED OUR WITS, FOR THE POLEMICS SOUND TOO HARSH AND THE HAND IS BECOMING TOO QUICK TO FOLLOW THE BITTERNESS OF THE WORDS. LET US BREAK THE SYMBOL "STUDENT PROTEST" AND FREE OURSELVES FROM THE VIOLENT ACTIONS AND RE-ACTIONS THAT CHARACTERIZE ITS EMOTIONAL HOLD ON THIS NATION AND ITS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER LEO STRAUSS PUT IT MOST SUCCINCTLY WHEN HE SAID, "LIBERAL EDUCATION CONSISTS IN LEARNING TO LISTEN TO STILL AND SMALL VOICES AND THEREFORE IN BECOMING DEAF TO LOUDSPEAKERS. LIBERAL EDUCATION SEEKS LIGHT AND THEREFORE SHUNS THE LIMELIGHT."