

ATTENTION, THE RE-YOUTHING OF ----- ELLIOTT #1814

Instead of being as young as you feel (as goes the old gerontological bromide), you're as young as your enthusiasm for what/who you're paying attention to--a reversible proposition: you're as old as life is "tedious and tasteless" from disinterest in attending.....This thinksheet is based on (1) my observations and (2) medical evidence that saints and sinners tend to stay healthy, and everybody else sickens and dies of boredom. And what does this increasingly clear fact have to say about social ordering in general and the church's ministry and mission in particular?

1. A few hours ago, a youngish cracked voice on the phone said, "You wrote that letter in today's CAPE COD TIMES (5Mar84)?" I: "Yes." He (as old as this century is, and a native Cape Codder): "Thanks. I'm phoning to let you know I agree with you. I always phone letter-writers I agree with, to thank them and encourage them." His voice is cracked, but his spirit is anything but! His caring, and his acting on his caring, has not, cannot, age. He is young, ever young, with caring, and with the ever-fed enthusiasm fed back from his acting on his caring. Bodies tick away with the clock: what happens to the inner us, its destiny and quality, is under the control not of clock hands but of our hands.

2. ORDO/LEX NATURAE/GRATIAE is my formula for a life-principle sustained by reality and, in humane societies, maintained by law and infused by grace. The principle this thinksheet is paying attention to is such a life-principle. Let's say BA is your bio-age; then AA is your attention-age. It's tandem to the prior principle I enunciate thus: what gets your attention gets you, and what holds your attention is your god. The great neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield says the brain of a person reveals his/her attention-age (though he doesn't use my term). Your "mind," the spiritual organ of your attending (as in "Mind you," "Never mind"), determines your brain-age: at 25 you have an old brain if you've lived dully, at 75 you have a young brain if you've lived on the spectrum that runs from curiosity (which God gives children) all the way to fascination (which Moses, age 80, gave himself in the presence of the Ex.3 burning bush). (My biblical reference, but WP is Bible-conscious: he wrote a good novel on Abram and Sarai in Ur.) (See WP, THE SECOND CAREER, Little, Brown/63. See also, *passim*, Bucky Fuller's INTUITION, Anchor/73--especially his lecture to neurosurgeons, "Brain and Mind.")

3. Inferential extension of this principle: Mind/brain quality is a function of the quality of what/who one has been attending to. As our bodies are what we eat, our souls are what we love. This result is recompense, both interpersonal (the Jews' "divine judgment") and autonomous (the Greeks' moira/logos/diké): Christianity strands the two (God will get you, which is awful; AND you will get yourself, which some folks think is even worse). Since "the West," as more Christian than anything else (an inarguable negative definition of "a Christian country"), strands the two, Western public education cannot be "Western" unless it does the same. In 1984 USA, the stranding does not occur: the public schools elide the divine sanction, using only the autonomous sanction--in other words, are Greek rather than Jewish or Christian. That is the heart of the "school prayer issue" Reagan has slyly thrown into this election year (and that is being debated in the Senate as I write this thinksheet). Many things

OVER

I'm "up to" in this letter to the editor:

(1) I'm fighting off the decay of my brain, and so am honoring my Creator.

(2) I'm acting "community." I'm in the public swim, the democratic equivalent of the ancient 4pm Roman bath.

(3) I'm "making friends." What a delightful old codger that was on the phone!

(4) I'm taking a public stand on a public issue. Citizenship is more than voting; it is also stand-taking and the monitoring of officials. (As soon as I finish this thinksheet, I'm off to the town hall for a hearing vis-a-vis a zoning issue of public concern for environmental quality.)

(5) I'm shifting attention to a fresh focus, viz., freedom for the individual teacher (an angle I've heard/read from no one else, though it's the only basis on which I favor "school prayer" (and am therefore against the formulation Congress is now debating).

(6) I'm calling public attention to (a) the fact that our public schools are deliberately misrepresenting our American heritage and (b), for this and other reasons, are in danger of increasing deterioration and of ultimate demise, and (c) the possibility that structural pluralism is more "American" than the present tax-money monopoly of the public-school system.

(7) I'm modeling caring about God, religion, public education, the public-school system, and vigorous public dialog on issues. NOTE that most of the above would obtain no matter the content of my letter! INTent is vastly more important than CONTENT, partly because INTent mediates between CONTENT and ATTention. What is true of the individual is true of society: Sloth leads to social brain/mind death in micro- and mega-institutions. (E.g., with the exception of the U. of Chicago, I have found American schools appallingly, dangerously, anti-intellectual--mindlessly fighting for the past, or feeding on the pablum of slogans. It's a deep and long American weakness: two foreign visitors, a century apart from each other--Tocqueville and Bonhoeffer--remarked it. No wonder so little electioneering deals with issues: American have been taught not to be "nasty" with their mouths, so we get leaders who are only clever with their mouths.)

## School prayer or disintegration

"Bringing prayer back into our schools" is the inappropriate phrase Laurence L. Barber uses in his letter in today's Times (Feb. 29).

What would be appropriate? "Bringing freedom back," the free-

dom of a teacher to open a class-session, if he or she so desires, in a manner (1) recognizing "This Nation Under God" and "In God We Trust," and (2) authentic to the teacher's heart, motivation, and occupational intention.

For 30 years a sister of mine exercised that freedom. When forced to surrender this freedom, her heart and style and power of discipline were broken; and she had chaos on her hands the last three years of her teaching career.

Mr. Barber commits the all-or-nothing fallacy in assuming that returning the teacher's freedom would bring "uniformity and compulsion," including "formulas for prayer." Those of us who are pro-freedom on this issue are as adamant against a new tyranny ("formulas for prayer") as we are against the old tyranny (which took freedom away from public-school teachers).

Note that I say "public-school teachers," not "teachers in government-supported schools." The government paid salary as a University of Hawaii teacher; I opened every class session with prayer, and no one ever objected. What a crippled system we have, depriving children —

only children, not youth and adults — of their teachers' authentic self-presentation! And, at that, only some teachers: In our public schools, some teachers do have that freedom — namely, nonreligious teachers.

In this context, I mean by "nonreligious" those whose way of seeing and living in the world does not include God, and so "opening with prayer" is meaningless or worse. In the wider sense, of course, such teachers are religious: their religion is secularism, which because of the public schools' present ban is the religion of our schools (as it is the religion of the schools in the USSR).

What do I think will happen? Either the restoration of the freedom or the disintegration of our present public-school system, probably the latter. We are rapidly moving toward structural pluralism in public education.

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