



The philosophy of the school room in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

SCHOOL DAYS, SCHOOL DAYS, DEAR OLD GOLDEN RULE DAYS?

It has now been 70 years since I graduated from high school. 1949 was a sort of in-between time. The U.S. was in the process of emerging as a world power following World War II but we hadn't quite made it yet. Harry Truman was president. The Korean Conflict was beginning — we didn't like to call it a “war”. It was the beginning of NATO. The Soviet Union had just gotten nuclear power. We were purging communists from our labor unions. We refused to recognize the communist government of China. The United Nations moved its headquarters to New York City. The minimum wage was raised to \$.75 an hour. An American, William Faulkner, received the Nobel Prize for literature.

People my age were wondering where we were going as a nation and how we individually would fit in. In that last regard at least, we shared some questions with the young people who will be graduating from high school this year.

But what has been the school experience of those leaders of the future who will be graduating this year? And is it, as predicted by Abraham Lincoln, a prediction of life to come in the United States?

By chance a great deal of information about the experience of the class of 2019 has come to my attention from several sources. I found aspects of it troubling.



A nonprofit law center followed up on 2,776 K-12 educators who reported witnessing 3,265 incidents of bias or hate in their schools in the fall of 2018 alone. Sadly most of these incidents were not addressed by school administrators. In 90% of the cases there was a failure to denounce the bias.



We think of schools as places where students feel welcome, safe, and supported. For a number of reasons this often does not seem to be the situation. The report states that there were,

... a disturbing number of incidents involving identity-based slurs and symbols, bigotry and the harassment of children in school. Most of those sentiments were racist, anti-semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ... Many children were worried for the safety of themselves and their families... White students

taunted athletes of color from opposing schools or chanted "build the wall" at Latinx players.

The report reaches the conclusion that what is happening in the schools reflects what is happening in society at large. Hate crimes are at an increasingly high level. It charges what many others feel, that government officials are *“shattering the norms of behavior observed by generations of American leaders.”* But sadly it also provides the environment in which tomorrow's leaders are being educated. One aspect of this heartbreaking situation has especially drawn my attention.



SCHOOL AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP is a survey conducted by the UCLA Graduate School of Education and it takes the environment of instability and contentiousness into some frightening dimensions for students. 60% have experienced some form of cyber-bullying for example. 92% of the principals say their school has faced problems related to the threat of gun violence. This fruit of the division and hatred on the rise in the United States relates to the increase of suicide which is now the second leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 10 and 24 according to the Center for Disease Control.

It was shocking to me that school counselors in the bucolic county in which Starcross is located are on the alert for signs of suicide. We all remember the students and teachers killed by a gunman at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida last year. But the casualties did not stop the day of the shooting. A short time ago two teenage survivors of that shooting committed suicide. And soon afterwards the father of a little girl killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting in Connecticut took his life. As one survivor of a high school shooting in Kentucky put it recently, *“You can’t let the shooting define your*



whole life but you can't put it behind you."

Before I go on, this is the brief but important message that we are all asked to remember. If you or someone you know is experiencing a time of crisis, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273 TALK (8255).



My personal experience with students in today's schools is admittedly rather limited. I also believe that teens have always been experts and always will be experts in editing what they say to an adult. However, while recognizing the very challenging environment that students have to cope with these days, I nonetheless feel optimistic.

It seems to me that young people in general have lost trust in all the institutions that I accepted at their age so long ago. As a result of that mistrust, a young person can feel very alone. I grew up among people my age who didn't really have an identity crisis. We might have found things wrong with the government, the church, the schools, or the families, but even in their imperfect state, they provided us with the sense of belonging. Now I



think today's youth, including those in their 20s, are just turning their back on institutions and authorities of any kind. And I don't blame them. This is how history evolves in critical moments.

It seems that the young people I'm privileged to come in contact with are replacing institutions with communities of all shapes and sizes. I think that's a very good thing. The trouble is that they live with much more stress and fear than is healthy. That is not their fault. That is a mess that the adults allowed to happen and must clean

up.

It seems to me what youth wants for the future simply extends what the transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker (1810–1860) said long ago concerning the abolition of slavery. It had been echoed many times in our history, by Martin Luther King, Barack Obama and others,

“The ark of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

So at the risk of what one young friend of mine calls my “disgustingly paternalistic” attitude, I say — go for it kids! History is bending in your direction.

Brother Toby