

"FOUR CHOICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE"

Text of commencement address by John Fischer, editor-in-chief of Harper's Magazine, Sunday, June 18, 1967, in Laurence Frost Amphitheater at Stanford University.

My text today is taken from a young man most of you know: Jim Binns, president of the senior class. When I asked his advice some months ago, he suggested that I ignore the parents and faculty who are here today, and speak directly to those of you who will, in a few minutes, enter the non-student world. Mr. Binns told me that: "More than any previous generation of Stanford students, our generation views the adult world with great skepticism... There also is an increased tendency to reject completely that world."

I have no doubt that Mr. Binns speaks for a good many of his contemporaries, here and on other campuses. During the last few years I have listened to scores of young people, in college and out, who were just as nervous about the grown-up world. Some apparently feel even worse. For example, a Mr. Emmett Grogan, leader of a West Coast sodality of social drop-outs who call themselves The Diggers, recently was quoted as saying: "Politics is dead. Culture is dead. The whole world stinks."

Such total discouragement probably is shared by only a tiny minority of Americans under 25. But many of the others--perhaps a majority--evidently look at the society they are entering with some degree of bewilderment and mistrust. Roughly, their attitude might be summed up about like this: "The world is in pretty much of a mess, full of injustice, poverty, and war. The people responsible are, presumably, the adults who have been running things. If they can't do better than that, what have they got to teach our generation? That kind of lesson we can do without."

These conclusions strike me as reasonable, at least from your point of view. It is true that the world is an unfair and untidy place. It also is true that the conventional wisdom, which we elders offer the young with such overwhelming generosity, often will have little relevance to the problems of the next two decades. The grown-ups might argue, a little defensively, that the reasons for the mess are somewhat different from what most young people think they are, and that the current crop of adults is neither so stupid nor so corrupt as their youthful critics often assume. Nevertheless, I am delighted to see Jim Binns's generation approaching the future with a certain skepticism. As a one-time semi-pro boxer, I can testify that anyone who keeps his guard up, his eyes wary, and his knees loose has a better chance of survival. And skepticism, after all, is simply a habit of not believing anything until you have some solid evidence that it might be true. Among scientists, I understand, this is known as the scientific method.

The relevant question for the arriving generation is not whether our society is imperfect (we can take that for granted) but how to deal with it. For all its harshness and irrationality, it is the only world we've got. Choosing a strategy to cope with it, then, is the first decision a young adult has to make, and usually the most important decision of his lifetime.

So far as I have been able to discover, there are only four basic alternatives:

1. Drop out.

Anyone who takes Ramparts seriously might think that this solution was invented only yesterday by The Reverend Timothy Leary, and that it can be practiced successfully only in Haight-Ashbury or Greenwich Village, with the aid of LSD or some other reality-blunting drug. In fact, it is one of the oldest expedients, and it can be practiced anywhere, at any age, and with or without the use of hallucinogens. It always has been the strategy of choice for people who find the world too brutal and too complex to be endured. Its

notable practitioners include many Hindu mystics, certain monastic orders dating from the early years of Christianity, several Buddhist sects, and the Skid Row bums slumped on the curb with a pint of cheap wine. The hermit of Mount Athos and the millionaire recluse in his Caribbean hideaway are both drop-outs. So were Diogenes and Lao-tse. So too is a certain type of suburban matron whose life centers on her daily bridge game and a jug of martinis.

This way of life is, by definition, parasitic. In one way or another, its practitioners batten on the society which they scorn, and in which they refuse to take any responsibility. Some of us (The Squares) find this distasteful--and undignified kind of life, like that of a leech or a kept woman. But for the poor in spirit, with low levels of both energy and pride, it may be the least intolerable choice available.

2. Flee.

This strategy also has ancient antecedents. Ever since civilization began, certain individuals have tried to run away from it, in hopes of finding a simpler, more pastoral, and more peaceful life. Unlike the drop-outs, they are not parasites. They are willing to support themselves, and to contribute something to the general community--but they simply don't like the environment of civilization: that is, the city, with all its ugliness and tension.

The joy of simple life among the noble savages has been celebrated by eloquent propagandists, from Virgil to Rousseau. Their precepts have been followed by people as diverse as Daniel Boone and Gauguin. When I was 21, at a time when American society seemed hopelessly bogged down in the miseries of the Depression, I attempted it myself. I applied for a job on an Australian ranch, and if I had been accepted I might be herding sheep today--no doubt a happier and healthier man.

The trouble with this solution is that it no longer is practical on a large scale. Our planet, unfortunately is running out of noble savages and unsullied landscapes; except for the polar regions, the frontiers are gone. A few gentleman farmers with plenty of money can still escape to the bucolic life--but in general the stream of migration is flowing the other way. Each year American farming has room for fewer and fewer people. Recently about a million have been moving every year--many of them reluctantly--from the country to the cities. There is some hope that this trend eventually might be reversed; but it would require a massive national effort, extended over several decades.

3. Plot a revolution.

This strategy always is popular among those who have no patience with the tedious workings of the democratic process, or who believe that basic institutions can only be changed by force. It attracts some of the more active and idealistic young people of every generation. To them it offers a romantic appeal, usually symbolized by some dashing and charismatic figure--a Byron, a Garibaldi, a Trotsky, or a Che Guevara. It has the even greater appeal of simplicity: "Since this society is hopelessly bad, let's smash it and build something better on the ruins." And to anyone with strong Oedipal feelings it provides the special delight of defying the Establishment--that stuffy collection of father-figures whom we all find it so easy to hate.

Some of my best friends have been revolutionists, and a few of them have led reasonably satisfying lives. These are the ones whose revolutions did not come off; they have been able to keep on cheerfully plotting their holocausts right into their senescence. Others died young, in prison or on the barricades. But the most unfortunate are those whose revolutions succeeded--men like Djilas and Trotsky. They lived, in bitter disillusionment, to see the establishment they had overthrown replaced by a new one, just as hard-faced

I am not, of course, suggesting that revolutions accomplish nothing. Some clearly do change things for the better, 'as in Mexico and (in spite of Djilas' unhappiness) in Yugoslavia. Elsewhere, as in Poland and in Ghana during Nkrumah's reign, the change clearly was for the worse. My point is merely that the idealists who make the revolution are bound to be disappointed in either case. For at best their victory never dawns on the shining new world they had dreamed of, cleansed of all human meanness. Instead it dawns on a familiar, workaday place, still in need of groceries and sewage disposal. The revolutionary state, under whatever political label, has to be run--not by violent romantics--but by experts in marketing, sanitary engineering, and the management of bureaucracies. For the Byrons among us, this discovery is a fate worse than death.

Fortunately the young revolutionists in today's America are safe from such a fate. This government simply is not going to be overthrown by violence, within the foreseeable future. Many recruits of the New Left are unwilling to believe this--and since they can't be bothered to study the history of revolutionary movements, they probably are beyond argument. Bayard Rustin, the leading intellectual of the civil rights movement, recently remarked that he has to spend a lot of his time persuading student enthusiasts that the conditions for a successful guerrilla war do not exist in the U.S. He seemed unsure whether he had made much headway.

At most, these would-be guerrillas might provoke a tragic reaction. So long as they limit themselves to demonstrating and wearing buttons, they will be tolerated. But if they should ever become a real nuisance--if they should attempt enough violence to disrupt seriously the life of the country--then the community will suppress them, quickly and harshly. If that happens, a lot of other people will get suppressed at the same time, and many of the most hopeful impulses in American society will be drowned under a new wave of McCarthyism.

For the rebels who understand this--the idealists who are determined to remake society, but who seek a more practical method than armed revolution--there remains one more alternative:

4. Try to change the world gradually, one clod at a time:

At first glance, this course is far from inviting. It lacks glamor. It promises no quick results. It depends on the exasperating and uncertain instruments of persuasion and democratic decision-making. It demands patience, always in short supply among the young. About all that can be said for it is that it sometimes works--that in this particular time and place it offers a better chance for remedying some of the world's outrages than any other available strategy.

So at least the historical evidence seems to suggest. Thirty-five years ago, for example, the generation graduating from college found the world in an even worse mess than it is in today. The economic machinery had broken down almost everywhere; in this country nearly a third of the population was out of work. Hideous political movements were burgeoning in Europe and Asia. A major war seemed all too likely. As a college newspaper editor at that time, I protested against this just as vehemently as student activists are protesting today. I pointed out to my parents' generation, with what I hoped was burning eloquence, that war was inhuman and irrational--and that it was stupid to close down factories when people were starving. The doddering old folks who ran the country obviously were bunglers. If they would just step aside, we youngsters would soon straighten things out.

(more)

Oddly enough, something like that actually happened. The generation which came of age in the '30's did get the national economy working again--not by revolution, which was widely recommended by the advanced thinkers of the time, but by slow, pragmatic tinkering. As a consequence, though poverty has not yet disappeared, it has been shrinking dramatically for the last three decades. The same generation demonstrated, at considerable cost, that fascism was not the wave of the future. It even created diplomatic machinery for working out peaceful settlements of international disputes. It is true that this machinery has operated only moderately well; but it has forestalled any major war for nearly 30 years--no trivial achievement in the light of earlier history.

At the same time, my generation was discovering that reforming the world is a little like fighting a military campaign in the Apennines: as soon as you capture one mountain range, another one looms just ahead. As the big problems of the '30's were brought under some kind of rough control, new problems took their place--the unprecedented problems of an affluent society, of racial justice, of keeping our cities from becoming inhabitable, of coping with war in unfamiliar guises. Most disturbing of all was our discovery of the population explosion. It dawned on us rather suddenly that the number of passengers on the small spaceship we inhabit is doubling about every 40 years--and that already there aren't enough seats to go around. So long as the earth's population keeps growing at this cancerous rate, all of the other problems appear virtually insoluble. Our cities will continue to become more crowded and noisome. The landscape will get more cluttered, the air and water even dirtier. The quality of life is likely to become steadily worse for everybody. And warfare on a rising scale seems inevitable, if too many bodies have to struggle for ever-dwindling shares of food and living space.

So Jim Binn's generation has a formidable job on its hands. But not, I think, an insuperable one. On the evidence of the past, it can be handled in the same way that hard problems have been coped with before--piecemeal, pragmatically, by the dogged effort of many people. The victories will be unspectacular: perhaps tomorrow the discovery of a cheaper and more reliable method of birth control, next year the development of a high-yield strain of rice. The real heroes will not be revolutionary demagogues, but the obscure teachers who work out better ways to train underprivileged children...the businessmen who manage to upgrade unskilled Negro workers...the politicians who devise new institutions to govern our metropolitan areas...the journalists who persuade a reluctant citizenry that change not only is necessary, but inescapable.

Because the results of your individual efforts will come so slowly and uncertainly, you will often find it easy to slump into discouragement, and a feeling of helplessness. And it is true that your future, in most cases, will be determined something like 90 per cent by circumstances beyond your control--by the accidents of history, the weather, the kind of family you were born into, and the unpredictable elements in your work. Nevertheless, to the extent of about 10 per cent, your future will be decided by your own conscious choices: by your foresight, and your determination to channel the flood tides of change, in whatever small way you can, in hopeful directions.

In the end, you may find that your individual efforts add up to a surprising sum of accomplishment. For your generation, from what I have seen of it, shows more potential than its predecessors. It is healthier and better educated. It is more idealistic--that is, more willing to work for the common good, rather than for purely selfish ends. If it is (fortunately) pretty skeptical, it certainly is not complacent.

Provided that a reasonable number of your generation chose the fourth strategy, then, you may succeed in reshaping the world considerably more than you now expect. But you can be sure of only two things. First that you will get no help from the drop-outs, and precious little from the escapees and professional revolutionists. And second, that about 25 years from now you will be questioned by your own children because you have not done enough, and have failed to foresee the arising problems of the next century.