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CULTURAL SELF-RELIANCE AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Address by
HENRY MERRITT WRISTON
President of Brown University

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It is a peculiar moment to speak of either culture or democracy. Culture does not seem to be in people's minds very much. As for democracy, it has become a standard pattern of speech to say it is fighting a last ditch struggle for its life. We may remind ourselves that it is only twenty-one months ago that we had "peace in our time", that only last summer the late Senator Borah had better information than the Department of State on the likelihood of war, that when war came his phrase about a "phony war" won wide-spread use. It has been asserted so often that people have believed that laws made by politicians could keep us out of war! Politics is forever washing the outside of the cup! The power of politics to maintain the peace is not enough—and that should have been obvious from the first. 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—economic power. We were given statistics about oil and rubber and other commodities, discussions regarding the condition of Russian and German railroads, ice in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Danube—and a thousand other things which now seem unreal. 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. Public officials in America betray acute alarm over the condition of our productive resources. Economics follows politics over the dam as the decisive factor.

Now we are urged to put our faith, so to speak, in horses, despite the warning that "an horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength." Yet we have the Trojan horse in the form
of the Fifth Column, Pegasus 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 great battle now raging. Both sides seem to be agreed upon the point—but that does not make it true. We may be reminded that Napoleon ruled Europe, that France was beaten in 1870 and Germany crushed in 1919. These military events had enormous consequences, but civilization did not rise or fall with them.

How does it happen that men say nothing of soul force, of moral stamina, of cultural continuity which will count more in the long run than political maneuvers, economic factors, or physical force? It is my thesis today that the future of democracy depends upon a self-reliant culture, and that the achievement of that kind of culture is the task of education, both in college and elsewhere.

The central objective of education is a mature grasp upon the issues of life. It should recognize the essential tragedy of life, and seek to master it. We know that all the richness of mind, all the wealth of personality, all the talent for appreciation of art and music and letters—in short all the aspects of a self-reliant culture—eventuate in death. That is the issue which must be faced. Fear is the instant response: a self-reliant culture cannot save us from what we fear, but can save us from the fear that makes it terrible. The conquest of fear by confronting reality and coming to terms with it upon a positive basis constitutes the business of education. Physically, man can alter his environment, but he cannot overcome it. Spiritually, however, he not only can overcome his environment, but he must; otherwise there is no meaning in the educative process.

In recent years our thinking upon this essential point has been victimized by certain slogans. "Social security" is one. Like other slogans, it is designed as a hypnotic, to destroy independence of thought and canalize our ideas. With the substance of the procedures covered by the phrase I am not concerned. They may be good or bad depending upon their administration, their solvency, and many other factors
irrelevant to this discussion. But the name and the philosophy implicit in the name are antithetical to all that may save democracy, or make it a vital force. The accent upon “social” represents a retreat from faith in the individual. Once the individual is relegated to a secondary position and society is put first, totalitarianism is the inevitable consequence. You have pinned your faith in political solutions and engrossment by the state is on its way.

Equally the accent upon “security” is corrosive of the forces that make for democracy. By its very nature life cannot be secure; you are never out of danger of death until you are safely dead. A corollary of this dishonest word “security” is another slogan, “safety first”. It is obvious we do not mean it. If we meant it, we would not fly at all, we would not build cheaper cars to go at higher speeds—all the accent upon speed would disappear. Even in industry it is production first, safety somewhere behind.

The fault is not in hedging some of life’s physical hazards by insurance or by care; the fault is in pretending that you are abolishing them instead of hedging them. That is dishonest, but it is even worse; it is a hypnotic by which men are led to hope for escape from the law of life instead of its fulfillment.

Whether you speak of democracy or of culture there is no way to escape from the individual as the factor of ultimate significance. That should be obvious so far as democracy is concerned. For democracy is that form of political organization by which the state is the servant of the individual citizen and is obligated to do his bidding.

It seems to me equally obvious when we speak of culture. Without self-reliance there can be no such thing. Culture is an individual response to values. The mind on a great book, the mind on a true work of art, or upon nature, the whole being caught up in the intensity of some passage of ineffable beauty in music, is a mind responding like no other in the world, either then, or before, or ever again, and is not only an intellectual but a cultural integer. 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 the sense of values, and values can never be a group possession. They are utterly individual even when many individuals approximate a common ideal.

It needs to be said that there is no short cut to any of our objectives—democracy, self-reliance, or culture. One of the reasons for current discouragements is the failure to recognize this simple, and, indeed, obvious fact. The achievement of culture is no short-run objective. There is a quality of immediacy, and consequently an ephemeral character, in technical information. It is speedily out of date. Little that was written in some fields one hundred years ago, or fifty years ago in other fields, or even a decade ago in yet other regions of knowledge has much utility today. Indeed, so rapidly do relevant facts pass into obsolescence that we have a sense of change in the world that is not wholly warranted. For wisdom, the fruit of an intelligent mind activated by a high heart, is not made irrelevant or obsolete by changes in the political structure, in the economic scene, or any other environmental change—even disastrous defeat in war. That is why the conspicuous changes technology makes in our lives are often essentially superficial,
while the well-springs of life are not deeply affected. There is cultural continuity in the midst of material change.

It may be objected that this individualistic kind of culture cannot be attained by the millions. That is the sort of objection one would anticipate from the citizen of Chicago who over half a century ago agreed that his city had never gone in for culture, but when it did, it would make culture hum. No one has ever made it hum yet, but that is no reason for proclaiming defeat. Of course not everyone will be self-reliant, and some will never be wise. Some people will never participate to the theoretical limit in any aspect of life. But they will respond to the leadership of those who do. Those who have a clear point of view, a deep and abiding purpose, exercise an influence out of all proportion to their numbers. And if their point of view is that of self-reliance, and their purpose is democratic, our institutions will be stabilized and enriched.

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 leveling all down to the lowest is absurd; it cannot be justified by the work of any of the great theorists who have discussed democracy nor any of the practitioners who have made it a vivid force in the life of mankind. As a little leaven mixed in the lump may ultimately influence it all, so also a relatively small number of persons of intelligence, of integrity, of sensitive appreciations, of spiritual insight, of emotional balance, and deep conviction may also leaven the lump.

That figure is worth thinking about from another point of view. Like hidden leaven, leadership need not always be conspicuous. It need not always be vocal. Often it will not be self-conscious. The wisdom of this quiet leaven may not even come from books or men of the schools. We ought to be both humbled by the thought and grateful for the fact that the colleges do not bear this burden alone. 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 education in one of its finest mani-
festations. 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 those, like the boy in Padraic Colum's beautiful stories of *The Boy Who Knew What the Birds Said*, who learn more listening to them than to discussions of the Townsend Plan at a public forum. There are still some 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 though "in the assembly they shall not mount on high, they shall not sit on the seat of the judge . . . neither shall they declare instruction and judgment," nevertheless, in their communities they will exercise a quiet influence. They will bring sanity in place of hysteria; they will use judgment in place of passion; they will play their part in maintaining the fabric of the world.

We of the schools could make no more terrible error than to confuse formal instruction with wisdom and the stuff from books with the substance of understanding. When, therefore, I hear someone lamenting, as I heard an expert the other day, that a self-reliant culture was impossible because the average mental age was 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 the experience of the race.

As I thought on this defeatist spirit touching culture and democracy in America, there came inescapably to my mind the conversation 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 of the little garden in front of the hotel at the end of a calm and beautiful fjord. His formal schooling had consisted of very little. He had learned English by listening to the radio. In terms of money, in terms of opportunity, in terms of housing and plumbing, in short, in terms of any of the material standards which we so commonly accept, he would indubitably be damned with those glib hypnotic words, "one of the underprivileged." But in his comments there was sanity, a lucid and penetrating simplicity; there was wisdom. Perhaps he was one of those described by Leland Stowe as "too civilized" effectively to resist the German invader. Certainly he was not equipped for blitzkrieg.
But surely also, when the echoes of bombs no longer shatter the silence of his quiet home, he will be the one, if any, to defeat the gloomy prophecies of social and moral and intellectual disintegration. He will be one who will maintain the fabric of the world. He will be lost neither in cynicism nor utopian schemes of revolution. Never having misinterpreted life as a joyride or a world's fair, never having fled from reality, he will not have lost his bearings in a sea of trouble. 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 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 pass for a barrack, except that it was made beautiful by gardens and planting provided by the students. With cots and benches inherited from the last war, with equipment which 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 were the principal and the faculty and the business manager and the housekeeper and the gardener and whatever else you may think of—save for cook and bottle washer. They had about them peasant students. I have no doubt that if they had been given an intelligence test, the results, interpreted, as is customary, wholly without intelligence, would have been so disheartening that their education would have seemed to be hopeless and would never have been attempted. As one looked at their three-tiered bunks and saw their plain and well-worn clothing, the primitive nature of their life, and their limited economic prospects, they also would be damned as underprivileged. It would have seemed to the educational technicians who have so captured our imagination that these students needed not culture but a trade—that energy should not have been put upon spiritual orientation but upon vocational skill.

Any standardizing agency in America would drop such a school from its approved list. Its faculty had not enough degrees, not even the "equivalent" of a doctor of philosophy degree. Neither the headmaster nor his wife could meet the formal requirements for a teacher's
certificate 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 poor benighted students with such slender intelligence, such hopeless economic prospects, had only three or four or five months to spend in the school. That would not permit of any substantial achievement which could be tested, measured, calipered, set forth in terms of coefficients of correlation, regression equations, Sigma scores, and "probable errors". It is an axiom of our system that learning which is incapable of such magnificent demonstrations verily cannot exist.

But those in charge, never having been introduced to the bewildering marvels of "scientific" education, blissfully neglected them. Not knowing enough to know their pupils were dolts, they treated them with respect instead of condescension. Not realizing their pupils 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. And the response defies the statisticians who rule so many of our educational procedures.

I heard those students sing; they sang with beauty and with freshness that comes 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, made to give an outlet to human energies not engrossed by the scramble for power and money. 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 school, discussed the history and the poetry, the traditions and the culture of Denmark.

"Predict the tides—
But still the mind goes free,
Unhindered by the moon,
Untaught by prophecy,
Yet holding vastness in its cell
Like captive oceans in a shell."
Forecast the wind—
But still the heart shall go
Through wider spaces of the sky
Than wind can ever know
And by imagination draw near
The spindle of this turning sphere.

Foretell the rain,
Snow, sun and hail—
But we the unpredicted ones
May climb to pinacles and fail
Without a chart unless we find
The secret weathers of the mind.”

That teacher knew more of the secret weathers of the mind than educational technicians could ever tell him.

The objective of the school, as of the historic liberal college in America, was a self-reliant culture, and experience has shown that schools of both types stimulate it, that their former students have maintained the fabric of democracy. Even though the tide of terror has rolled over the quiet countryside of Denmark, we may well be reminded that it has rolled before. And I must predict that until mankind comes to a standard of values more nearly theirs than ours, war will roll over that land again and yet again. They were powerless to resist it, for physical force was denied them. They were inadequate in numbers. Their resources were of the mind and the spirit, not of material things. There was not a strategic hill, even, for them to defend. As a German officer scornfully said, “They could be conquered over the telephone.” However, the many years of earlier German rule did not make the people less Danish, and unless they stay submerged for more than two generations, what they got in that school, which by American standards was an incredible school, will survive in them and their children. Those students will never attain to the full stature of manhood as measured by a Ford, a radio, and a bathtub which were set by one of our foremost industrialists as the ideal for the salvation of Poland only a decade ago. But by a different standard they may have more significance, for they have a deep
and abiding faith in themselves, a sane approach to life and its realities. I suggest that democracy will find a surer foundation upon those qualities than upon the materialistic trivia of which we chatter so interminably.

As I read the *American White Paper*, with a mounting sense of indignation I learned how one of our "policy makers" recorded his "feeling of seeing a civilization breaking, of seeing it dying before its actual death." Musing upon the magnificent arrogance of this banality, it seemed the fruit of overemphasis upon knowledge and intellectual power, and a lack of cultural perspective, knowledge without wisdom. I suspect that Norwegian gardener with his earthy wisdom and the self-reliant Danes searching for values see it in better perspective. I doubt that any of them would be so ignorantly despairing as to say, "We are ending our death watch over Europe." Perhaps they have not taken freedom so much for granted, and are more patient as they wait its fulfillment.

I am not suggesting that these illustrations show the only road to a self-reliant culture. Far from it: I am seeking only to indicate that the defeatist assumption that culture is impossible for the millions is not borne out by experience. 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 we should hustle out and establish folk high schools upon Bishop Grundtvig's pattern. The virtue and the effectiveness of his schools, as of the American college of liberal arts, arose from their indigenous character. But I am insisting that the spiritual and cultural potentialities of men and women cannot be gauged by economic opportunities, by years in school, or by any other formal and pseudo-scientific measurements. Indeed, these often blind us to the deep cultural urge which has marked the experience of the race.

Only as knowledge falls into its right perspective and wisdom emerges from a fog of terms can we attain a yet broader and more genuinely self-reliant culture. One has only to listen to the radio to realize that Americans already know more things that do not amount to anything than any other people on the face of the globe. But we have not yet learned that "to fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." We exclude
from the schools the greatest piece of literature mankind has known on the ground that it is partisan, and then worry because our schools do not teach patriotism, which is partisan by definition. It is a barrier to culture to have public officials tell us that our economic system has broken down; to have sociologists in a government survey tell us that our social system has broken down; and politicians tell us that there is an invisible government by business.

Today the proponents of general education, that shoddy, synthetic substitute for liberal education, 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 those very reasons. Until we sincerely believe that life is more than meat and the body than raiment, public education will continue to be defeatist in its fundamental thinking and defensive in its fundamental procedures.

If culture has ever been based upon defeatist assumptions and negative gestures, much less a self-reliant culture, then my reading of history has been worthless. There was talk, a few years ago, of clearing the money changers from the temple. One set was driven out only to be replaced by a new and more raucous group, whose materialistic interpretation of life, whose jaded and diminished faith in the essential solvency of democracy, whose hope to drown our troubles in a sea of expenditures, whose attempt to make small change by having us live in a philatelic paradise are all part of the record. Who, in the last decade, has dared to say the one thing essential to a self-reliant culture as the foundation of democracy,—"The kingdom of God is within you." When the day to raise our voices in thanksgiving to Almighty God is selected with an eye to the retail grocery trade and Christmas shopping, we have a point of view which is morally bankrupt, and culturally incredible.

Such distortions in values twist everything until it is seen wrong end to. It is for this reason that progress brings fear instead of courage. Each instrument we forge terrorizes us, and each new tool becomes a menace. The first mass intelligence test was the Army Alpha; its positive features are forgotten; the real effect was to convince us against
all experience that we are a nation of morons. Army physical examinations proved we are a race with flat feet. The Wasserman test proves that syphilis will get you if you don't watch out. We have had mad talk of a holiday for science. The chairman of the Temporary National Economic Committee proposes a law to penalize the use of labor-saving machinery and applauds the President's call for 50,000 airplanes a year—doubtless to be made in ladies' sewing circles! Business is afraid of government, and government of business. Unemployment is incurable but will bankrupt us if it does not bring revolution first. The schools and colleges have failed us!

All these are partly reactions from delusions of grandeur that were but lately with us. In my college days the most popular religious speakers were boldly proclaiming "the evangelization of the world in this generation,"—a religious blitzkrieg! Not long afterward Wilson put in currency a whole set of utopian phrases—like "a world safe for democracy"; then an American promoted "the outlawry of war" and its renunciation as an instrument of national policy; and we were to have, you may remember, a chicken in every pot. These objectives were all as unreal as the current sense of defeat. Why should anyone expect the evangelization of the world in one generation? Had twenty centuries lived in vain, waiting for us to do overnight what saints of the church had given their lives to do? Why should anyone suppose that scratches on a piece of paper would lay an effective prohibition upon greed and lust for power any more than a constitutional amendment could control thirst? Why people who had never known chicken should take it for their diet no one told us. Are better food and better clothing the measures of good life? Why democracy should be made safe for atrophy does not appear in the record.

Our defeat today is the defeat of inflated hopes and distorted values. The objectives we failed to reach were not real, but only mirages. Either mood—that of false pride or that of defeat—is antithetical to culture. The boastful age was self-reliant, but 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 much faster
if we adapt our hopes to the rhythm of history. The troubles in the world today are neither the worst nor the least men have faced before. 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. The tempo is well described by Captain Andre Chanson in his *Quatre Mois*, a diary of four months at the front. He looks with courage to a future in which France moves "with her peasant’s stride—reasonable and balanced even in her fury.” There is nothing grandiloquent about that, nothing about making culture hum, but there is something sane, and self-reliant—and stable. Insofar as that is true there is something of value for the democratic tradition.

Beneath all the shallow alternation of pride and defeatism which 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 the long and solid tradition of personal independence and rugged individualism, nourished by all the frontiers of American life—geographical and industrial. There is a basic self-reliance as part of our great inheritance. We have relative leisure; there are machines to take the load even from the humblest backs, slaves to do our bidding and leave us freedom. Relative to the rest of mankind we have wealth, money for books and music and art if we choose to spend it for those things. The women are free, free to learn, free to work, free to do as they choose. Our children are bound by no social caste system; many a man has crossed the tracks between childhood and maturity. In few places do social barriers drop more readily. Relative to the rest of mankind there is no evidence that our people have not their fair share of native intelligence. Our institutions of learning have libraries and laboratories, buildings and equipment, learned faculties and capable students. With intelligence as the foundation and with a passion to fulfill the law of life as our 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. The democratic process is not submission to the rule of the majority. The democratic process 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 plan or enforcement. It 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.

The Charter of this institution opens with a magnificent phrase: "Whereas institutions for liberal education are highly beneficial to society, by forming the rising generation to virtue, knowledge, and useful literature." It goes on to declare, "That into this liberal and catholic institution shall never be admitted any religious tests," and guarantees "full, free, absolute, and uninterrupted liberty of conscience." It comes to a climax: "above all, a constant regard be paid to, and effectual care taken of the morals of the College."

There is not a weak or defensive word in the document, though it was drafted in an age of war and difficulty. There is no inference that political solutions are the real path to progress, but the clearest recognition that the citizens make the government, not the state the citizen. There is no hint of economic determinism. Even in discharging the offices of life, the stated goals are usefulness and repute. There is no reference to force at all; there was no need to tell our founders that the decisions of arms are transient—that the wills of men are stronger than steel, that the hearts of men are stouter than horses.

Brown University was dedicated, by its Charter, to a self-reliant culture. As we fulfill the stipulations and the promises of that instrument we justify the faith of the founders; we achieve a self-reliant culture; we maintain and strengthen the fabric of the democratic process.