

Once There Was a Way to Get Back Home

Presented to the Graduating Class of Brookfield High School

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Brookfield, Connecticut

June 15, 1970

There is a line from the Beatle's album, *Abbey Road*, which came out last fall that impressed me very much. It was the line, "Once there was a way to get back home." I think there is a feeling among our generation that the world is moving faster, and as it moves faster, we are getting farther apart from each other. We see the world getting more complex, and often don't feel "at home" with ourselves and our society. Perhaps once there was a way to get back home, but everything today is transient and confusing and we're not sure anymore.

The hippie response

Our generation has been noted for two responses to this problem. The first might be called the "hippie" or "modern art" approach. The idea here is to break things down to their component parts, to try to get an idea of how the basic pieces relate to each other. If you go into an art museum today, you may run across paintings which consist of simple square, circles, and lines. The title of the painting may be "Anna"—and you don't recognize that it's a painting of a person at all; in fact, it looks more like a colored-in street map, with Joe's Garage in the upper righthand corner. But the intent of the painter is to rediscover the lines and forms and colors he uses in his craft. By breaking complex designs down to their basic relationships and shapes, he may be able to re-establish the value of his art in a mass "pop art" culture.

This could be the contribution that hippies could make to our society—the idea of breaking "society" down to its basic relationships between people. Last New Year's Day I attended a folk-rock and hippie-craft festival at Diamond Head Crater in Honolulu. I'd like to read to you from a mimeographed sheet that was passed out there:

LOVE is here. It's our gathering, our family, the peoples. The motivating force behind it is LOVE. LOVE is what the revolution is all about, giving to and working for each other. Lay something good on your brother. LOVE, Yeah! LOVE your brothers and sisters and the creator and her costume of earth and green trees...

Then a little further down the page, the tone changed, and it read:

ESTABLISHED-SOCIETY-STRUCTURE is anti-LOVE. They make people uptight and selfish. It is based on selfishness-competition-greed-profit-capitalize-on-you-brother-ism. Even if you feel LOVE the structure inhibits your acting on it. Established institutions hold us back— keep us from making LOVE, the motive force of people.

The idea, then, is that people are really loving and want to be good to each other but “established-society-structure” prevents this from happening. The hippie authors of this statement want relationships between human beings to improve, and they are interested in the social structure only in its most basic form: the love of one person for another.

There is a problem with this approach, and the hippie statement itself gives us a clue. At the bottom of the page, it read:

Do your own thing and if you desire to coordinate ideas and plans, meet at the LOVE gathering at Crossroads Church around 7:30 pm every Sunday.

It seems to me that if a group of thirty or forty people met at the church every Sunday, they would begin to know each other, and an informal “society” of friends would develop. If they met every week for many months, this gathering would become “established.” And if one person is in charge of refreshments, and another sets up entertainment, and a third calls people on the phone to remind them of the meeting— then, informally, there is a “structure.” Almost without wanting to, this hippie group, intent on furthering its LOVE gathering, will have its own “established-society-structure.”

I’d like to suggest, then, that it is not a question of the goodness or evilness of societies and structures and establishments *per se*— rather, it is a question of whether or not those societies and structures and establishments are filled with the kind of people and ideas which we want. The problem with breaking things down into their basic pieces is that we have to pick up the pieces and put them together again if we are to move forward. Societies and structures should always be reevaluated and adapted to changing conditions, but if we are to go anywhere, it is hard to see how we could do completely without them.

The campus radical response

A second response our generation has been noted for making to the growing complexity of society is that of the campus radical. The campus radical often relies on the “conspiracy theory”— someone is keeping us from being free, from doing what we want, from making society better. (When we don’t know what to do with our freedom, we assume that we’re being oppressed.)

If you went up to a student radical and said: “I want to persuade you that I’m right, but if I can’t convince you, I’ll beat you up or put you in jail”— the radical would probably laugh and say that having to beat him up or put him in jail would be the sign of a weak argument. “If you’re right, you should be able to convince me without resorting to force,” he might say, pulling out a copy of Thoreau and talking about the fact that disciplining his body is not the same as reaching his mind and heart. Unfortunately, he loses this point as it applies to himself. The radical goes to an administration and says: “I want to persuade you that I’m right, but if I can’t, I’m going to take your building and obstruct your office.” Weak in logic and facts, the radical takes a simplistic, physical-force approach to solving moral or intellectual problems.

Then there is the problem of the “non-negotiable demand.” Usually, non-negotiable demands are made by students who fear their own inability to negotiate. In our schools, we teach students the American ideals, but not what to do about them. We teach *what*, and not *how*. Students don’t get experience working with groups and organizations; they don’t get a chance to learn how a group of people can accomplish more together than they might accomplish separately. Thus, students are afraid of getting lost in meetings and memos, and choose to make rigid, non-negotiable demands instead. Unfortunately, in the realm of campus politics there is no such thing as a non-negotiable demand. If you have power, it is a *command*; if you don’t, it is a *request*.

The real drawback of the campus radical movement is that it is not particularly useful or effective. Protestors making demands often anger the administrator and the public at large so much that the protestors get less of what they wanted than if they had used other approaches. The tendency among radicals is also toward “symbolic action.” A symbol is something which represents something else; so symbolic action represents “real” action. Radicals often feel guilty because they aren’t doing anything about their beliefs— they aren’t teaching, or working in the ghetto, or in any noticeable way building the new society they say they want. Thus, many of their actions are more aimed at making

them feel better about a problem, than at solving the problem itself. It's a kind of therapy. By seizing a building, they can convince themselves that they have taken strong action against such things as the war in Vietnam.

Many hippies don't want to live in the world; many radicals don't know how. The difficulty with the hippie movement is that you have to pick up the pieces to move forward; and the drawback of the campus radical movement is that the actions taken are often geared more toward solving student guilt complexes than making constructive, socially useful changes in society.

Gaining perspective

I'd like to suggest that neither the hippie nor the campus radical offers a very good way for our generation to "get back home." The task of the educated man and woman in our society is not to deny the complexity of society by withdrawing from it, or being irrelevant to it, or trying in vain to simplify it. The task is to understand society: to gain perspective.

For example, we students are often heard criticizing the impersonality of war, the ease with which generals sit in their plush Pentagon offices and talk about kill ratios. Recently, I came across a good description of this problem:

We, this whole people, have been clamorous
For war and bloodshed; animating sports,
The which we pay for as a thing to talk of,
Spectators and not combatants!...

We send our mandates for the certain death
Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,
And women, that would groan to see a child
Pull off an insect's leg, all read of war,
The best amusement for our morning meal!
The poor wretch...
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
And technical in victories and defeats,
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
We join no feeling and attach no form!
As if the soldier died without a wound;

As if the fibres of this godlike frame
Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,
Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,
Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed;
As though he had no wife to pine for him,
No God to judge him! Therefore, evil days
Are coming on us, O my countrymen!

Those are strong words. They were written in 1798 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in regard to his own country, Britain. As you can see, the problem isn't new.

Parents today are often quoted saying that today's youth are really a hopeless case. Here's an interesting passage to that effect by a Chinese author:

White hair covers my temples—
My flesh is no longer firm.
And though I have five sons
Not one cares for brush and paper.
Ah-shu is sixteen years of age;
For laziness he surely has no equal.
Ah-hsuan tries his best to learn
But does not really love the arts.
Yung and Tuan at thirteen years
Can hardly distinguish six from seven;
T'ung-tzu with nine years behind him
Does nothing but hunt for pears and chestnuts.
If such was Heaven's decree
In spite of all that I could do,
Bring on, bring on
"The thing within the cup."

This poem was written in 400 A.D., a mere 1,500 years ago. It was written by the poet T'ao Ch'ien, and it is called "Putting the Blame on His Sons." Again, the problems of the despairing parent are not new either.

There is a great deal of concern today about pot and drugs. Several weeks ago I was reading a book which discussed the discovery of a new leaf that people smoked, and how dangerous it was. Governments were trying to ban it; people were jailed for possessing it. One near-Eastern ruler delighted in finding people in the act of smoking this leaf, and then hanging them— with a package of the

“weed” around their necks. This account turned out to be a description of the appearance of a mysterious weed called tobacco, about 250 years ago. Probably every third person in this room tonight has a pack of cigarettes or a pipe; and at least half of us have smoked at one time. Again, each generation faces something like tobacco or pot which it is afraid of, and which is eventually brought under control.

The generation gap

In the last year or two, there has been a lot of talk about a so-called “generation gap.” The generation gap strikes me as a concept that was created by Madison Avenue on a slow news day. There are many “gaps” between us in America— social, religious, economic, racial, political, regional. Placed in the context of all these differences, the generation gap may be one of the smallest gaps we face. It is likely, for example, that a father and son who are Buddhists from Hawaii will agree more with each other on a large number of issues than they would agree with their counterpart father and son who are Baptists from Alabama. It is possible that a daughter who comes from a middle class family in Montana will share more values with her parents than with other girls her age who are upper or lower class New Yorkers. Ardent Republicans of all ages will have more in common on a lot of issues that they will have in common with ardent Democrats of their respective ages. Some small studies indicate that a black man who is well-to-do may agree more with wealthy white men on economic issues that with his poorer black brothers. And so on. We are a diverse people, with many cross-cutting attitudes and backgrounds.

We normally consider our diversity to be our strength: we know we are different, and that some of our gaps must be closed, but we accept it as part of the American system— a good way to make sure we are checking all the angles in a democratic society. It is ironic, then, that in the case of the generation gap, we say that it is bad— and furthermore, we have begun to use this gap as an excuse. We use it as an excuse for not talking to each other any more. How many times have you heard a student say: “I could never talk it over with my parents. They’re out of it. They’d never understand. I couldn’t groove with somebody over thirty.” And how many parents have said at one time or another: “No, I’d never be able to explain it to the kids. Kids are so wild today. I can’t get through to them. I can’t get inside their world.”

Certainly, age is a factor in the development of viewpoints. But one fact that we must not miss in our attempt at perspective is that we students are more like our

parents than anyone else we have been close to. Even as we try to be different, we should keep this basic bond in mind.

This leads us to the difficulty of maintaining perspective in human relations. A few years ago I came across a story which I thought made a clear and tragic point. It was a true story of a young man and his parents. The boy was very much enamored of a young girl his age, and more and more of his weekends were devoted to spending time with her. The parents objected to his being out late and finally decided to lay down the law: if he was late again, he would lose the use of the car for a month and his allowance for two months. The boy went out, and lost all track of time. (When you're in love, time has little meaning.) Suddenly realizing how late it was, he said goodnight to his girlfriend and began speeding home. The later it got, the more he sped, until finally, he came to a corner he couldn't turn at high speed, and he crashed head-on into a bridge embankment. He was killed instantly.

I know of no parent who wouldn't have rathered that their son arrive home late instead of dead. When they laid down the law, they forgot that his being alive and well was more important than a curfew, a car, and an allowance. And the young man himself should have remembered that arriving home late was more important than not arriving at all; that not using the car for a month was a small inconvenience compared with dying. Both the son and his parents forgot that the rules, the codes, the disciplining, all were small compared with life itself, and what they as human beings meant to each other. We should never lose this main perspective.

Politics in our love, emotion in our politics

In a similar way, we often put too much politics into our love. It is so easy to see something in another person that we disapprove of, and let that keep us from relating to that person. We discount people too easily. We should be different, and when we see behavior we don't like, we should stand against it. But you don't have to condone a person's behavior in order to love him. In a complex society, a society where men begin to feel life is impersonal, it becomes more important to remember that as great as our differences are, we are basically more alike as human beings than we will ever be different. Our differences make life interesting, and give us our life's work, but they should not prevent the growth of a genuine brotherly love, the Greek notion of *agape*, an ability to feel compassion for the lives of other men and not wish them evil.

If there is too much politics in our love, it is possible that there is also too much emotion in our politics— too much thinking only with our hearts and not enough with our heads. I think the message for us as students is that the people in adult society who get things done and are respected are those who are competent, who have mastered the hard-nosed facts about the way the world operates, the people who address the real world when they advocate changes, and the people who know that many viewpoints are due to the position a person holds in a controversy— and so it is possible to attack that position without attacking the person who holds it. The message for us is that the world is not run according to what is right or wrong, but according to what is possible; and that the right only wins when it is embodied in competent and courageous leaders who can grasp both the technical strategy and the over-all moral importance of current issues and affairs.

Life choices

Another perspective that is difficult to maintain is that of our life choices. We live in a country and world of rising expectations. The old notion that the grass is greener on the other side has taken wings, and in a time of frustration, has almost become a national pastime. Workers want to be paid as much as company vice-presidents. Students want to be equal to professors. People want to be someone besides themselves. A while back, I went to a party which struck me this way:

People trying to be what they aren't,
Looking for it from people who aren't what they are,
To find what they wouldn't want to be.

Rather than working on our own skills, our own potentials, our own lives, we spend valuable time wishing we were someone or something else.

It is hard to remember what we all know to be true: no one has it all. Every job has its drawbacks as well as its freedoms, and some jobs look good to us because we only see the freedoms and not the drawbacks. I spent two hours talking recently with a friend of mine at college, who felt that he wanted to get away from his middle-class background— he felt that his parents had been held down, limited, by a lack of money, and he wanted to go out and start a law career and make much more money than his parents ever had. I tried to convince him that making \$50,000 per year or more as a corporation lawyer might not be as free as he thought. He'd be making the money, all right, but there would be more things to spend it on. He'd be expected to have a certain kind of car, and live in a certain neighborhood, and

send his kids to expensive schools, and have plush carpeting and costly paintings in his office. By the time he finished keeping up the corporation image in his life style, he'd probably have less money left over than his middle class parents. If he got really rich, and had millions of dollars, he'd have to spend most of his time watching his fortune and not much time enjoying it. What time he did have away from ticker tapes and stock brokers and tax consultants and market analysts, he would probably spend in ways that many less wealthy people could spend it if they just saved a certain amount of their earnings each year and spent it wisely on recreation.

One poem which puts our grass-is-greener wishing into perspective is the poem "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson, a poem which is better known to most of us students through an adaptation made by Simon and Garfunkel. I'd like to read it in its original form:

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and glittered when he walked.

And he was rich— yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread,
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

A book which has in the last year received a great deal of publicity is called *The Peter Principle*. The book describes how people rise to their "level of incompetence." If a person is a good warehouseman, he'll be promoted to assistant superintendent; if he is a good assistant superintendent, he'll be promoted to superintendent, and so on, up the ladder, until he gets a job which he can't do well

enough to be promoted out of. In this job he'll stay— he'll remain at his level of incompetence.

The problem here is that if you do your job well, and know that the next highest one is not for you, how do you keep from being promoted to your level of incompetence? Professor Peter suggests “creative incompetency.” If you are a gardener and a good one, and gardening is what you want to do, then you ought to lose a few order blanks and leave a tool out in the rain every once in a while so you don't look too good, and you don't have to be promoted to the main office where you'll sit at a desk and order seeds for spring planting.

The happiest people I know are the people who have discovered something that they can do well— and then have stuck to it. The work they have picked in the first place has suited them, and they have not gone about wishing they were someone else or spending someone else's money. And having found the happiness of knowing who they are and what they can do, they have refused to be moved by other people into other jobs or other life styles.

High school

Finally, I'd like to discuss the perspective I think we should have here tonight regarding high school.

In so many schools that I have visited, students have told me that high school is a “waiting period.” Students in high school are waiting to live. “Boy, when I graduate, I'm really going to let it rip, I'm really going to do my thing.” And then you go off to a job, or training school, or college, and you say, “Boy, when I get out of college, just watch— I'm going to let it all hang out, I'm going to do my thing.” And then you settle into jobs, and you say, “Just wait— when I get my promotion, I'm really going to take off, really going to live!” And then you get the promotion, and you say, “Say, let me tell you about my retirement— I'm really going to do it, really going to be free.” Then you retire, and you say, “Boy, watch this”— and then— poof!— you're gone.

I'd like to suggest to the graduating class here tonight, that you should be doing now, all of the kinds of things you want to do the rest of your life. Certainly, there have been demands on your time, but it doesn't get any easier from here on out— there will never be any really “free” time, no time when really *living* will be easy. You just have to *decide* to live.

There has been a lot of talk about the “alienation” of our generation. I think the basic cause of our alienation is that we are not participating, we are not working, we are not really *in* the world around us. We have been too superficially involved in our society. In this regard, I’d like to read a passage from Kahlil Gibran’s book *The Prophet*:

Then a ploughman said, Speak to us of
Work.

And he answered, saying:

You work that you may keep pace with
the earth and the soul of the earth.

For to be idle is to become a stranger
unto the seasons, and to step out of life’s
procession, that marches in majesty and
proud submission towards the infinite...

You have been told also that life is dark-
ness, and in your weariness you echo what
was said by the weary.

And I say that life is indeed darkness
save when there is urge,

And all urge is blind save when there is
knowledge,

And all knowledge is vain save when
there is work,

And all work is empty save when there
is love;

And when you work with love you bind
yourself to yourself, and to one another,
and to God...

Work is love made visible.

I think for the parents here tonight, this is a “graduation”— a ceremony commemorating something which is past, a looking back. It is tonight that parents begin to face the fact that the seventeen or eighteen-year habit of watching over their sons and daughters is beginning to end. But for the graduating students themselves, this must be a “commencement,” a beginning. And the fact that it is only a beginning needs to be stressed.

I've met a lot of students who feel that if you haven't made it by the time you graduate from high school, you just haven't made it. This is a mistake. Things change; people develop at different rates, and blossom at different times. The students who are the "Outstanding This" and "Outstanding That" in high school may not be particularly outstanding a few years later, much less their whole life. Of the "Outstanding" students that I remember from my own high school days, many have gone to college and jobs, but one is on hard drugs, one has been married and divorced, and one is in jail. (It's not that I came from a bad district—it's simply that leaders in high school must grow as fast or faster than their peers in order to remain leaders years later!) Perhaps you didn't find the right circumstances here in high school; perhaps you haven't discovered something that excites you, something that satisfies you; perhaps you haven't begun to develop your life as you secretly wish. If so, it certainly doesn't mean that it's all over. Personally, I believe that if you are open to new experiences, your time will come.

In closing: It is obvious to us as students that today's America is not the America that our parents grew up in. I believe that the American heritage will not survive in its present form. We can inherit the basic values from our parents, but they must be adapted and transformed to be meaningful in a changing society. This is the challenge for all of us students here tonight: as enter the world, we must become our own Americans, and build our own America.