DEMOCRACY AND A SELF-RELIANT CULTURE

By Henry M. Wriston

The future of democracy depends upon a self-reliant culture, and the achievement of that kind of culture is the central task of adult education: this is my thesis.

It may seem a peculiar moment to discuss either culture or democracy. Culture is apparently not very much in people's minds these days. As for democracy, it has become a standard pattern of speech to say that it is engaged in a last-ditch struggle for its life in Europe. We may remind ourselves that little more than twenty months ago we had "peace in our time," and that only last summer the late Senator Borah had better information than the Department of State on the likelihood of war. That laws made by politicians could keep us out of war has been asserted so often that people have come to accept the assertion as valid. But it should have been obvious from the first that the power of politics to maintain the peace is not enough. Neither appeasement on the part of England, nor abandonment of freedom of the seas by the United States, was of the slightest use.

Only a few short weeks ago there was a smug faith in a second line of defense—economics. The supremacy of the Allies in material resources seemed to make their victory only a matter of time and patience while the blockade did its relentless work. But now it is said that economic resources are not decisive unless they are translated into striking power. Economics follows politics over the dam as the decisive factor.

Today we put our faith in horses, so to speak, despite the warning that "an horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength." We have the Trojan horse in the form of the Fifth Column, Pegasus multiplied by fifty thousand in the air, the draft horses of the tanks. Force, striking power—that is all that counts. So Hitler tells his men that on their arms rests "the fate of the German nation for the next one thousand years." It is the current cliché in America that the future of western civilization in general, and of democracy in particular, hinges upon the outcome of the present conflict. Both sides seem to be agreed upon that point—and yet their agreement does not make it true. We may be reminded that Napoleon ruled Europe, that France was crushed in 1870, and that Germany was defeated in 1919. These military events had enormous consequences, and the military events of today will likewise have great consequence, but civilization did not rise or fall with them in the past, and will not do so now.

How does it happen that men say nothing of soul force, of moral stamina, of cultural continuity? Is it not clear that these things will count more in the long run than political maneuvers, economic factors, or physical force?
In dealing with adult education, I shall exclude training for the activities by which an adult seeks to improve his vocational efficiency, though I would not, even by inference, appear to deprecate such activity. Here, however, I am concerned, as I have said, with adult education as the pursuit of a self-reliant culture. This kind of adult education may be wholly unrelated to improvement in economic or social status, or to enrichment in any sense other than intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Its central objective is a mature grasp upon the issues of life. It recognizes the essential tragedy of life—that all richness of the mind; all wealth of personality; all sensitivity to beauty in music, art, and letters eventuate in death. This is the supreme issue that must be faced. Fear is the instant response: a self-reliant culture can not save us from death, but it may save us from the fear that makes death terrible.

In recent years our thinking upon this simple but essential point has been victimized by certain phrases. "Social security" is one of them. The procedures covered by that phrase may be good or bad depending upon their administration and many other factors irrelevant to this discussion. But the name, and the philosophy implicit in the name, are antithetical to all that will save democracy. The accent upon "security" is corrosive of the forces that make for democracy. By its very nature life can not be secure; we are never out of danger of death until we are dead. That is why the slogan "safety first" is misleading. Besides, we do not mean it. If safety were really our first consideration, we would not fly at all; we would not build cheaper cars to go at higher speed. The whole organization of our industry, which now puts production—not safety—first, would be altered. The fault is not in hedging some of life's hazards by insurance or by care; the fault is in pretending that we are abolishing the hazards when we are only hedging them. This pretense is not only dishonest: it is worse than that; it acts as a hypnotic, for under its influence men think they can escape the law of life instead of fulfilling it.

Equally unfortunate is the "social" of the phrase "social security," because it represents a retreat from faith in the individual. Once the individual is relegated to a secondary position and society is put first, totalitarianism is inevitably the outcome. If faith is pinned to political solutions, the domination of the individual by the state is only a matter of time.

When we speak of democracy, there is no way of escape from the individual as the factor of ultimate significance. That should be obvious. For democracy is, by definition, the form of political organization under which the state is the servant of the individual citizen and is obligated to do his bidding.

It seems to me equally obvious that the individual is paramount when we speak of culture. Without self-reliance there can be no culture. Any concept of culture that requires it to be propped up with external support, to be kept alive by artificial stimulation, to be freed of morbidity by gregariousness is a hopeless concept. Culture is an individual response to values. The mind concentrating on a work of art or a great book, or caught up in the intensity of some passage of ineffable beauty in music, is a mind responding as no other mind ever has responded or ever will respond again in all the history of the world. Walt Whitman touched this individuality of response with a poet's insight:
We consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not divine. I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still. It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life.

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it. (Did you think it was in the white or gray stone? or the lines of the arches and cornices?)

All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments. It is not the violins and the cornets, it is not the oboe nor the beating drums, not the score of the baritone singer singing his sweet romanza, nor that of the men’s chorus, nor that of the women’s chorus, it is nearer and farther than they.

There is no false emphasis here upon facts; the reality is in the sense of values, and values can never be a group possession. They are utterly individual even when individuals approximate a common ideal.

We all recognize that the widespread vogue of a popular song is a sure indication of its ephemeral character. It is too thin to stand so much wear and tear. It contributes nothing to a self-reliant culture. Similarly, the purchase of three pounds of fiction in order not to be out of step with three hundred thousand other people can not be the road to such a culture. The determined pursuit of the ten best sellers is not a way to express self-reliance. Self-reliance should mean precisely what the words imply. It should represent the exercise of one’s own matured taste and should involve the free choice of things new or old, things popular or unpopular, things meaningful to many or to few.

It needs to be said that there is no short cut to our objectives—democracy or self-reliance or culture. One of the reasons for current discouragement is the failure to recognize this simple and, indeed, obvious fact. It should also be said that, though much of what was written, especially on technical subjects, a hundred or fifty or even ten years ago, has little utility today, nevertheless true wisdom, the fruit of an intelligent mind activated by a high heart, is an enduring value. It is not made irrelevant or obsolete by changes in industry or the political structure, or by any other environmental change; no, not even by disastrous defeat in war. There is cultural continuity in the midst of material change.

It may be objected that this self-reliant culture can never be attained by the millions; and this is an objection easy to sustain. Of course not everyone will be self-reliant, and some will never in all their days be wise. Some people will not participate to the theoretical limit in any aspect of life. But they will respond to the leadership of those who do. Our natural leaders, the men and women who have a clear point of view and a deep and abiding purpose, exercise an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. And if they practice and preach the virtue of self-reliance, and if their purpose is democratic, then our institutions will be stabilized and enriched.

III

There is much that is relevant to my subject to be said about leaders and leadership. It is sheer nonsense to suppose that democracy ceases to be democracy if there is cultural leadership or social leadership or economic leadership or political leadership. The conception of democracy as reducing all to the level of the lowest is absurd. As a little leaven in the lump may ultimately lighten it all, so also a relatively small number of persons of intelligence, of integrity, of sensitive appreciations, of spiritual insight, of emotional balance, and of deep conviction may raise the level of a whole society.
That figure of the leaven is worth thinking about from another point of view. For leadership, like leaven, may be hidden; it need not always be conspicuous. It need not always be vocal. Often it will not even be self-conscious. Its wisdom does not necessarily come from books or scholars. The man who has wrestled with the soil and has learned at first hand the ways of nature, who has looked at the stars and reflected upon human destiny, may achieve a homely wisdom which is the essence of self-reliant culture, and one of the finest manifestations of adult education. There are those who can hear more in the whispers of the wind than others will learn sitting at the feet of Gamaliel. There are still those who lift their eyes unto the hills from whence cometh our help, and who attain perspective, physical and moral, intellectual and spiritual, through that experience. There are many such, and they will exercise a quiet influence in their communities. They will bring sanity in place of hysteria; they will use judgment in place of passion; they will maintain the fabric of the world.

We of the schools could make no more disastrous error than to confuse knowledge with wisdom, or the stuff of books with the substance of understanding. When, therefore, I hear someone lamenting, as I heard an expert lament the other day, that a self-reliant culture is impossible because the average mental age is between ten and twelve years, I am moved to ask why we should be more powerfully influenced in our hopes and fears by some pseudo-scientific verbal formula than by actual experience.

As I thought on this defeatist spirit touching culture and democracy in America, there came to my mind a conversation that I had with a Norwegian gardener in the Hardanger district last summer. With a primitive kind of scraper he was digging the grass out of the gravel path in front of the hotel at the end of a calm and beautiful fjord. He had had very little formal schooling. He had learned English by listening to the radio. In terms of money, the house he lived in, the plumbing in the house; in short, in terms of any of the material standards that we so commonly accept, he would unquestionably have been glibly classified as "one of the underprivileged." But in his comments there was sanity, a lucid and penetrating simplicity; there was wisdom. Perhaps he was one of the men of Norway described by Leland Stowe as "too civilized" to resist the German invader. Yet I have no doubt that, when the echoes of bombs no longer shatter the silence of his quiet home, he will be one of those who will defeat the gloomy prophecies of social and moral and intellectual disintegration. And when, in the course of time, the democratic process can reassert itself in his native country, he will be both its justification and its guarantee.

One other notable educational experience of last summer pointed the same moral. In the little hamlet of Fynshav on the island of Als in Denmark, long owned by Germany and now again in German hands, there was a school building which might have passed for a barracks, except that it was made beautiful by gardens planted and tended by the students. With cots and benches inherited from the last war, with equipment that would make a schoolhouse in the Ozarks seem elaborate, a folk high school was operating under the inspiration of Bishop Grundtvig, though he has long been dead. A man and his wife constituted the entire faculty and staff of the school—save for cook and bottle washer. The students were adults. I have no
doubt that if those students had been given an intelligence test, the results, interpreted, as they generally are, without intelligence, would have been utterly disheartening to a "modern" educator. And a sociologist, looking at their threetiered bunks and their plain and well-worn clothing; observing the primitive nature of their life; estimating their limited economic prospects, would probably have damned the entire student body as underprivileged.

Any standardizing agency in America would have refused that school a place on its approved list. Neither the headmaster nor his wife had a Doctor of Philosophy degree or its "equivalent." Neither of them would have been given a certificate to teach in any state of this Union. The school had not enough books, not enough laboratory equipment, not enough of anything that could be counted or measured. The students had only three or four months to spend in school—not time enough to permit of any substantial achievement that could be tested, measured, calipered, set forth in terms of coefficients of correlation, regression equations, Sigma scores, and "probable errors."

But those in charge, never having been introduced to the bewildering marvels of "scientific" education, blissfully ignored them. Not knowing enough to judge their pupils dolts, they treated them with respect instead of condescension. Not realizing that these adults had no economic outlets for what they learned, they instructed them with enthusiasm instead of pity. Knowing nothing of "guidance"—that last refuge of the confused educator—they offered inspiring leadership.

I heard those students sing; they sang with freshness and with feeling that came from the heart. I saw their handicrafts, not made to sell, not made to give them vocational skill, but made to give expression to an innate sense of beauty which false standards had not overlaid. Although I could not understand his words, I could not mistake the depth and the earnestness, the sincerity and the passion with which that undertrained and underpaid man-of-all-work, the head of the folk school, discussed the history and the poetry, the traditions and the culture of Denmark.

The object of that school was a self-reliant culture. Its students will never attain to the full stature of manhood, as measured by possession of a Ford, a radio, and a bathtub, which was the standard set by one of our foremost industrialists in 1929 as the ideal for the salvation of Poland. But by a different standard those Danish students have great significance, for they have a deep and abiding faith in themselves, they have a sane approach to life and its realities. And I suggest that democracy will find a surer foundation upon those qualities than upon the materialistic trivia of which we chatter so interminably.

I am not suggesting that the illustrations I have given show the only road to a self-reliant culture. I have known many a Yankee farmer with the same qualities of shrewdness, tolerance, common sense, and wisdom that marked the Norwegian gardener. I am not suggesting that we should establish folk high schools upon Bishop Grundtvig's pattern. The virtue and the effectiveness of his schools arose from their indigenous character. But I am insisting that the spiritual and cultural potentialities of men and women can not be gauged by formal and pseudo-scientific measurements. Indeed, these measurements often blind us to the deep cultural urge that has marked the experience of the race.
Only as knowledge falls into its right perspective, and wisdom emerges from a fog of words and phrases, can we attain a yet broader and more genuinely self-reliant culture. One has but to listen to the radio to realize that Americans already know more worthless things than do any other people on the surface of the globe. But we have not yet learned that "to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." I say it is a barrier to culture to put "In God We Trust" upon our coinage, but never upon our schoolhouses. We exclude from the schools the greatest piece of literature mankind has ever known, on the ground that it is partisan; and then we worry because our schools do not teach patriotism, which is partisan by definition.

Today the proponents of "general education," which has become the new hypnotic slogan, talk about "the facts necessary for everyday living," but they do not dare to speak in terms of values. The spiritual life goes wholly unrecognized; cultural values appear only by inference and with apology. Many aspects of the urge to promote general education are self-defeating, and for the very reasons that I have indicated. Until we sincerely believe that life is more than meat and the body than raiment, we shall continue to be defeatist in our fundamental thinking and defensive in our educational procedures.

Our defeat today is the defeat of inflated hopes and distorted values. The objectives that we have failed to reach—such objectives as evangelization of the world in a generation, or a "world safe for democracy"—were not real; they were only mirages. The false pride of yesterday and the sense of defeat today are both antithetical to culture. The boastful age was self-reliant, but it was not the fruit of culture; the current age is neither. Culture, if it means anything, means effectively coming to terms with life as it exists, seeking out its riches, refining the gold from the dross. We shall get forward toward that goal faster if we adapt our hopes to the rhythm of history. The troubles in the world today are neither the worst nor the least that men have ever faced. War and poverty, ignorance and disease, are old foes—and stubborn. We can conquer them by no lightning campaign, as once we dreamed, but only by patience and persistence.

Beneath all the shallow alternation of pride and defeatism that has marked our generation, one fact remains: our potentialities for a self-reliant culture as a basis for the democratic process are all but unique. We have a long and solid tradition of personal independence and rugged individualism; self-reliance is a basic part of our great inheritance. We have relative leisure; there are machines to take the load from even the humblest backs. Compared with the rest of mankind we have wealth; there is money for books and music and art if we choose to spend it for those things. Our women are free—to learn, to work, to do as they choose. Our children are bound by no social caste system; between childhood and maturity many an American has crossed the tracks. In few places do social barriers drop more readily. There is no evidence that our people have not their fair share of native intelligence. With intelligence as the foundation and with opportunity and incentive, there is no reason we should not make progress toward a self-reliant culture.

The democratic process is not the rule of the majority; it is not submission to the rule of the majority; it is not even the rule of the majority with emphasis upon the protection of the rights of the
minority. The democratic process is not any of those things. The essence of the democratic process is the individual as a moral, intellectual, and social integer, expressing his powers with the maximum of freedom and the minimum of restraint, with the accent upon accommodation and consensus rather than upon plan or enforcement. Democracy does not rest upon governmental forms or upon constitutional provisions. Its reality and effectiveness are dependent upon the self-reliance of the citizens. Its quality is the reflection of their cultural maturity.