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# THE RECOVERY OF PROPORTION

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PACIFIC LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY

## BULLETIN

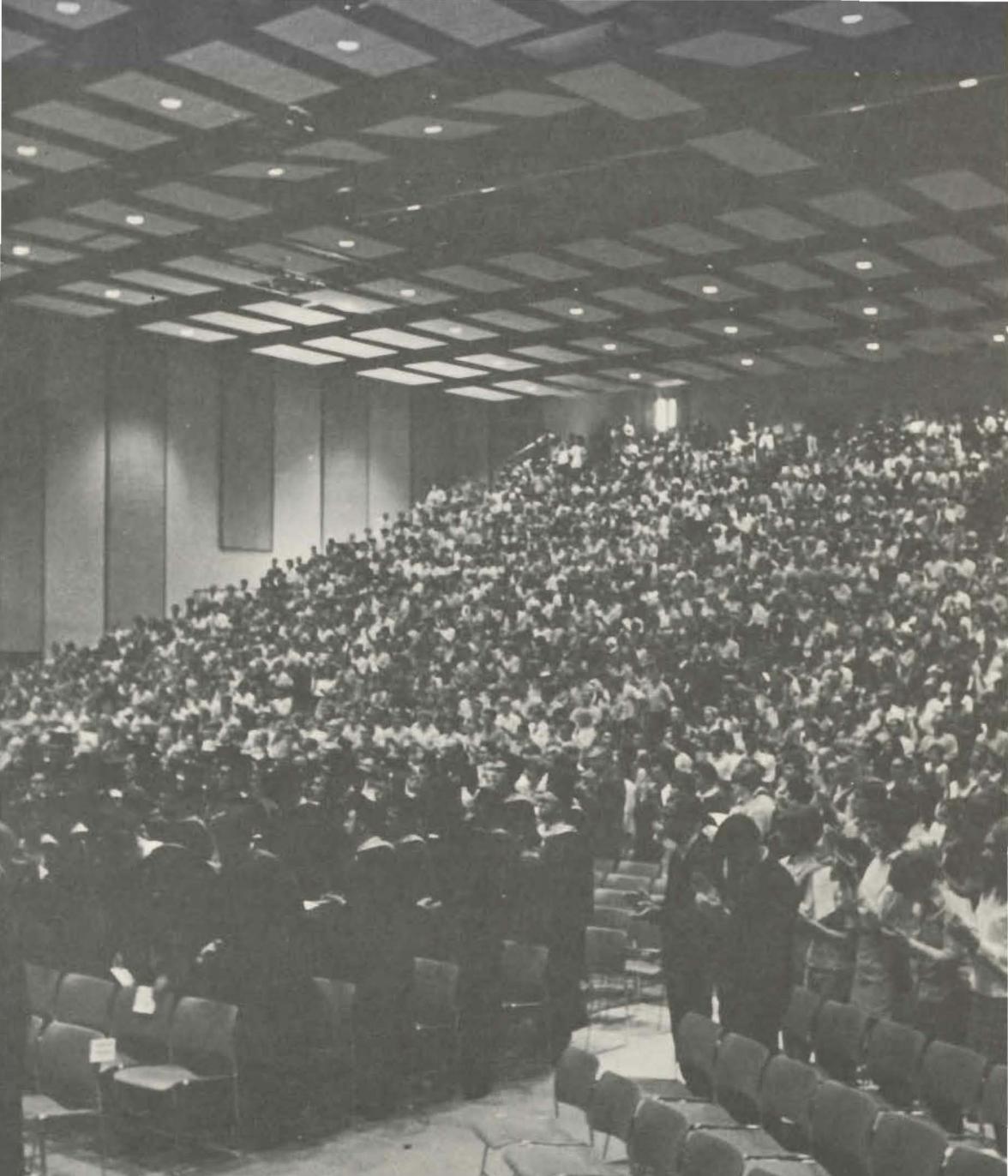
VOLUME XLIX NO. 6

DECEMBER 1969

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# THE RECOVERY OF PROPORTION

*Abridged text of address given at commencement June 1, 1969*

I.

Lloyd J. Averill

Revolution is brewing on many a college and university campus these days. That *could* be a promising development. Much in American higher education desperately needs reform. Too often instruction is inexcusably tedious and tendentious, requirements appear designed to frustrate education rather than to encourage it, and the moral edge of learning is dulled by disuse. So I would like to join a revolutionary strategy for change. In fact, I think I could be extremely useful in an academic revolution. I know the whereabouts of some skeletons in academic closets around the country whose existence the revolutionaries have

not even guessed yet!

If, then, you wonder why I haven't rushed to sign on with one or another of the radical movements, I shall be glad to tell you. In fact, I insist on telling you, having come all this way just for the purpose.

There is one absolutely indispensable requirement for a successful revolution, and that is a proper understanding of the nature of man. The revolutionary ideology can be expected to work only if it is pretty savvy about the nature of human nature. The reason why some splendidly motivated revolutions have gone sour lies precisely, I think, in the fact that they

mistook the nature of the human situation. And having discovered, after embarking upon their revolution, that things do not go quite as they had expected—that human nature does not react in the revolutionary situation quite as they had anticipated—the revolutionaries grow desperate, unwilling either to admit their error or to abort their revolution, and so they resort to any means available to keep a bad thing going, if for no other reason than to retain whatever power they may have seized.

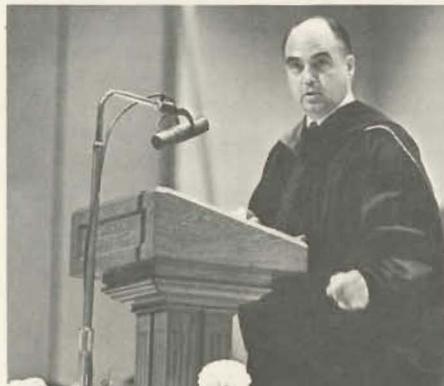
The Russian revolution is a case in point. It was both profoundly moral and profoundly mistaken. It was moral in that it desired to give to every man a degree of economic equity which history had not previously provided in any society. It was mistaken in its failure to understand that revolutionary leaders who are “temporarily” invested with absolute political authority in order to create the new society in a hurry — even when it is announced in advance that their authority will be transferred to the people once social justice has been achieved — will become so enamored of their power that they will never voluntarily relinquish it and will invent whatever historical and ideological fictions may be necessary to hold on. Thus, ironically and tragically, a revolution for social justice is transmuted by desperately mistaken men into one of history’s most repressive regimes.

Reflections like these give me pause in the presence of our current crop of campus revolutionaries. As much as I would like to join them, I am prevented from doing so by what seem to me to be the profoundly flawed views of human

nature which they hold. More conservative voices among us are insisting, rather shrilly, that the new left is simply fascism, 1933 style, in disguise. I do not know whether that historical analogy will do in every detail, but I am impressed by the fact that campus revolutionaries in their several sizes and shapes do share, both with German National Socialism and with Soviet Communism, a romantic view of human nature which is as wrong as it is beguiling. Romanticism errs in attributing to all men, or at least to some preferred group of men — the Aryan race, the proletarian class, the unestablished young, or the disestablished poor — more nobility, more wisdom, more natural virtue than there is any warrant in human history to claim.

Let me be specific. The romanticism of campus militants lies in the notion that, in a state of nature, man is innocent and good, pure in ideal and uncorrupted in motive. In their peculiar re-writing of the narrative of man’s fall, the new radicals seem to see the satanic creeping into their Eden, not in the temptation to be “like gods, knowing good and evil,” as in the biblical story, but rather in the temptation to be like organizational men, knowing rules and regulations. Left to himself, in

*Lloyd J. Averill*



this radical view, man always does what the good required. Men only go wrong when they permit their playground paradise to be turned into an institution. It is life in a socially organized mode which causes man to lose his innocence and dries up his goodness, which pollutes his ideals and corrupts his motives. Institutions are not only unnatural, in the radical view; they are actually contrary to nature, because they frustrate the unhibited freedom which nature intended to confer upon every man. Institutions compel a man to give up doing "his own thing" and force attention upon a corporate will, which is to say that institutions rob man of his identity and warp his integrity. If so, the only way to recover one's true manhood is to tear down all social institutions, in the faith that one will find Eden regained thereby, and innocence restored.

But there is, so one must gather from certain student professions, a point of no return. There comes a time in life when institutional discipline has so broken and domesticated a man that there is for him no way back to the innocent wildness of paradise; a time when he will actually prefer the comfortable slavery of Egypt to the stony openness of the Sinal desert. Students seem to fear that there is an age — and it appears to press younger and younger — beyond which natural goodness is irretrievable, idealism irrecoverable. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for their haste: apprehension that, if they are not quick to cut the ties of institutional tyranny upon their own lives, they may themselves step across that continental divide and become



Retiring faculty members, left to right, Olaf M. Jordahl, physics; E. C. Knorr, sociology; Vernon A. Utzinger, speech; and J. E. Danielson, admissions.

hopelessly and helplessly trapped in a system which grinds man into mulch.

All of which is romantic, I insist, because it distorts as romanticism always does, by claiming for all men, or for some preferred group of men, more natural virtue than history gives us any warrant to claim.

## II.

To put the matter in theological terms, the radical view is romantic because it denies the reality of original sin. If I understand that ancient doctrine correctly, it asserts that all his life long every man struggles with, and regularly succumbs to, the temptation to treat the universe as if its center were located precisely at the place where he stands, and not elsewhere; and as if its horizons were exactly where he measures them, no nearer, no farther. The wisdom of that doctrine in no way depends upon simple-minded interpretations of Eden as a place to be located on a map, of Adam and Eve as our literal first progenitors, and of our sin as the inherited result of their primal misdeed. Of course that is nonsense! Each man's own nature as a man is the sufficient explanation for his sometimes subtle,

sometimes savage attempts to remake the world his own image. That desire is rooted deep in the excessive demands of his own esteem. If he cannot have life on his own terms, played by his own rules, he fears that he will be swallowed up in oblivion, that he will literally become a non-entity. If he cannot claim all importance, he fears that he will qualify for no importance at all. So each is his own Adam, each woman her own Eve.

Nor is the wisdom of this doctrine in any way dependent upon outrageous notions of "total depravity" which have sometimes been associated with it, as if all man's effort were directly contrary to the good, the true, and the beautiful. Of course that is nonsense! Original sin does not deny that men achieve much that is good; rather, it insists that even the best we do is touched and tainted by our self-interestness.

It is not difficult to understand why campus radicals reject the doctrine of original sin and, indeed, are threatened by it. They reject it because they are engaged in all-out war, and wars are not won by generals and enlisted men who go off into battle beating their breasts and crying, *Mea culpa!* Wars are won only if warriors can be persuaded that their cause is absolutely right and the enemy's absolutely wrong. Reasonably normal men may perhaps learn to kill devils with a good conscience. But if the enemy should be seen simply as a man like himself, uncertain about the full rightness of either cause, it is infinitely harder to make that enemy out to be a demon dangerous enough to kill. And there is nothing more devastating than, having maimed or killed another man, to have to live with doubts

about the moral justification of that act. So when wars are fought, mass hypnosis is aimed at relieving the soldier of any guilt and the enemy of any good. This is a part of what makes warfare immoral: it can only be prosecuted successfully if the real moral proportions of praise and blame, wisdom and folly, cause and effect, right and wrong, are deliberately distorted.

The radicals quite understand that as it relates to Vietnam, and they have delighted to prick the balloon of American pretentiousness and self-righteousness at being the moral policeman of the world. What they have not the wit, or even the humor to see, is that they are themselves pointed instances of precisely the way original sin works: they imitate in themselves what they profess to hate in the American presence in Vietnam; what is condemned as evil in their adversaries is adopted as virtue in themselves. So civil authorities become "pigs," and university authorities become monsters of repression upon whom the ordinary human courtesies of dignity or civility would be wasted. "Listen to me!" the radical demands. "I have something to say which is worth hearing because I am uncorrupted, standing as I do outside the corrupt establishment.

So the instruments of mass hypnosis — chant and slogan, march and martyrdom, berating and burning — serve the radical purpose of widening the polarities between their virtue and some one else's vice, between their truth and some one else's deception, between their innocence and some one else's establishment. Radicalization simply cannot permit the cry, *Mea culpa!* within its own ranks. It cannot admit uncertainty, or complicity,

or error, without becoming de-radicalized. Admission of uncertainty, complicity, or error, is what Communism calls "counter-revolutionary" activity. Since, therefore, the radicals' warfare is threatened by the idea of man's *universal* sinfulness, what cannot be domesticated must be denied. What they cannot do is annul the law of life, that those who reject the doctrine of original sin are condemned to illustrate the doctrine.

To insist that the campus radical suffers from a moral infection which is common to all of us is not to deny genuine moral excellence in the radical program. Today's radicalism is, indeed, notable for what Professor Sidney Hook has called "high-mindedness."<sup>1</sup> They declare passionately for humanity and against brutalism, for freedom and against repression, for truth and against error. Nor is there any reason to doubt the sincerity of their declarations. There is ample reason to doubt both their intellectual consistency and their practical judgment. When jazz critic and novelist Nat Hentoff asked one of the radicals whether the new order had any place for due process, the man replied, "There are times when those of us preparing a revolutionary society must simply go ahead and do what's right because we understand what's right better than anyone else." Hentoff comments, "I saw the utter conviction with which he spoke and knew how sincere a jailer he could be."<sup>2</sup>

Few instruments in the hand of man are more dangerous than an excessively good conscience, nurtured by faith in one's own moral purity and infallibility. Such a conscience can create mischief without misgiving and justify the world's

worst deeds with the world's best reasons. As Shailer Mathews, late dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, wrote more than fifty years ago, "Agitators are indispensable, but an agitator mad with altruism is as dangerous as any other madman."<sup>5</sup>

### III.

The militant view on the campus is romantic, not only when it locates the source of evil in institutions rather than in men, but also when it believes that men can live most humanly apart from what it believes to be the enslavements of institutions. So the radical gospel asserts the self-sufficiency of individual men and affirms their full completeness as men apart from the organized human community.

In an even more basic way they convict themselves out of their own mouths. They did not invent the four-letter vulgarisms with which they hope to offend middle-class sensibilities. Whether they know it or not some of their most valued verbal weapons are the most venerable of words, learned by succeeding generations from Old English and Middle English usage, and preserved by continual employment through these long centuries because of the unique monosyllabic thud with which they make their verbal impact.

The point is that the very language of protest against institutions is itself institutionalized communication. Indeed, uninstitutionalized, or deinstitutionalized, communication would be a contradiction in terms, since it would put nobody in touch with anybody. Words are not lonely inventions. If they were, there

1. Sidney Hook, "Barbarism, Virtue, and the University," *The Public Interest* (Spring, 1969), p. 24.

2. Nat Hentoff, "Dehumanized Radicalism," *Mademoiselle* (May, 1969) p. 16.

5. Shailer Mathews, *The Church and the Changing Order* (Macmillan, 1912), p. 168.

would be no communication but only moanings in the wind. Words are socially formed, socially recognized, socially sanctioned symbols, their meanings preserved through the organized memory of society. Words are used according to certain rules called grammar, and grammar is a convention, a social agreement, the regulation of our verbal behavior by certain social norms. If we care about being understood, we can defy those norms only within certain limits, like saying "ain't" or "we was." Total defiance of the social regulations of our verbal behavior would simply make the defiant one irrelevant. Such defiance would make protest quite harmless, since no one would have the least idea what was being protested, or indeed that the sounds uttered were to be understood as protest at all.

When we speak of animals other than man as "dumb," that epithet is commonly associated with their limited intelligence. But surely more important, it is intended to mark their inability to speak, their lack of language. For it is precisely

language which makes man human and marks him off from the rest of the animal world. It is language which confers selfhood.

All of which is to say, that I begin to be an individual self when I am enabled to break out of my isolated individuality by the gift of language. Language is a gift; I do not create it; I must learn it from those who already know it. Far from being the natural enemy of our humanness, the institutionalization of experience is the absolutely indispensable precondition of our being human at all. Having said that, I am under no necessity to defend every institution which men have produced as somehow beneficial to human life. Of course institutions distort and corrupt, and when they do they require reformation or replacement -- *by other institutions*; for it is precisely by the institutionalization of experience that humanness is nurtured.

Then let us be quite clear about this: protest against the institutionalization of experience is simply protest against being human.



#### IV.

In at least one other way the radical romanticizes and thus falsifies the human situation. He assumes not only that he can dissociate himself from his own past with immunity — we see this in his effort to shake himself loose from the social history which has spawned him — but that he can also dissociate himself without penalty from his own future. To put the matter more directly, he fails to see that when he deliberately widens and hardens the generation gap, making youth the deadly enemy of age, the ironic consequence is that he makes himself his own enemy. For barring untimely disaster, one thing is certain: every young man grows older.

Psychiatrist Dr. Seymour Halleck insists that every society must find a means of providing a respected place for its older members. "So long as aging means being less respected, less powerful and less relevant to this society," he writes, "there can never be any joyous anticipation of the future." So the tragedy of this present enmity between youth and age is seldom noted. It is, as the psychiatrist notes, that "even as [the young] attack the adult world they become trapped on destroying themselves; if they make their parents irrelevant, they will surely make themselves irrelevant. . . We are told that our youth are our future. Yet, unless we can create a world which offers possibility of aging with grace, honor and meaningfulness, no one — young or old — can look forward to the future."<sup>7</sup>

There is no way to step outside the historical continuum which gives identity

7. Seymour L. Halleck, "Why They'd Rather Do Their Own Thing," *This Week Magazine*, (March 16, 1969), p. 7.

to the self — no way, that is, to defy with immunity "the golden chain of affection that binds the generations" — without tearing at the vital tissue which makes us what we are. It is simply romantic nonsense to believe that the present moment exists in isolation and immunity either from what we already have been or from what we shall yet be. Our part is never finished and done; it intrudes ineluctably into the present. Nor is our future simply uncreated; rather it reaches, and indeed sometimes rushes, forward to qualify the "now" before we know it. There is very little difference between one who, in age, despises and retroactively repudiates his earlier years, and one who, in youth, despises and by anticipation repudiates his later years. Both break "the golden chain of affection that binds the generations" even within a single life. Both are thus forms of self-hatred from which nothing humanly useful can be expected.

#### V.

These are critical days for democratic institutions, among them the liberal, college and university. Reinhold Niebuhr saw human nature with a clarity which has given to few men, and in expressing that insight he has given us the only basis upon which we may safely rest the full weight of a truly human social order, on the campus or anywhere else. His words are both a proper rebuke to our current crop of revolutionaries, and a proper prod to the rest of us.

Said Niebuhr, man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary!<sup>9</sup>

9. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Chicken of Light and the Chicken of Darkness*.



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