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Social-Medical Problems of Youth: Viewpoint of the Educator

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passing is the irrelevancy of their faith, an irrelevancy which often causes young people to wonder whether their faith really means anything at all to them. It is not to say that they will leave the religion; they do not leave it for the most part. But then it is very, very difficult for a young person to take the stunted version of religion which they have learned in grammar school and high school and in the college years reevaluate the religion of his infancy and turn it into an adult religion. It is especially difficult to do so because this reevaluation has so often been defined by his previous religious training as losing the faith. If you question, then you doubt it; and if you doubt, then you've already lost the faith.

Most of the so-called crises of faith that we encounter are not really crises of faith at all; they're merely signs of health actually, attempts of people to upgrade their religion through matter of immaturity to maturity and the real problem is that society, at least in its religious functionary, insists on defining for them that this reevaluation of their religion is a sin when it is anything but sinful.

Are there any solutions for these problems? Well there are no clear cut panaceas obviously because the problems are rooted in the nature of American society. What the young person must do, of course — as one young woman put it to me — is come to terms with oneself. You must accept yourself; you must not view life as a long series of tests to be passed, but rather as a series of experiences through which you grow. But of course it is very hard when everything you have done has been a test thus far in coming to terms with yourself may mean accepting yourself as a growing, maturing, developing human being and not as someone who is constantly passing a series of tests and overcoming obstacles in the absence of which is a nothing, a failure, unacceptable, without dignity.

Now how do they do this? They can't do it in their relationships with parents. During the adolescent years for young American children to communicate with their parents about anything meaningful in their life is all but impossible. Some of them can establish communication with educators some with clergy some, indeed, with their MD at least the point that I would make you is this: many of the problems, the physical, emotional problems of adolescents brought to their offices are actually difficulties that result from the fact that the young person is not at all sure of his own loveliness; he is not at all sure that he is acceptable or worth adventuring. His real problems are not the mysterious headaches or stomach-aches or psychosomatic disturbances that he may have, but that real problems are self-hatred, self-rejection, and I guess every doctor who deals with this kind of person must be a part-time psychologist; but then I would think that this is nothing new in the medical profession because almost every doctor feels on a number of occasions that most of what he does is not medicine but a very limited form of medicine called psychotherapy.
The weight of talent on the part of well-educated and dedicated teachers who are in some cases managing something more like a house of correction than a classroom for learning. It hardly seems fair to say "draft youth at sixteen" but it seems criminal to force them to stay in halls of learning against all sane rules of fair treatment to one class of American professional people who are not free to say "take your business elsewhere" as you are. Not to speak of the morale of the children who really WANT to learn something in those same classrooms! It is economically advantageous to keep these young-sters off the labor market, and we have many elderly citizens who need those jobs, but is this really intelligence, not to speak of justice?

Second, I wonder if you have thought how increasingly difficult it is becoming for young people to make mistakes in life. A college junior wrote me about this. She said, "It is part of becoming mature to fall flat on your face occasionally. I wish we could try a course at the risk of failing it, just to see if we could do it. We are discouraged from aiming at the stars in school because we dare not fail. Rank in class, grade-point average—these things are criteria for acceptance or rejection in the next step forward. How can I learn my limitations unless I am free to fail, or at least fall short of high achievement?"

Third, ask any teacher today what the strongest motivating force in school learning is, and I think he will say "grades." There is competition in schools today between students, and makes the span of rigor of the high school look like a bed of roses. When I watch this aides in rapid attention to a physics class, learning about South America because it is exciting and personally rewarding just to know something about South America. I cannot help thinking, if they could only teach the socialization that twists them into considering learning as means rather than an end. There can be cutthroat competition today in the 9th grade algebra class, and the 12th grade journalism class, as in reciting, doing extra-credit work, achieving high grades, and similar marks of distinction. We... Unfortunately, we can turn back to the reader and blame that teaching. Instead of it... he knew that using grades as a threat brings results. The father, too, who told his first-grade son to "learn to read well so you can get into college" wasn't helping matters much in supporting the little boy as he confronted one of the most challenging and amusing learning experiences of his life. One almost feels naive in mentioning the value of "learning for its own sake" in the light of such pressures toward external achievement in today's school world. We know about apathy, but who dares to go too involved when the stakes are too high, unless he is sure of coming out on top?

Fourth, it has been stated, and I quote, "chronological age is no guarantee of physical, social and emotional development." I would like to add that it is any guarantee of intellectual development. And yet, since the 16th century, we have been packaging our children into grades according to chronological age and assuming that this is a reasonable way of grouping them for learning. To persuade ourselves that we were sensitive to individual differences, we have become excited about homogenous grouping in the high school, leveling children into "tracks" according to performance on tests demonstrating academic potential, achievement level or reading proficiency. The most progressive schools, generally, are instructing children this way today. We assume that high-achievers in these terms should take highly-gared courses across the board—English, social studies, mathematics, foreign language and science. But a very real fact remains ignored. We are still assuming that a fifteen-year-old has a fifteen-year total of academic achievement—no more, no less. Recently the nation's newspapers carried an article describing an "ungraded" high school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Knowing the psychological sense behind the organization of that school, I could picture psychologists across the nation rising to cheer as they read about it. This is what they have said for years was the only reasonable way to group children for learning... disregard age entirely and group them according to tested achievement, keeping the groups open for students to move up and out. Here is a reversal of the idea of keeping children almost trapped in school... rather, says the principal of an ungraded high school in Melbourne, Florida, "Let's not keep them in high school; let's get them out!" In other words, let them advance or not advance, according to their individual capacity. In the upper years of high school, and you may decide three or four years are best for adequate social and emotional maturity upon leaving high school, give them more electives or advanced placement courses which carry college credit.

Let the slow children learn with the slow children, no matter what their chronological age. Drop the grading system entirely... organize an area of learning like English or American history into fifteen or twenty or thirty phases and let movement into a new phase be the only indication of achievement. Parents could be informed as to whether the child is doing satisfactory or unsatisfactory work. Parent conferences are the best way to do this, I feel. Surely there are many administrative and teaching problems that would have to be solved, but these are absolutely nothing compared to the relief from pressures exerted by parents and school and social stigma of failure that this type of system could bring about.

Fifth: Young people today are more impatient than ever before in our history. They feel that they can take what they can when the opportunity arises, because they have slim hope that a similar opportunity will come their way. More and more students each year are products of a number of elementary and secondary school systems... mobile families mean... many uprootings for young people. There is an awesome depersonaliza-
Social-Medical Problems of Youth —

VIEWPOINT OF THE JUVENILE COURT JUDGE

THE HONORABLE BEN J. SHEPHERD, M.D.

(Editor's Note: This article has not been edited. It is being published as typed when given at the Conference on Medical Care of the Family in Chicago, November 5, 1965. The author is a doctor, a lawyer and a judge with the wit and the home-spun philosophy of a Will Rogers.)

I am away from the “ivy halls” and I'm just judging. We have a big juvenile court, a domestic relation court in Miami. We have a population of more than a million which is nothing to Chicago.

So I speak from practicalities only — I've dealt with youngsters over the last six to seven years since I became the judge of the juvenile court. I was the Medical Examiner for Dade County for three years and I took care of the county jail until the time I became the judge, so I've had a spectrum of dealing with delinquent and non-conforming children.

One of my pet phobias is the word teenager. This is something I decry — I decry because I believe it has psychiatric connotations, and the kids feel they have to act in a certain way as they would act when you speak about a twelve billion dollar yearly spending by this group of adolescents; children act this way. The thing that bothers me most in my work is the breakdown in the family morals and family morale because I see children in court who are 95% from the culturally deprived, if I can coin a new phrase, culturally deprived areas and 5% from the upper brackets. I practice in Coral Gables which is where the economics structure is much higher and do most counseling with children.

Now if I were to tell you that in the last four weeks I had four fifteen to sixteen-year old girls brought in by their parents and these girls were pregnant (this is into my medical office because they wouldn't come into the court) I wouldn't be exaggerating. I've had four young girls from so-called good families; I've had youths from the Coral Gables area in court for shoplifting, stealing bobby-pins, stealing handkerchiefs. Parents could well afford to buy the store. This is the thing that bothers me. Where are we falling down? Where is the family falling down?

I've come to the conclusion that the only thing to say for the free choice of husband or wife is that the husband or wife seeks the psychological equivalent. I feel very definitely that I would like a return to the old European system where the parents at maturity have selected the husband and selected the wife. The percentage of teenage divorce and separations is well over 50 to