

opinion

Willis E. Elliott, a member of the faculty of the New York Theological Seminary, gave an address at the Cambodia/Kent Rally in Chappaqua Center, New York, on May 9, 1970. He did not just describe the horrors of our times or deplore our present responses to our crisis. Rather, he offered his opinion of what older and younger Americans might do. Colloquy opens this issue on the future with his remarks.



We Older Americans Can:

1. Consult our faith more often and more seriously than our fears. In a time when everything that was nailed down is coming loose, that's harder than it sounds! Most of our fears are old scars appropriate only to the old world and irrelevant to the new world being born. If you can admit and feel this—if you have the wisdom and humility to confess that much of your experience is more hindrance than help in living today—you will use your energy to build bridges between yourself and the young and between the faith and values you profess and the responsibilities you seek to fulfill.

2. Study the issues. Parents who are not doing some hard thinking, alone and together, about peace, economic and social justice, and other such issues have no right complaining about the generation gap; so also with Americans who read only the sports page and never engage in conversations of human consequence: they have no right to complain about conditions local, national, or global.

3. Involve ourselves in some action for social-economic-political improvement. It takes little searching to turn up scores of things we can do to put our weight on the side of a more human, more just, community and nation and world.

4. Talk up! Leave "the silent majority" and speak out against all suppression of information and of dissent. Ours is a civilization of dialogue, and we die if we fail to get the information we need for public decision and also if, getting the information, we fail to study issues and speak our conclusions and convictions. May our youth shame us into dialogic action!

5. Get into conversation with young people about the questions, not just about the answers. Learn the double humility: maybe the reason our answers aren't working is that we don't know the questions, the real, relevant questions. Our children are natives in this new land, this new world. They know its language and its questions better than we do. If we tell them we know this, we may earn the privilege of helping them with whatever wisdom our age and experience can supply. "Common sense" as a straight-line projection from yesterday will seldom help; "rational" projections from the past are destroying the world.

You Younger Americans Can:

1. Listen; and become more sensitive to the terrors in your parents' hearts, the terrors that have led to the insanity of Cambodia, the inhumanity of Kent, and the brutality of construction workers with iron pipes in Wall Street. I say listen, listen compassionately; but don't be persuaded by my generation's terrors—if you are, you will be in complicity with us whenever we consult our fears more than our and your faith. If you learn the skill of listening to these terrors, you will both earn the right to be heard and enable us to listen better.

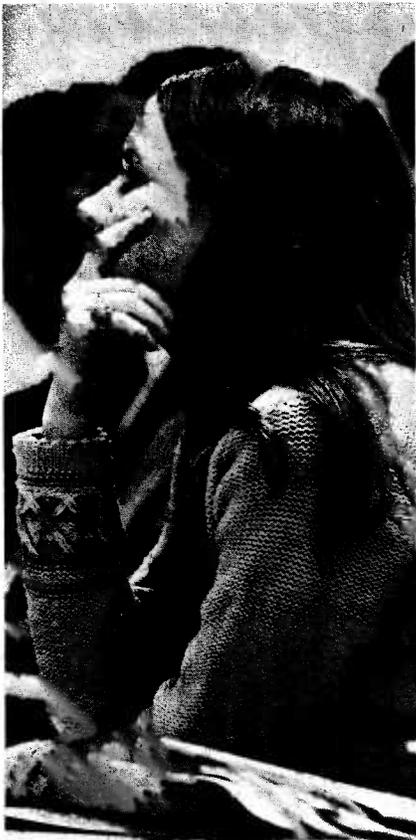
2. Act together in common protest wherever the inhumanity, brutality, insanity of what you call the System or the Establishment appear.

3. Get into the hard, undramatic work of revitalizing the political processes of our nation at whatever levels are available to you. Fight for your peace candidates! Form actional coalitions in the direction of your vision whenever and with whomever you can—with the poor, the blacks, the Spanish-speaking, the middle-aged, the elderly—yes, even the rich! In our best moments, we know you'll be fighting for our best selves, for our own values you inherited from us and rightly accuse of neglecting and prostituting—compassion, justice, integrity, and in biblical words "the praise of God and the joy of the whole creation." And be aware that your fight is not, as were the fights of past and present, for tribal glory. Your fight is for human survival, and the freedom to be human while you fight.

4. Avoid impatient and imprisoning dogmas that are only the counters of your parents' uptightnesses. Are you for nonviolence? You may, and I think will, face situations needing the threat of violence and even perhaps violence itself. Are you for violence? Consider that almost all the violence in the world today is counterproductive of your vision. Are you against your parents' religion? Meditate on the fact that all, all of the values you think human beings should live by—all the values you cherish and commit yourselves to—are central to Judaism and Christianity, no matter how much or little courage we of my generation have had in the living of them.

5. Achieve a distance from your peer group so that you will be more than a herd animal. Spend some time alone each day sorting out your priorities—whatever you call your solitary time, "meditation" or "prayer" or "digging in." You are conscious of not wanting to stay in the parental prison: become conscious also of the danger of conformism in the prison of your peers, who have their own stupidities, arrogances, and hypocrisies—curses not confined to any one generation. Don't be impoverished! Transcend the generations, and the centuries, and the cultures. Let the "own thing" you do be the richest, most human you can make it.

6. Turn off the TV and try to talk with your parents about your priorities. Try to explain to them something you're "sure" they won't understand. With a little empathy, patience, and imagination you may get a surprise of joy, peace, and love. In comparison with parents of two generations ago, your parents carry the wisdom of centuries: they are at least three hundred years old, qualitatively, in what they have lived through. Don't miss mining this wisdom, and love them for sharing it with you.



(This address preceded the Jackson State "official" violence, as execrable as that at Kent State.)

(These action-suggestions ended the address.)