

CITIZENSHIP IN THE ATOMIC AGE

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A few days ago I sat in a meeting of serious minded men and women - volunteers from the community in which I live - assembled for the purpose of preparing themselves to carry the message of Civil Defense to their fellow citizens. To me the after-taste of the meeting was bitter and its after-thoughts depressing. It is a reproachful commentary on the state of our middle-twentieth century civilization that citizens in this country - or in any country, for that matter - find it necessary to be instructed in means of shielding themselves and their families from the blasting, searing effects of hostile atomic explosions. It seems almost ludicrous to speak of intelligence, education, culture and morals in a world whose people must be prepared to interrupt peaceful pursuits, often without more than an instant's warning, and to grovel on the ground in what may be vain attempts to escape death or worse at the hands of warring men. It is unthinkable that this state of affairs shall be permitted to continue. The search for correction and remedy is the business of every one of us.

One of the pernicious penalties of the bigness and complexity of modern societies is the danger of obscuring the identity of the individual citizen and depriving him of a true sense of proprietorship and participation in public affairs at all levels, local, national, and international. A man who belongs to an organization where he is convinced that his presence is felt and his voice heard is almost sure, if he be normal, to possess a sense of ownership which begets zeal to have a part in the organization's affairs. Contrariwise, a feeling that one's presence or absence goes unnoticed and that one's voice is drowned in the din of the multitude tends to prevent or

destroy all sense of ownership and to breed instead a sense of the futility of trying to have a part in affairs. The latter is doubtless a natural reaction of human beings. Its importance lies in the fact that unless it is counteracted, the search for a remedy to the great, forboding dangers of the atomic age may be doomed to despairing failure. Without detracting in any way from the urgent necessity for strong, intelligent, and courageous leadership, it is my purpose today to ask you to consider the role of the individual private citizen.

A short while ago Dr. Edwin G. Nourse was quoted as saying something to this effect: We need to be as much concerned about our "followership" as about our leadership. When I read that statement I could not help remembering what James Russell Lowell wrote in his famous essay on Democracy:

"All free governments, whatever their name, are in reality governments by public opinion, and it is on the quality of this public opinion that their prosperity depends."

Since public opinion is the sum of the opinions of individual citizens, it is obvious that, in the last analysis, what Lowell said was that the prosperity of the community depends on the quality of the opinions of its individual citizens. Therefore it becomes pertinent to know and always to keep in mind the attributes which determine and govern an individual's capacity to formulate sound components of the public opinion.

At this point I turn for assistance to a learned and distinguished Englishman, James Bryce, doubtless one of the most accurate and sympathetic of all foreign observers who have written about us and counselled with us.

Speaking to the faculty and student body of Yale University more than 40 years ago, Lord Bryce stated that capacity for citizenship in a free community involves three qualities: Intelligence; Self-control; and Conscience. These qualities he defined as follows:

Intelligence - the citizen must be able to understand the interests of the community;

Self-control - the citizen must be able to subordinate his own will to the general will;

Conscience - the citizen must feel his responsibility to the community and be prepared to serve it by voting, working, and (if need be) by fighting.

As a general observation, Lord Bryce remarked that Intelligence and Self-control are the more frequent and easier to produce by proper training, while Conscience, a sense of civic duty, is the rarest.

Reminiscent of Lowell's words which I quoted a moment ago, Bryce also said:

"Upon the extent to which these civic capacities are present in the community, the excellence of its government will generally depend. Such as are the stones, such will be the temple into which they are fitly compacted together."

In these beginning days of the atomic age it is essential that our concept of the community be expanded beyond that which prevailed in the times of Lowell and Bryce. On the basis of the changing relationship of distance to time, the world community of today is relatively no larger than the national community in Bryce's day. In terms of time, nowhere on earth is very far today from anywhere else on earth. Such time-proximity has offered solution to some of our problems but has greatly aggravated

others. Significantly and regrettably, the problems most aggravated by our conquest of distance are those which grow out of the seeming inability of human beings to live peaceably with each other. Though man has been able to make great strides in overcoming difficulties arising out of relationships between him and his environment, he is floundering and almost foundering in a morass of unsolved difficulties stemming from man's relationship to man.

For the attack upon these great problems of human relationships - to achieve the ultimate goal of peace throughout the world - we are usually inclined to look with more or less hopefulness to governments, to pacts between governments, and to world organizations of governments. As a result, the impression is abroad and growing that the means of achieving the goal we all desire are beyond the ken of ordinary citizens and to be understood only by an initiated few. I would not minimize for one moment the importance of technical, specialized skill and experience in handling the many complex and delicate relationships between governments. I would not contend that we should expect such skill and experience to be widely disseminated among our people. Nevertheless, I do say that unless the mass of our people provide a broad base of intelligent, self-disciplined, and conscientious citizenship from which skill and leadership can be drawn and upon which leadership can depend for inspiration and support, we have no right to expect much of leadership. Our effective strength or weakness as a people is the inexorable total of the individual strengths and weaknesses of our citizens, - which is but another way of saying that in the last analysis the role of the individual citizen is the essential,

indispensable factor in determining the success or failure of our attack upon the world-wide problems of man's relationship to man.

These things, you are probably thinking, are glittering generalities. What, precisely, should the individual citizen do or refrain from doing? Can you be more concrete and less abstract? The answer to the latter question is "no". We are talking about qualities and attributes, about attitudes and frames of mind, about things of the spirit, the heart, and the soul. These things must be right first. Then there is time to talk about concrete things. However, we can elaborate upon and perhaps illustrate a few of these abstract concepts.

First and foremost, in my judgment, the thinking of the individual private citizen and his attitude toward the society in which he lives must be conditioned by obliterating his tendency to believe or claim to believe that what he does doesn't matter. No Rotarian believes or claims to believe that, I am sure, but you doubtless know others who do. In order to assist in banishing that belief from other men's minds, it is necessary, or at least useful, to inquire why it exists.

In some it is a product of frustration, of a sense of futility arising out of the individual's realization of his own smallness as compared with the masses of humanity in which he lives and realization that he cannot hope to comprehend all the complexities of the problems which affect him. By way of illustration, many individuals in all honesty believe that their staying away from the polls on election day does no harm because, they say, one or a few votes either way probably would not change anything. On the same or a similar theory they fail or flatly refuse to

participate in community and civic enterprises. In their frustration they have lost sight of the fact that they have a share of ownership in public affairs. They have come to consider themselves almost as outsiders and not as partners in a joint enterprise. They fail to realize that the total effect of this blighting belief if held by many would of a certainty be collapse of the institution we call free government.

There are others in whom the pretended belief that what they do doesn't matter is a sort of wistful self-justification for lack of self-control, for inability to subordinate selfish personal interest to the general interest of the community. Such a person may say in the very middle of a desperate fight against inflation, "I will not save but will gratify my personal desires by spending all I earn, then borrowing more and spending that, because my contribution to inflation is of no consequence - it doesn't matter". Another such person says, "It makes no difference whether I pay my just share of taxes, as long as I don't get caught - my contribution to the public expense will not be missed". Still another says, "I will not accept work assignments in the Community Chest or Red Cross campaigns or in the Civil Defense organization - it would take too much time from my business and my golf, and anyway, there are plenty of workers without me". Self interest is the most insidious enemy of good citizenship, and there is but a dim line, I think, between indulgence of self interest due to lack of Self-control and such indulgence due to lack of Conscience. In any case, whether the what-I-do-doesn't-matter attitude springs from lack of understanding, lack of self-control, or lack of conscience, the problem is to find a cure for it, and the best kind of cure for this kind of ailment is one which the patient can administer to himself.

The prescription, I believe, is simple to write, though it may not be so easy to fill. Develop by proper training, encouragement and practice the qualities of Intelligence, Self-control and Conscience about which we were speaking a few moments ago. Bring about in each member of the community an understanding of the nature of community life. Generate in each individual a sense of responsible ownership in the community so that he says "we" and not "they" when speaking of community affairs. In every community look to the provision of appropriate, voluntary citizens' organizations which offer widespread opportunity for the participation of individual citizens in the discussion, consideration, and formulation of solutions to community problems. Afford to every man the privilege of gratifying his inborn desire to have a hand in the management of his own affairs including those of the community in which he lives.

This prescription does not dispense with the need for leadership. On the contrary, it calls for leadership of the highest order. It calls for leaders who understand that their effectiveness depends not so much upon their own efforts as upon the might of their fellow citizens united for the public good. It calls for leaders who are able to envision means of enlisting the active participation of individual citizens in consideration of common problems. In the very nature of things, such widespread citizen participation can come about mostly at the level of the local community, and this brings me to a conclusion which I desire to give great emphasis.

The role of the individual citizen in the affairs of his local community is likely to be the measure of his role in large affairs. The local community is the training ground for citizenship. It is the place where a sense of ownership in public affairs can be created and strengthened.

It is the place where essential qualities of citizenship may be cultivated and given greatest freedom to operate. It is the place where expertness in dealing with the everyday problems of human relationships may be achieved. There, in the local community, the individual citizen can realize a role of dignity and importance. There leadership can be discovered and developed.

The person who has become accustomed to discharging the duties of citizenship in his own local community is not easily dismayed by the problems of larger communities. Having acquired a foundation of understanding concerning the things over which human beings fall into disagreement at home, it is but another step to tackle the solution of disagreements in other areas. But more than these matters of education and improvement of understanding, active participation in local community affairs nurtures the individual's power of Self-control and sharpens his sense of civic duty - the quality of Conscience. In local affairs the consequences of lack of Self-control and lack of civic Conscience stand out in clearer relief than anywhere else. Lessons learned at home are not easily forgotten, and their application to problems of citizenship in larger arenas can almost be taken for granted.

In the public affairs of the local community, one soon learns that every right has its correlative duty, and that to lose sight of duty in a struggle for rights will certainly lead, sooner or later, to the loss of rights. In the local community one learns that benefit and burden, power and responsibility, go together, and that the man who pursues benefits and power without willingness to assume burdens and responsibility is soon brought to judgment in the forum of the local community. These are

fundamental lessons in human relationships and in the art and science of living peaceably together. They are easier learned by experience and among homefolks than by precept or among strangers.

I firmly believe that the long run attack upon our problems of human relationships must be made in our local communities through processes of training and practicing our individual citizens in the requisites and qualities of citizenship. This is not to say that we can locally solve current international problems in Korea, Iran, and Russia, but we can help. We can contribute immeasurably to the solution of present acute problems and at the same time erect defenses against repetition of similar ones in the future. We can do this by strengthening our local communities, and through them our Nation, and by keeping ourselves strong, based on principles of right and justice which cannot fail to convince the peoples of other nations that the American way of life is good and desirable. Strength in the Nation can be achieved only if we are strong at home in our local communities, and only if we as individuals possess and exercise the qualities of citizenship which make the body politic, healthy and strong. The strength of which I speak is not the strength of arms and armament - important as that may be for the present and the foreseeable future - but the strength of truth and good will, the strength that springs from strong individual citizens, relaxed and confident in the realization of their dignity and fully aware of their responsibilities. These are the things that can be nourished best in our local communities.

I feel no sense of uneasiness about the existence of inherent qualities of Intelligence, Self-control, and Conscience among our people.

Pessimists who brood over symptoms of the lack of these qualities in certain individuals are prone to lose sight of the great majority in whom unmistakable signs of their presence are clearly discernible. What is needed is not to generate or inculcate these qualities so much as to afford opportunity for the free exercise and display of those innately present. The ordinary citizen - the man in the street, so to say - simply doesn't know how or where to take hold of the problems which beset and trouble him and his world. Somehow, some way, we have got to supply the handle which will enable him to take a grip on these problems. We must furnish him a forum in which he can participate in deliberations on the questions that interest him. The place to begin that is in the local community, where organizational means can be provided which will make widespread citizen participation possible in the management of local affairs.

Up to this time the major emphasis of most citizen participation organizations has been put on things like local public improvement programs. Such things will doubtless continue to furnish an important cohesive force for holding voluntary citizens' organizations together, but I hope we shall rapidly gain better realization of the fact that a longer range and deeper purpose for the existence of such bodies is to be found in the training for effective citizenship which they provide. For effective citizenship in local affairs is an essential prerequisite of effective citizenship in national and world affairs.

Projects of this kind are not self starters. They are the product of vision, imagination, hard work, perseverance, and intelligent leadership. They require the services of leaders who do not appear to lead, but get the job done nevertheless. They thrive only if a true concept of the role of the individual citizen pervades the organization at all times - if individual

private citizens themselves recognize their own significance in the affairs of the local community, and in state, nation, and world.

Stalin and his cohorts of the Politburo understand what the role of the individual citizen must be in a free community. They understand that to keep their own communities behind the iron curtain from becoming free they must prevent their individual citizens from acquiring and exercising the qualities of citizenship of which we have been talking today. They understand that in order to stamp out freedom in today's free world they must by infiltration, lies, and propaganda submerge and destroy these qualities of citizenship in individual citizens everywhere. The question I leave with you today is whether we in these United States comprehend as well as Stalin does, the truth of Lord Bryce's words:

"Such as are the stones, such will be the temple into which they are fitly compacted together".

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