

OPEN LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY OF WAYZATA

by Douglas P. Sarff

In case you didn't know—and you didn't, and you are proud that you didn't—the following is Horatio's warning to Hamlet before the latter follows his father's ghost to the sea-cliff to find out what is making Denmark rotten:

Think of it:

The very place puts toys of desperation,
Without more motive, into every brain
That looks so many fathoms to the sea
And hears it roar beneath.

Horatio says that it is maddening to think down to causes. But Hamlet, who lusts after any truth, does follow the ghost—and finds out, to the peril of his sanity, that everything in which he believed was hideously corrupt.

My topic is what is rotten, not in Denmark, but in the public high school of this community; not the madness of Hamlet, who was in a corrupt court from which there was no escape—but of myself, who for five years taught in a spiritual slough of mediocrity and sophistication from which, fortunately, there is.

And as the Prince concluded that the universe is amoral, I have concluded that this community and the school it has produced exist merely to perpetuate themselves—which is the same as existing for nothing.

Against this I now protest, if not in blank verse, with all the vehemence prose can raise—but at no risk now, because I am riding away on the echo of the same bell that frees the Class of 1965. Exempt from my attack are the congenitally half-witted, sufferers from dementia praecox, and all others whose failings are of nature, not of will. Otherwise I intend to gun down everything in sight. Those who feel wronged can take comfort in whatever rationalizations they can invent, perhaps telling themselves that I am crazy anyway.

That's not far from true, so poisoned is my spirit from long contemplation of folly; mine for playing the idealist in a swamp, yours for having given up your souls to middle-class mediocrity.

One week before the adolescent spawn of this semi-human pool of murky waters flow into school next September, the Administration will have its fling in the form of what is called a "pre-school workshop" for the staff. Ostensibly created to regenerate us, after a summer of being out of practice I suppose, these workshops are really a triumph of the human capacity to create dullness. As such they epitomize the years they begin.

It is a miracle how, within a few hours of the first day, a bright, enthusiastic, even youthful faculty is transformed to gray-green putty.

In keeping with the shallow Hedonism of the community, the opening meeting is a breakfast at a local golf-course, where one lines up for the sort of bird-food he is supposed to miss if he doesn't belong to a Country Club; eggs Benedict, for instance, which piled on huge trays resemble so many unsocketed eyes. After piddling in these insipid eatings for an hour, renewing old acquaintances better never made, instead of sounding a trumpet somebody heralds the week-long enervation by tapping on a water-glass with a spoon.

There follow welcome-speeches from all sorts of glad-handing local dignitaries. And while one contemplates having stood a few days before in the wind at the summit of

dropouts, indifference, and student preference for skiing and hot chocolates in the chalet at Mound Sugar Daddy, and which, this year, some of the parents opposed with inscrutable belligerence.

It was not to blame for the failure of a Summer Writer's Colony, even though it included (at a tuition one-third that of summer workshops anywhere else) a raft-trip down the Mississippi and a week on Isle Royal.

It was not to blame when a literary magazine run by a few students without help was poor the first time (most of its contents having been done by the writers when they were freshmen, before their spirits died), and never even got published the second time.

The Administration is not to blame when our plays are listless, our speech activities dead past rigor-mortis, our musical organizations just fair, and our athletics losers all the way.

Nor are the instructors for these and like disappointments at fault. In those which I tried to operate, I invested more enthusiasm and labor than all of the students combined. The Field Trips Course, my best invention, availed the participants of cultural entertainments elsewhere in the Twin Cities, my free instruction, and the opportunity to write creative responses. But it and many of those in it died of unnatural causes, both years; and of those who benefitted from it the first year, only one would help with it the second.

Disagreements over issues related to this indictment notwithstanding, my battle in this lakeshore Gopher Prairie was never really with the Administration. It was with the students themselves. For one who had counted on their potential achievements in order to put up with such things as administrative inertia, parental opposition, and compulsory attendance, this realization was totally dispiriting.

It came in many blows, beginning with my earliest failures to raise the students to the level of productive enthusiasm (which failures I used to blame on the Administration for over-regimenting the kids, and upon simple adolescent herd-instinct). Its final stages were the most painful to bear, because they involved the death of the youthful creative spirit in many students who had won my admiration and trust. The potential excellence I had seen, and which kept me going, died here and died there—in some cases taking such morbid forms that I would not even describe them in a tantrum.

But to get a general picture of what makes me splenetic, step into a classroomful of this year's seniors and take a look. Wear an overcoat against the chill, though—because, Dear Reader, they are frozen solid with sophistication. Any value dearly held, whether by teacher or fellow-student, and any emotion produced by any value, are killed by sneering indifference. No matter what the value, no matter what the emotion, a cold draft fills the atmosphere.

But all is not lost. Talk about drinking and its related activities (like the idea of a "teen nightclub") will restore them to life. It seems they like to try things debauching, but they do not like to try virtue, and they loathe idealism. So the wise teacher stays with the text, not wasting himself with concern over whether learning will have any visible effect upon the character of the learner.

At eighteen they already know everything they need to know. They know how to seize upon the opportunities others have built for them, and they believe they can seize upon them at leisure too.

Intimidated to catatonia by the college-or-else propaganda, that drips from a million mouths, the students take courses they neither want nor need in the long-range expectation that with a college diploma they too can someday have a house on the bay, two convertibles, eggs Benedict, good "fun," security—and no soul. The first rung of this ladder to dullness is summer employment at a super-market.

There is too much organized play for the boys, who should be enjoying games of their own invention—and too little for the girls, who soon learn that the worst tragedy life can hold is to be seen parading before the bleachers during a basketball game with their hair mussed. There are too many parties provided gratis by the school, at which it is taught that the height of happiness is a "cool combo" and a dance-floor. There is too much "how-to-be-popular" propagandizing, with a meaningless smile and a slapped back substituting for genuine affection, so that the young learn how (in Wordsworth's phrase) to extend "greetings where no kindness is." As for the churches, they have become mere social centers for mother-daughter and father-son banquets and the like. Able to teach only a diluted religion, they function chiefly as exemplars of the hypocrisy of the times.

To consider the politicians you elect is to have a concrete symbol of the rot I describe. Politics has produced a new breed of "bright young men" indeed, who assert that it is better to win than to be right. Pragmatism, extended to its extreme, is the rottenness at the heart of everything; no basic beliefs. Your political leaders are not leaders at all, but the invertebrate offspring of the communities that raise them to power. They, like the rest of the population, have failed to perceive that success without substance is nothing.

Those who speak of success with the zeal of a Talmudist speaking of Zion should mean the success of something right.

This explained why talk about wine-drinking is more interesting to most of my students than a description of my climb of Mount Teewinot in a blizzard. They want to hear only of topics within the framework of their ambitions. I have done both: uncorked the wine and ascended the stormy pinnacle. But mine was the wine of life, taken in celebration of the triumph of ideals. Theirs is the wine of escape, taken in their absence.

Do not wonder, then, that the few young people who do develop ideals usually retreat to sullen corners, there to guard them from pollution in the moral sewer from which they fled. But such introversion makes them inaccessible to the vitality of human give-and-take where it does exist—and from there they will never learn anything really new for the rest of their lives except how to hate and how to brood. They have sustained too much pressure, heard too much advice, and seen too many bored faces. I blame them not when they spin cocoons. But one womb is as much as another: the crib of popular suburban culture is in some ways not much worse than the coffin of total withdrawal from humanity.

Modern literature and the theater also do their bit by promoting another kind of thinking which puts so many out of reach of good schooling, even if it could be provided. Try to count the number of novels, movies, t.v. programs, and plays that promote the notion that youth must be understood, and that it is the duty of parents and teachers

Mount Teewinot or the Grand Teton, the intellectual torch is gently snuffed out by the Topic of the Year—"The School and the Community," for example, which has been the stated topic twice since I came here, but the real topic all five times.

The gist of the speeches, panels, and committees through which we are dragged for five hot August days is that the school is a reflection of the community. A notion promoted by colleges of education for so long that people began to believe it, it means that the school must acquiesce to, then promulgate, the values of the town in which it is located. No matter what. Teachers, who as imports could be a force for dynamic change, are supposed to forget what they may know of the world outside this suburban womb-surrogate and merely think and act like anyone else who knows his place.

Thus we are told that the most important consideration in our work is—not the teaching of wisdom—but good public relations. Good public relations! After a week of digesting that sort of conciliatory pap, ladled out by the School Board, Administration, and guest speakers, only the Promethean-of-will have survived emasculation and still hope to give their students the kind of education they should have.

The kind they should have includes a massive dose of matter wholly foreign to this reechy backwater, which still languishes in the burnt-out glory of its antebellum days.

Having exhausted its message during workshop, the Administration has very little to say after that, fortunately—except this year. This year we were all forced to serve on three of about fifty "self-evaluation" committees, helping to puke out more of the same meaningless slogans and platitudes that have become the bane of sensitive educators everywhere.

We have also had to endure several special faculty meetings since 1962 for the stated purpose of participating in the future architectural expansion of the leaky barracks in which we labor. There we have been advised among other things that all of the pupils of one grade, lest they be traumatized by contact with hundreds of strangers, should spend the entire school day in one corridor of rooms. The first thing that happens at these sessions is disgusting. An Administrator takes up chalk, draws a large square on the blackboard, and says: "There's the cafeteria. Now where shall we put the classrooms?"

With that kind of thinking, obviously passed on from the Community Mothers, it is no wonder that the only topic that excites the students to intellectual passion is the quality of the Government lunches, the foyer rocking with controversy upon the number of butter sandwiches you should get.

Yet, as uninspiring as the Administration is, and as weak as they are before community pressures—especially from parents who cannot support the possibility that their children will learn ideals strange to them—I have to concede that I was provided with the climate for experimentation I needed in order to reach the students who could benefit from real learning.

Real learning is learning related to and occurring in real-life situations. To spend a week-end in some snow-bound village in central Minnesota, studying Ethan Frome around the oil-stove in the lobby of a shabby hotel, is to experience real learning. The Administration knew this, and not once during my confinement did one of them say to me, "Stop doing what you are now doing."

That was why I launched so many experimental projects. But that is not why all of them sank.

The Administration was not to blame when a writing contest I ran with the incentive of high monetary prizes could muster only seven entrants in a student body of one-thousand.

It was not to blame for the demise of Field Trips Courses for two years, which reeled with the smell of death from

And they are already individualists, you know. Nowadays everybody, be he conformist or not, professes belief in the concept of individualism. But it is an individuality bankrupt of conviction, and they assert their independence only when their obligations become difficult to carry. It produces nothing excellent or original or vital in any but four or five students, whom I would name if I were certain that they would not fall into the arrogant mediocrity of their classmates before this page goes to press.

From those who have closed themselves off to poetry, music, theater, creative writing, painting—anything to which one gives of his "self" or "ego," and therefore anything that demands that a "self" exist—I have heard rationalizations that make me physically sick. One knot of the willfully demented smugly tell you that they prefer to produce for their clique. That means a mutual admiration society of mediocrities creating mediocrity for those whose judgments are guaranteed to be flattering—or at least safe, since hidden from any court of higher standards. Another group, much larger, have ceased to create and to respond, on the ground that such things are not important.

Not important! That is the bored sophistry of a human trying to become less than human. They would rather eat pizzas, go to "cool" dances, ride convertibles, try on the latest in ski-sweaters, and contemplate the busy social calendar for next year, when they will "go collegiate."

The Class of 1965—the product of suburban parenthood and suburban schooling—is a mass of bored, indifferent, dulled mediocrities or tittering good-timers. They are dead in every sense of the word except viscerally. But what are the causes of this mass dying?

One is the indifference of parents to their get's attaining excellence in any but popularly accepted activities: the kind Mrs. Doe and Mrs. Roe can compare notes on during a maternal conversation about pompom-waving Debbie and Pam over morning coffee on the shore of Sophistication Beach. Another is a tight-minded Puritanism at its cynical worst, expressing itself in a pathological suspicion of teachers who work best with individuals on a personal basis, and so risk imputations of base ulterior motives.

Another is the spiritual poverty of the overworked fathers, who are wearing themselves out trying to keep up the slick luxurious life to which the spoiled brats they married are accustomed, and who for the most part take no more interest in their sons' and daughters' cultural development than they did in their own.

Another is the bewildering army of busybodies and charlatans who advise, cajole, and control the lives of boys and girls who are better off making some decisions—yes, and some mistakes—of their own. Think of it. Six teachers, a preacher and an assistant pastor "who works well with youth," two parents and who knows how many grandmothers and aunts and the like, school counselors, the social crowd, and a perpetual avalanche of unsolicited advice and analysis in popular magazines like *This Week*. All have plenty to say, and some plenty of pressure to apply, concerning what Tammy and Rickie should do with their lives.

To be sure, youth is always under pressures. But those to which a Wayzata adolescent usually yields only perpetuate the slick, empty "modern living" that is seen at its worst in this town. It is a shrill, hand-waving, convertible-riding round of trivialities, and for the young a blurred descent into oblivion, because—having exhausted its substance by age seventeen, and knowing nothing else—they become bored with themselves, with others, and with life.

From then on it is all a contest with ennui, and no meaningful change ever. Instead of taking a thousand spins of the bay on water-skis behind their old 20-horse motor, they buy a 40-horse and do it faster. But they are still going in circles.

to understand why Rickie became either a silly unproductive boob or a sneering sophisticated opportunist with no more conviction than a whore.

I have witnessed the spiritual corruption of student after student because of that attitude alone. The kids are learning that they can do anything or nothing, as they choose, with impunity—because adults are bound to some mysterious edict to tolerate everything.

But a boy who really is wiser than, and therefore superior to the instruction of an adult who has been on the firing-line for ten or twenty years, will not crave understanding. He will have learned that one difference between being a child and being a man is that the man has ceased to expect it.

But if understanding must exist, it seems to me that the person with the superior knowledge is the one who should be understood. One reason I am leaving the profession is that I am sick of honoring appeals for understanding from persons whose performances are usually unreliable and always half-hearted.

Few things can stimulate improvement more than a well-spoken judgment. As Ayn Rand says somewhere, the injunction "Do not judge lest ye be judged" should be amended to read, "Judge, and be prepared to be judged." That, taught to old and young alike, and carried into action, would clear the air of all this evasive whining for tolerance. I hasten to add that the judgments of persons who are productive are, of course, more respectable than of those who find sarcasm an easy substitute for work.

I tell you, I have seen enough of living death. I have been able to absorb everything else—attacks from all sides, the indifference of slow learners required to take my course, even being dropped back a step on the salary schedule last spring—, but the petrification of a once-vital young person is a sight so ugly to me that all my senses reel from it. I cannot look into eyes that have lost their luster and then walk into a classroom and teach. I cannot look at the downcast faces of boys and girls whose parents have pulled them out of experiences they really wanted, or the sight of students who suffered with me being turned into masses of nerves on my account.

I cannot bear to witness gentleness turned sour and curiosity tamed to sophistication.

A teacher sees the future results of his endeavors through the students whom he has taught. I cannot contemplate the future through a screen of premature senility and still keep up what has been self-deception all along. And I cannot take a steady unveiled look at what is happening to my own spirit in the process without speeding to freedom as fast and as far as my car will carry me.

I suppose many of you who have read this far will complain about my failure to include in this statement the thing called "constructive criticism." My experience has been that those who ask for constructive criticism usually mean no criticism at all. Others will tell me that I have not behaved "professionally"—which means, "Shut up and don't rock the boat." In reply to such complaints I ask you to think of the community and its school as a diseased organism. The physician who removes a tumor performs a wholly negative act: he does not construct anything to replace the malignancy, but the body is improved by the removal.

What I have tried to do here is to perform the diagnosis; and, like most diagnoses, it was performed without anesthetic. Citizen, heal thyself! As for constructive ideas, I believe it can be asserted that I have had them before. And I still do have them—but a certain proverb about pearls and pigs reminds me to keep them to myself. Short of donating my body to the biology department for dissection, I did what I could.