

Weekly Forum

Views and Reviews

THE FUTURE OF OUR CULTURE

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(Continued from last week)

That is the question which culture raises and sets itself to answer. Culture alone keeps our eyes clear to the vast spiritual resources which we may yet command, if we will, and our ears open to voices that speak with authority through all time. The prophets and the poets live in our agonized revolutions, condemning civilization, pointing the better way. They never accept a society built on force and broken faith and hatred. They rally good men everywhere to the defense of honor and human personality. Bring me my bow of burning gold! Bring me my arrows of desire! Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!

Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand

Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

In spite of the mass impact of a brutalized civilization, men of culture in every land walk together or alone, confident that out of the welter light must break at last. "What is all this," exclaimed Carlyle, "but a mad fermentation of the spirit wherefrom, the fiercer it is, the clearer product will one day evolve itself!" And Santayana, seeing that neither knowledge nor power is adequate to the need, calls us back to the ultimate resources of faith. O world, thou chooseth not the better part.

It is not wisdom to be only wise
And on the inward vision close the eyes.

But it is wisdom to believe the heart.

Columbus found a world and had no chart

Save that which faith deciphered in the skies.

To trust the soul's invincible surmise

Was all his wisdom and his only art.
Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine

Which lights the pathway but one step ahead

Across a void of mystery and dread.
Bid then the kindly light of faith to shine.

By which alone the human heart is led

Unto the thinking of the thought divine.

Civilization cannot break such a man. He is able to stand alone, fortified by the judgment of the ages. And that calm courage which speaks in faith is the central spirit, and purpose of a university. To produce one man of that inward power, we cannot help feeling, is to justify all it may cost to maintain it.

And so, too, the central spirit of a university must determine the attitude of the private man towards his neighbor. The oldest monument to human relations, the archaeologists say, is one found on the highway down into Egypt, one stone man with a spear drawn against another. That spear is still raised everywhere in civilization. And we have fashioned spears invisible, subtler, more penetrating and deadly. The racketeer, the pressure group politician, the militarist, the hooded kluxer, the captains of the organized underworld, the fascist, the racial bigot—each of these has poised a venomous dart for the breast of his neighbor. In all the great nations wherein we expect tomorrow the flame that may sweep the world, the leaders have no room for neighborly goodwill. They have no stock in ethics, morality, religion, covenant, plighted word or human affection. Reality for them is crude brute power. Racial bigotry and international hatred are the blazing faggots with which they threaten the world. God for them is the great battalion. His only authentic spokesmen the chemist and the physicist.

What a home this civilization is for the mind and heart of the private citizen! Where may he put his trust? Who is a neighbor? What future is there for right human relations? Well, here is Rousseau at Dillard declaring still that man would be good but for the corruption of civilization. Here is Saint Augustine offering refuge in his City of God. Here is Quintilian warning the rising generations in his Institutes. Here is Martin Luther hurling his ink pot against the face of darkness in defense of the individual. Here, last come, are the social scientists teaching that, to the mind of truth and of culture, all mankind is one, that there is no single superior race, no single superior nation, that each race and nation makes its own contribution to the common weal. No student could go out from four years of saturation in this mighty testimony here at Dillard and fail to respect all human personality. He could never be made to believe that Hitler or Mussolini will take the world. He will be free from the blindness of that captain of the good ship Beagle, who, because Charles Darwin had a broad nose, a beetling brow and a prognathous jaw was unable to realize that he was in the presence of one who would put a century to school and make the world his debtor. Rather, he will have the fine intuition of that cultured woman at Hampton, who, looking beyond the kinky hair, shabby clothes, and hesitant manner of a penniless Negro boy, gave him his chance in the cleaning of a room, and thus set Booker T. Washington on the pathway of his great service. That was culture rebuking civilization, and determining the right relation of man to his brother.