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Lovell, John, Jr., - 1944 (typescript)

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Dear Mr President:

Since my last newsletter much water has run under the bridge, and perhaps the bridge has changed, too, a few times. For the past few months, I have not been an office worker, but a teacher. Teaching here—thank goodness—is not fundamentally different from teaching at Howard. Some of my friends are surprised at that statement. When they are, I casually remind them (without my tongue in my cheek) that "you teach people, my dears, not subjects. People are lots more alike, in brain and heart, than subject matter and materials." They think I'm being facetious, but I mean it.

Your first realization that you are teaching people (in this particular game) comes when you first try to make yourself understood by people of limited vocabulary but varying degrees of understanding. Some of them are possessed of great understanding. And the fact that they have limited vocabulary reminds you of traversing a narrow approach to a great building. If you can just get into the building—

Then, their vocabularies are not nearly as limited as they seem. I often start a new group by discovering what field is the greatest common denominator among them, and working that field for a few minutes, or an hour. Take automobile mechanics, for example. Say, you have a class of 15 people, 9 of whom have driven cars and have had to "doctor" their cars. They know an automobile as an anatomist knows the human body. A crankshaft, a piston ring, a clutch facing, the action of the spark are all as clear to them as day. And they can use most familiarly terms that you must think about, and place in your mind. From there, the only thing you have to do is remind them how large their stock of words really is (how important they are—they who have been taught to think of themselves as so unimportant) and how necessary it is for them to join in the cooperative enterprise of learning how to identify the main body of their word-stock through letters and sounds so that they can completely control the situation. Most of them are heartily of your opinion and are soon of your determination.

Another interesting phase of the orientation you learn from them is their opinions and beliefs and their inordinate desire for reassurance from someone who is supposed to have some authority in the subject. As I told you before, there are five levels, ranging from complete illiterates (IA) through the four beginning grades of school (I, II, III, IV). Opinions as such a re supposed to be in Levels III and IV. Partly at my own request, I have taught only on Levels IA, I, and II, but opinions and ideals have played a large part in my classes. These men are concerned about the nature of things and life, about the Army and its intentions (honorable or dishonorable), about race and color (most violently), about post-war opportunity, especially as it concerns the guarantee to them of jobs and positions where they and their families may grow and prosper. They don't want just money, for some of them have already been making lots more than you were paying me, Mr President. They want
the elusive, somewhat vague (in their own minds) things they have already tried to buy with money, and failed. They don't quite know what these things are, but they are pretty sure that they exist, and they are determined to supply such things for their families and themselves. The fruits of education and the war are pretty concrete so far as they are concerned. I wonder if that's what you mean when you say you must see things through the eyes of a little child. Do we theoreticians see security and peace and equality and struggle and freedom-to-work-for-one's-own-new-world through the eyes of these far-sighted children?

Of course, you have many in the gang who (partly because of their sense of inferiority, deeply ingrained by a social system) are stalling. They know that men are discharged from the Army for the lack of capacity to absorb learning. They see civilian life as a haven for them—a place shady and relaxed because devoid of competition—and they think they want to go back. I have detected no real pacifist strain among them, outside of the feeling that war is a pretty dangerous business for the people who fight it. Their efforts to show their dumbness and stupidity are pitiful, and they often demonstrate (in the process) powers that cause them to be assigned out (non-literate) to an Army career much worse than that of the regular soldier. They are going to be just as much a problem in our post-war world as they are now. They are the people who love darkness rather than light, and we aren't going to let them stay that way.

The tests at the end of each level are standardized by the Adjutant General's office. Many of the teachers believe the goodness of their teaching depends on the number of their men who pass. They therefore give every possible assistance to their men to get them the right answers. This practice is generally discouraged by the Education Office, although it means slower progress for the Unit. Interesting thing about that whole business, though, is that so many teachers have almost no conception of the kind of mustard seed this Unit is. They don't seem to realize what a powerful growth may result and will result from this kind of infinitesimal beginning. Perhaps I'm at the extreme of being too warm on the subject; but I confidently expect this intensive experiment in adult education of benighted people in the United States to have consequences terrific beyond imagination. I confess I'm watching it with all the eyes I have. And every time I get a chance to slide in anything about voting, or holding up one's head, or making up one's mind to a self-respecting way of life, or developing one's ideals along concrete paths, I do it. I jump at it. I'm not always sure the Army would approve, but I take that chance. On the other hand, I find the discussion of such things (not too protracted) an excellent motivation for learning.

The cadre here are most interesting. Teachers have been selected from the highest calibre of educated men the Army affords, and there are literally dozens of them. I do not think I have ever seen so many promising young Negroes in one place. But many of them are already disillusioned and are interested in the school as a means of staying away from combat and for practically no other reason. In its broadest implications, this may be one of the great dangers of the war. In view of the fact that we need leadership more than other people because of the backwardness of our position, the poisoning of our leadership through disillusion and cynicism—poisoning at the source (because
these are young men. This disillusion and hardened infidelity, superinduced by bad treatment as Negroes, is worse than in peace times, for these men work under higher tension and care less for their objectives than do civilians.

The head of the educational program is a Captain from Hartford, Connecticut, who is a very striking personality. I'll have to tell you about him some time. Though not quite as well-informed on Negroes and the strain of their existence (as compared to the general strain of existence) as he might be, he is a most sincere and conscientious person. Before coming here, he had helped organize Negroes for voting in Hartford, and he is well-informed on certain specific phases of Negro life in America. He seems to have considerable respect for the educability of Negroes, both on the higher-education and the low-literacy levels. To hear him speak, once aroused by something that outrages his social or personal conscience, is to hear something "sho' nuff." He can sing like Malindy. And he can move even the cynics to thoughtful consideration of his points.

Personal experiences that might titillate you, or amuse you a little, I shall have to save for another time.

I want to talk a little now about Howard. I have been terribly disappointed over the fact that no faculty member has seen fit to pick up the program of student relations where I left off. It seems that teachers still believe that education can be conducted by leading some machines through classroom paces and turning them out (with perhaps a prayer) to a world full of tricky cross-currents. I would certainly not insist that the program of the past 2 or 3 years was the only program; but for the College to be lacking some definite and moving program in that general emphasis seems to me tragic—especially in view of all that's happening in the world. I doubt that the college of the future can stay alive without such emphasis. Or, if alive, it may perhaps (like the medieval church) lose some of its most precious functions and opportunities and become a form, dying through a thousand years.

Especially am I perturbed about the fate of the University Assembly. I am informed that Dean Price has cooled on it, that Dean Lawson made every effort to deny it the use of any and all music facilities. Very recently, I was told that the young lady who has been one of the two mainstays of the whole work centering in the Assembly, both when I was there and since, was "relieved" of her job through a coalition of Mr Edmonds and Dr Meenes of the Scholarship Committee.

I know that some of these reports are exaggerated, but I hope that you are not in sympathy with their general trend. As you have seen this year, a few students were willing to pursue the drudgery and hazards necessary to carry on, even in the absence of faculty leadership. From what I have been told, their efforts were not entirely in vain, and several of their projects met with considerable success. You remember that we both agreed that the ultimate goal of the student stimulation program was to have students carry it, though we did not anticipate their taking over until they were well-prepared. It was unfortunate that they had to take over so soon, but their taking over at all is some tribute to their faith in the program. I think their efforts should certainly be encouraged and prolonged—and by you,
Mr. President, who can encourage and prolong effectively.

Miss Jackson, the young lady who was "fired" by Mr. Edmonds, and again by Dr. Meenes because she holds a University scholarship, is a specialist in the work who cannot be replaced—and certainly not at this stage, not until she has trained her successor. She was working on the third issue of the Student Directory when told of her replacement. She is the only person who can provide a continuity of the program, even in the slightest degree, to next year. She is a "Magna Cum Laude" student, thoroughly worthy, with no black marks of any kind on her record. Will you please write Mr. Edmonds and Dr. Meenes and ask them to make an exception in her case, in view of the unique circumstances? If you like, you might confer with her to reassure yourself. She is Miss Marjorie Jackson, of Crandall Hall. Incidentally, she will finish Howard in 1945, in three years.

In my limited time off—very limited time off—I am doing all I can to keep the plans going. I expect to take a 4-day furlough soon, and I expect to use a good bit of it conferring on next year's program with whatever persons are available at the time. Miss Jackson should work at least until the first of July, and the first of August if she can—and she should begin again, as she did last year, in September. And, Mr. President, she works!

Oh yes, I hope you haven't forgot the Assembly program in the budget. If we can keep the thread going for the duration, we will have something very substantial to expand on. Please agree with me on that. If necessary, I'll get a pass from these people here and come in and talk the matter out with you. As you can see, I'm terribly upset about it. I hope you're just as upset.

Many, many thanks for facilitating that check. My present salary is most disappointing, as you can guess. Although I'm a corporal now (and expect to be another rank before the end of the month), I do not draw enough to permit any extravagance. My only seeming extravagance has been a few plays in New York. I must keep my hand up with the American drama, which as you recall has been my main interest at Howard for 8 or 10 years. I'm making notes, keeping scrapbooks, and plotting and planning in the field like a thief. The next time you're in New York, you must see THE SEARCHING WIND, Lillian Hellman's latest play, and get into a big argument we've been having on it. The subject is the way fascism can come to a country even though the people are thoroughly decent and self-respecting and doing "all they're supposed to."

And oh yes, THEATRE ARTS is publishing on May 19 an article of mine entitled "Shakespeare's American Play." It's a background study of the Robeson Othello, and is (I understand) to be accompanied by pictures from that play which has broken all world records for a Shakespearean production. I know you have seen the production, and I hope you will find time to read the article.

Please write me as soon as you can find the time. And please, oh please, check on those student activity matters especially on retaining Miss Jackson as my main link. As to holding on to the dreams of the new-social-world which you have helped me to build, I am still determined like Tennyson's "Ulysses"

"To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

John Lowell