

THE WELL-TEMPERED MIND

BY HENRY NOBLE MACCRACKEN

THE other day a pretty Vassar girl got off the bus at College Avenue. The campus lay to the left of the bus, and just as the motorman started up again, the pretty miss stepped off the curb and unconcernedly picked her way across to the college gate, right in front of the bus. The driver cut off his power and slammed on his brakes. We jolted to a stop. The bus driver turned round and faced me. "Did you see that, Doc?" he asked. "Educate 'em, and educate 'em, and educate 'em! And what good does it do?"

As I left the bus at Taylor Gate, I pondered. Where had I failed? Should I have taught her not to cross in front of buses after they start? Not to put her heel down on slippery ice, not to leave the flatiron with the current on? Not this, and not that? Not this, and not that? That's the way "the Good Wife taught her Daughter" in the Middle Ages, a thousand separate warnings. A thousand should have been enough in those days. Did it work? Or should I have contented myself with one "Be Careful" and let it go, as most teachers do?

As I entered my office, the Dean brought me a letter from overseas, from Susi in Vienna, the lovely Austrian girl who had been the light of our eyes a few years back, with her joyous laughter. I could recall her figure as she "skied" down Sunrise Hill. No joy in this letter, though. A picture instead of devastation and horror, with a brave spirit struggling against outrageous fortune. And then she added, "It all burns down to one thing — education."

Education — what good does it do? It all burns down to one thing, education. What's the answer?

I went home to lunch. My wife had a letter from Vlasta, in Praha. She had just been attending a congress of girl scouts in Paris, and had been delayed in crossing Germany. "Go home, you beautiful GI boys," she wrote, "go home, before we come to hate and despise you. Beautiful GIs who helped set my country free, how could you become . . . predatory mercenaries?"

Trained to win victories, but not to keep the peace. What was wrong? Was it education?

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Anyhow, I thought, we've got to have it. If there's no living with it, there's certainly no living without it. Somehow we've got something we call civilization by the tail, and it's a mighty big bear. We just can't let go. Somehow we must resolve this paradox.

Maybe Susi agrees with the bus driver, after all. Maybe it does burn down to a kind of education that will make folks want to see GIs around — they're going to have to be around for a good many years, and it's mighty important what folks are going to think about them. We'd better start quickly, for we're certainly on the wrong track now, and time's running out on us. It's this generation, or — nothing.

II

Let's look into this a little closer. That Vassar girl at the corner was a good student, getting a good education, according to her lights. Her lights just didn't include traffic lights. Why not? Ruined Vienna, home of culture and the arts, but helpless always in great crises of history — why had Vienna failed? What education would help? And those GIs — why did their morale and their conduct go to pieces when they became masters?

Don't they really point all one way — that a part, but not all, of the mind has been made aware of things? When all of it is alerted, shall we not have true education? Aren't we being specialized to death? In a world where

generalized beings alone can survive, we are being jammed and crowded into specialized jobs of living with little or no reference to their general significance.

Gay Vienna waltzed in the dance of life, and nobody told her that it was a Dance of Death. The Vassar girl put her intellect on the shelf along with her books, and lived stupidly. The American soldiers couldn't face garrison life, because they had been trained for action only.

The trouble with specialized education lies right here. It's only temporary, local; whereas the law of life is the law of growth and adaptation. Remember how long it took for air power to penetrate the military mind? Why? Because it was specialized along different ballistical ideas.

Remember what happened to the dinosaurs? I picked up *The Perennial Philosophy*, by Aldous Huxley, and read this: "It is only by remaining precariously generalized that an organism can advance toward that central intelligence which is its compensation for not having a body and instinct perfectly adapted to the kind of life in our particular kind of environment."

Nothing new about that; just straight biological common sense. Every biologist knows it. Why don't we make our education conform to it?

"Precariously generalized." That's it. Nowhere perfectly secure; but our security is better gained by imperfect generalization than by perfect specialties working independently.

"We've never lost a college building

by fire at Vassar," I thought, and knocked on wood, complacently. "Not because it's all fireproof. It isn't. But we have generalized our fire risk. We are ready to meet each challenge. Everybody is a member of the fire brigade. If a fire starts — and it does — we know what to do about it. Special skills service the general situation."

I went over to Belle Skinner Hall. "Mr. Geer," I said, "you're a musician. Tell me about Bach's 'well-tempered clavichord'."

"Before Bach," said Mr. Geer, kindly, "the clavichord was tuned to a just or pure temperament. Each note had an arithmetical relation to the next, in the octave. That was all right for certain keys, but it didn't work for all keys. Bach tuned the strings of the octave in geometrical progression, giving each tone in the twelve half tones the value of the twelfth root of two, so that the relationships were all equal and the octave intervals from one to two were equally tempered. So, the clavichord was set to meet the need of every tonality, and his 'well-tempered clavichord' contained compositions in all twenty-four keys."

A little groggy, I hung on to the meaning beyond my foggy enlightenment. "Would you say that a well-tempered mind was a mind so ordered that it could work well in every situation?"

He thought a minute, "Yes, I guess you could say that, and not be far wrong."

So, what I want of education is *the well-tempered mind*.

III

I have criticized the advocates of "general education" in the past. I don't like the Harvard Plan, or any other plan that thinks that by putting together one or two sciences, or by requiring one and the same course of everybody, it has solved the problem of the well-tempered mind. It doesn't go far enough. It isn't general enough.

In fact, the *well-tempered mind* is independent of any specific knowledge. A night watchman may be better educated than a doctor of philosophy, and often is. Liberal education isn't liberal enough, that's all. You can arrange knowledge as you please, though personally I'm satisfied with the present shape and size of the packages, but you won't get a well-tempered mind until you have distributed experience and learning over the whole process of growth which persists in all life.

I went home and worked out an Octave of Education. I tuned it to Religion, the ultimate Reality. At the opposite end I put Mathematics and Logic, the tools with which we learn about things and events. Then I went up the scale, filling it out until it stood thus:

Logic (mathematics, science)
 Aesthetics (art)
 Civics (family, community, citizenship)
 Economics (livelihood)
 Politics (the state, law)
 Ethics (morals, good conduct)
 Metaphysics (first principles)
 Religion

These with their half tones — for it isn't as simple as that — make up the scale to which the well-tempered mind is tuned. Given these, and the mind can meet every situation in life. Some can play by ear, but most of us have to learn the scale; and that, I think is education. Starting from a situation in any key, we can come to a harmonious solution, because the scale is adjusted to all human needs.

Henry Adams painted the Middle Ages as simple, his own time as complex. He saw no solution. He was wrong, because no human situation was ever simple, not even the primitive life of savages. It was always complex. There were always these keys, but they were not always tuned to each other. The solution is not to retreat into any "simple life," cloister, ivory tower, intellectualism, or any other. The solution is the adjustment of all phases of life to one another.

Just now, we're all talking about democracy. It's a good idea, better than most ideas. But if we work out a democratic scale for that idea alone, we shall have discord.

The age is political, and it is likely that we shall try to tune everything to that key. That's not realistic. The only true realities, to my way of thinking, are logic and religion, and of the two, I would rather take religion as my "middle C." I think it truer than fact, or reason. But anyhow, not politics, because in the long run everything in politics has reference to its ultimate in the reality of religion.

The well-tempered mind is not an

inert mind, a lazy or complacent mind. It is a mind ready, willing, and able for work at every level that life offers.

As I look around me, after forty-six years of continuous teaching, the only really happy students I know are those who have found this harmony in themselves. Can it be taught? It can be learned, anyhow. Not in the classroom alone, certainly. Nor can an ill-adjusted teacher teach it. The specialist who has let his specialty run away with him, who keys the whole world to it, no matter what the consequences, cannot teach it. The teacher, to begin with, must have the well-tempered mind himself.

There is no form of isolation so dangerous as this, which thinks life can be played in only one key.

IV

So I would let students study anything, provided they studied it well, and became competent in their field of study. But their life as students — oh, that is another matter. I would organize the college so that every one of the notes in my scale confronted students every day with situations at every level, scientific, logic, aesthetic, civic, economic, politic, ethic, metaphysic, religious — the whole scale. And because these come up in all life, not just the students' life, I would make the student as little different from his fellows as I possibly could. I would give the student experience and conscious learning on every level, us-

ing the whole college, trustees, administration, faculty, staff, graduates — the boiler plant and the kitchen, the farm and the comptroller, the snow and the rain, the neighbor and the visitor from afar; — from all of them something to give and to take in the life of learning. Only so can an educated mind become a well-tempered mind.

Now we are not all of us given perfectly healthy minds at the start. Mr. Geer says that in every scale there is an element that is unpleasant. Musicians used to call it the "wolf." This is tuned out in the well-tempered scale, distributed so that its harm is negligible. I think that the well-adjusted mind, similarly, if it has to meet situations on all these levels, will tune out its own private "wolf." I've seen this done with only a few other notes.

Marriage, for example, often gives the solution for the specialist, not because there's any magic in that state, but because the intellectual tends to become human when he has to run a furnace.

The industries have what they call a "test course," in which they put the young engineer through all the different processes of the industry. They find out his particular skill, and he finds out how to adjust to many needs. We need a test course in college, a test course including the whole of all four years of college, in which every mind comes to grips with problems in every field. Some of them will be in the regular courses, some in the dormitory, some in the college of education, and

litical, religious, athletic, dramatic, some just in daily living, in writing home, in meeting strangers, in keeping appointments, in learning how to be at one's best, to plan and to carry through, to understand and to sympathize, to think and to act, to appreciate and to worship, the right things. "Worship is worthship," the old pedant says, "reverence for that which is of most worth."

This all means a thorough reform of the academic attitude — a reform so thorough that all the old connotations of the word "academic" will slough off and be forgotten. It means that we take the whole scale back into our plan. Religion and metaphysics, first of all — so carefully avoided now, or given lip service and perfunctory acceptance, only. Then all the rest, each in its needs and challenges. Then we shall have really responsive people, alert, aware, sensitized to the possibilities of life. We shall need fewer shots in the arm — drink and narcotics, hazards and sensations, thrills and escapes and escapades, quarrels and antagonisms, frustrations and disheartenings, and all the rest that give college its all too frequent atmosphere of unreality. "Somewhere else," the student thinks, "is something real; there I shall find happiness." So she walks in front of the bus, opens the left hand swing door, drops her bike across the walk, scolds the maid, all because she's thinking of that history topic. Life is so unreal at college, so without meaning!

and educate 'em, and educate 'em,

and educate 'em, and what good does it do?" Well, maybe somebody some day will work out a college for students that can really live on every level, students for whom everything has meaning, students "precariously generalized," free because their secur-

ity lies within themselves, and so unafraid of tomorrow, students of the well-tempered mind.

Here, my good friend the Bus Driver, here's my new model 1946. See if you like her better as your next passenger.



DEATH OF A LITTLE MAN

BY ETHEL BARNETT DE VITO

THE stings, the rebuffs, the pricks of pain,
 The nagging in his ear and brain
 By one who said she pushed him on
 While pushing him back — all, all are gone.

No more upon his face is shown
 The small defeats etched deep as bone
 Of a little man blown by the years
 To ever narrowing hemispheres
 Till now he sleeps upon the shelf
 Of one no wider than himself —

Now, calm and heedless of her cries
 And dignified by death, he lies
 A little man with a secret glow
 Looking for all the world as though
 He had inherited at last
 The earth — exactly as he has.