

THE EMPORIA STATE

RESEARCH



STUDIES

THE GRADUATE PUBLICATION OF THE KANSAS STATE TEACHERS COLLEGE, EMPORIA

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and the Renaissance**

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VOLUME XIII

SEPTEMBER, 1964

NUMBER 1

THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES is published in September, December, March, and June of each year by the Graduate Division of the Kansas State Teachers College, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, Kansas. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.

A complete list of all publications in *The Emporia State Research Studies* is published in the fourth number of each volume.

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This publication is a continuation of *Studies in Education*
published by the Graduate Division from 1930 to 1945.

Papers published in this periodical are written by faculty members of the
Kansas State Teachers College of Emporia and by either undergraduate or
graduate students whose studies are conducted in residence under the super-
vision of a faculty member of the college.

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The Possibility of Renaissance

by Hardin Craig*

Some years ago I delivered an address on the possibility and desirability of a renaissance in our country. Since then I have had plenty of time to think the matter over, and I have now something more to say. The University of North Carolina published and distributed several thousand copies of that address, and it is only fair to say that it had, at least locally, a considerable effect. The appeal was to a group of very fine young men who had returned from service in World War II, and it is doubtful if, outside of and beyond this group, my address had any lasting effect. I doubt, however, if the older, simpler, and more substantial part of the American people are satisfied with the mediocrity in which they live. They may resort to the traditional American habit of boasting and possibly fool everybody but themselves. They are, most of them, well-descended people and have, as a whole, a creditable, indeed a rather fine, history. It has occurred to me that what I have to say may be understood and appreciated by a group of citizens of this community. Kansas is a state that has always been to some degree distinguished by sincerity and a willingness to act in behalf of what it thought right. Kansas people are also well-descended, have always supported and believed in education, and have aspired towards the permanent ideals and practices of civilized life. I do not know to what extent the assertive materialism of the post-war world has been able to eradicate the traditional idealism and the sturdy courage of the founders of the state and of the first two or three generations that followed them. It may be that these worldly and predatory commercial forces have been completely successful. My information is inadequate for sound judgment, but I know the strange persistence of the aristocratic, self-respecting, and independent spirit. I therefore entertain a vague hope that some members of my audience will understand me and be intellectually able to see that what I shall say is true and also in conformity with the best modern scientific and philosophic thought.

One great principle long known and now stressed by the best thinkers of our age should be mentioned first. Reform usually has to wait a generation for realization. It is a matter of ripeness and cannot be predicted. It was the sincerity, zeal, and piety of the first half of the reign of Queen Elizabeth that produced the greatness of Shakespeare, Hooker, and Bacon, and it is perhaps usually so. It follows that, if in this, our spiritually degenerate time, we could start a new order of public and private morals and introduce into American life a new energy, sincerity, and industry that is something better and greater than we now are and do, the generation that controls the world at the end of this century might be greatly our superiors.

It is easy to state in concrete terms the errors and vices of this age. Let us take a few outstanding examples. In our academic world we find

* An address delivered at The Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, printed with the kind permission of the author.

an obviously bad situation. Free public education, the cornerstone since Jefferson of the American system, is so badly supported, under-manned, and over-socialized as to imperil its value. Again, in our college and university world we find teachers who are ignorant of the best thought of this age, so that they grind along in an unprogressive way with no philosophy but a degenerate sort of pragmatism. Teachers of the humanities follow an outmoded art-for-art's-sake doctrine or are over-sold on modernism, and pretend to an unnecessary specialization that is a mere camouflage of ignorance. This is an age of highly organized predatory greed in commerce and business. Our economists have ceased to study economics or to observe and think and content themselves with swallowing Keynesianism whole. These things manifest themselves in a wholesale disregard of the consumers, who are the citizens of the United States. The consumer has no friends, and, more than that, his life is in constant danger. I was a good baserunner in my college days, and, but for that, I should be regularly killed by a motor vehicle three times a week. These statements, admittedly on a level of exaggeration, will, I hope, remind you that this generation has an opportunity to do a great service for our country.

I should like now to engage the sympathetic attention of this audience in an endeavor to think out what we might do in the situation in which we find ourselves. To begin with, this is primarily an individual matter. We can control our own actions and habits and, in some measure, shape our own characters. To do this well is to serve the cause of enlightenment, and enlightenment is what we and our fellow-citizens need. We and they need knowledge and its proper offspring, which is wisdom. We have been taught to think of knowledge and wisdom as mere specialities or accidents, whereas they are the fundamentals of civilized life and are indispensable. They are moreover achievable, so that to pursue them is to achieve them, since they are both method and essence. We may each of us achieve a renaissance limited to ourselves. But I would not restrict our actions merely to what we may do for ourselves, although I regard that as primary. It is also possible for groups to unite their efforts and by these means to produce far greater effects than lie in the power of single individuals. Both of these aspects will require our attention before we close.

Because progressive, sincere, and intelligent effort is in line with natural law, it is assured of success. No man or woman who thus aligns himself or herself with what we speak of as the laws of nature, which are the laws of God, can possibly fail. There are no cases of failure on record. When men and women have failed, it is because they were ignorant, lazy and cowardly, or subject to accident or disease. The element of chance has been removed from the discoveries of science and philosophy. Observe the elaborate provision made in the human brain and neural system for superior wisdom and skill. It is said that the possibilities of ideation in the brain are three billion. What a machine we carry about with us and what a shame to let it rust and suffer corruption by lying idle! It is estimated also that the ordinary educated human being achieves about three million synaptic inter-connections. We thus have one success in about one thousand chances. I leave it to you that one in one thousand is a mighty poor score in any game. We

are mediocrities and ignoramuses by our own choice. There is plenty of talent. I decided in World War I that an old-fashioned infantry company of 168 men counting the captain was a reservoir of talent. Men in that company could do anything that needed to be done and do it well. The environment made them willing to try. We have normally health and strength, abundant facilities, opportunities galore, and we have no excuse. Our chance to grow great and to exercise beneficent influence is a chance to realize our possibilities. What we need to do is to go to work.

In the area in which we have impeded control we can do much as individuals. I think also we can, if we try, accomplish much as groups. New factors enter into group action, and some of these factors are difficult to set in motion, but it has been done and can be done again. We are immediately concerned with academic groups on this occasion. We shall not, however, be too personal since we shall speak of several hundred universities and colleges in the Middle-West. Do not think that I know nothing about these institutions. I believe that it is possible for an institution such as this to accomplish incredibly great things, perhaps to influence the whole state of Kansas, perhaps the valley of the Mississippi River. No great numbers are required. There is latent ability enough in this institution, perhaps in this assembly, to lead a reformation and a renascence. The two words mean practically the same thing, but the idea of reformation is the basal one. That this or any other institution will do what I am suggesting is extremely doubtful. It is doubtful whether they wish to do it and whether they have the courage and industry, but, even so, institutionally speaking, the matter is in their power. For the student body to embark on this enterprise and to succeed with it, they would need the cooperation of two other bodies, namely, the administration and the faculty.

Administrations are usually made up of well-intentioned men and women, and there are many cases in which they have accomplished great things for their institutions and for the nation as a whole. But, for the most part, they do not know enough. They often lack vision and not infrequently courage, but possibly their chief deficiency is lack of faith. They do not believe they could succeed and therefore resort to what seems to be the next best thing, namely, to get by. They conceal their deficiencies by the delusion that mediocrity or faddism is success. They sometimes operate as small people instead of great people. In our current academic situation, administrators have much to answer for, but they are habitually blamed for things for which they are not responsible. Their only excuse for being is the promotion of education, and they ought, in my judgment, to participate earnestly and sincerely in the learned life of their institutions. I have, however, never seen an administrator who would not welcome greatness if it should make its appearance in his institution.

When I enter my own field and talk about college and university teachers, I get into obviously dangerous territory. I shall on this occasion limit myself mainly to considerations having to do with inducing and assisting students and student bodies to discover and exercise their inborn talents. The primary mistake that American college and university

teachers make is reliance on teaching instead of on learning. The British do not make this mistake. The reformation I speak of must rely on the efforts and activities of the students themselves, but I rather think it will have to be initiated and supported by the faculty. Of course, the whole process of the education of an individual depends on what that individual does and not on what is done for him. This misunderstanding of the educational process in our country I do not believe is necessary or incurable. We shall have to proceed according to the environment in which we operate, and obviously the next best thing to getting students to work is for the college teacher himself or herself to work. The example is contagious, the results are tangible, and the spirit right. It is an interesting thought that a renaissance in a faculty might produce and has been known to produce a renaissance in the student body. A college teacher who works at his subject has the priceless opportunity to take his students in as helpers and apprentices on real jobs, and there is nothing that inspires them so much. A working and thinking college teacher will import into his classroom the best current ideas. The discoveries and developments of physics, biology, psychology, logic, and relativity concern them and their subjects deeply, practically, and immediately; also teachers in collegiate institutions should know their own subjects more broadly. It is necessary for these narrowly-trained men to extend their views and interests. They are, as a whole, good men, men who would not willingly be found deficient in the subjects they profess. The idea simply stated is this: the college teacher, whatever his bent, should so live as to become constantly a greater and wiser human being. Let him learn to do the necessary formalities of his job quickly and well and thus have time enough to devote himself to learning and culture.

There is a great modern discovery that affects us all. I cannot, of course, go into it in detail, but I can explain one basal principle. The mystery of cognition or creativity has disappeared. Therefore, a renaissance of civilized culture is a simpler matter than it used to be. The perplexity is world-old, and nobody has ever known how and why these revivals of the human spirit came about. But people always explain things they do not understand. It used to be thought that creative activity was due to supernatural interference in normal events. Some god, they thought, or some good-natured angel took the pen out of the writer's fingers or the brush out of the painter's hand, and an unaccountable masterpiece was the result. This view is still widely held, but God is wiser and greater than we thought. Not knowing what the process was, pundits and art critics posited an unaccountable entity called genius or intuition, and this was and is put up as a shield behind which they can conceal themselves and justify their idleness, ignorance, and cowardice.

Let me state for you in partially intelligible terms the best current theory and tell you what it signifies. It begins with a new concept of time according to which the past and the future exist only in the present as they come into existence within consciousness. The past, which may have duration of only a tenth of a second, exists actively in the present and is the initiatory force in the current mental act. It comes armed with feeling and the urge to discover truth. That past needs to be rich in knowledge, wisdom, and experience if it is to start anything of significance. The future also exists only in the present, where it operates as a

forward-driving force and motive. It is the father of ideals and patterns of action. The result of this is the formation of a more or less vital one-dimensional time sequence. Meantime, the logic of our minds has made us see ourselves and our environment in terms of three dimensions. We can comprehend nothing beyond this world of length, breadth, and height, so that we do not understand what happens in cognition. This theory tells us that the one-dimensional time-sequence meets the three-dimensional space-sequence at the threshold of consciousness, and an intellectual event takes place in the fourth dimension. We cannot understand this, but there is no reason to doubt that it has the integrity of an event, with an intelligible beginning, an unintelligible middle, and an intelligible end. The important thing is that, if a new channel has been established in the mind, a thing that will happen in all active minds from the instinct to recognize truth, there is an impulse towards action. Creativity turns out, therefore, to be an affair of the moment and to be forward-driving. It may not be in full form and may take some time for recognition and development, but creation is a function of valid and active thought. It exalts and renders important the act of thinking and the moment of thought.

This is well enough known, but what surprises me is that nobody has pointed out that it dispenses with the accommodating angel and the mystical fabrication known as intuition and puts the responsibility squarely on us. If our minds are well trained and well stored, if our faculties are honest enough to recognize truth, and if we have sufficient drive in our natures and habits, we can realize and render effective more and more the great wealth of ability the Lord has bestowed upon us; so that, if we are weaklings and mere mediocrities, we have ourselves to thank. This subtracts nothing from the greatness of God. It merely reveals the superiority of His wisdom and the breadth of His mercy to man. You can, therefore, see before you the field of your own education and all that it offers. God has invited us all to occupy this freehold and has taught us the terms of the deed.

I have now to present to you my chief proposal, namely, that you, all of you and your wives, administrators, faculty, and students, proceed with a renaissance in this institution; that is, proceed to do something greater in the life of the intellect than you have ever done before. I admit that you are good already and that you are as good, probably better, than your neighbors. I merely say that is not enough. My proposition is very simple and is certain to succeed. In fact, such efforts, of which there are many on record, have never been known to fail. I should not, if I were you, announce it or advertise it, for that would be crude. I have told you that the American student and the American educated classes do not, in general, realize more than one one-thousandth of the possibility of their brains. That situation is known as mediocrity. In order to extricate ourselves there are three things we must have, and these things are neither absent nor rare. They are not usually recognized for what they are, but are diffused on trivialities and wasted. They are all perfectly natural human traits, and all are capable of some control by the will. The first is *effort* – industry, ambition, vision. By industry I do not mean drudgery. I mean intelligent effort. The thing to do with drudgery

is to cultivate efficiency and speed. The principle of this is *Do it now*. Work of every sort must be intelligent, and that brings me to my second point, which is *thought*. Thinking is automatic; it does not take so much time as we think it does. Thought is a rapid, often instantaneous, process. It is promoted by activity and not by idleness and ease. It can be carried through in the intervals of living—while we walk the street or carry on the routines of daily life. It is so constant and so concomitant that what we need to do is to pay attention to what our own minds tell us. It is a lot more important than running around asking other people what they think. But, in any case, you must have the habit of thought. The third requirement is *courage*—intensity, enterprise, sincerity, and faith in the outcome. With this comes a piece of advice about where to begin. Every man or woman must begin from where he or she is, that is, from the present moment and situation. If you are students, study more and more intelligently than you have ever studied before. Do not drone over things you know already and the skills you now possess, but push forward to the things you do not know and the skills you do not possess. Take your education in your own hands and your drudgery in your stride.

One more thing, do not suffer yourself to be regimented by such contemporary fads as “social adjustment,” the time-wasting and empty amusements arranged for you by the amusement business, and do not let yourselves be regimented by the neo-feudalism of modern business, where everybody works for somebody else. If you have to do this in order to earn your living, do it promptly and well, but do not enslave your souls. And remember this. Whether this institution or any institution or organization agrees with you or not, it nevertheless is possible for you, whether young or old, male or female, to grow constantly throughout your lives into greater and greater people.

From the point of view of institutions of higher learning in our region the aspect, in general terms, seems to be this. Students come to us year by year for a varying number of terms or semesters and then go away. They bring no ill-will and usually no serious aberrations. They are, of course, ignorant of the formal subjects we are prepared to teach and teach well. There is no difficulty here. The difficulty is of a different kind. They are unacquainted with their own possibilities of achievement. They bring the inertia of later adolescence, and a set of objectives so low and so limited that, if they realized them all, it would be a calamity to them themselves. They often bring the selfish ideals of our over-commercialized and more and more pleasure-loving society. Occasionally, they have adopted a cheap cynicism that pretends to have learned that there is no reward for merit and that success depends on pull, wealth, and a dishonest sort of tact about “making friends and influencing people” and not on themselves and their possible excellence. The replacement of these stultifying and trivial ideals by actual truth is no easy thing, and I am prepared to make only a few suggestions. Students must somehow be taught their enormous potentialities and the certainties that go with them. They must not be deceived into thinking that the road to self-realization is easy or that they have already arrived or that anybody can travel that road for them.

Houston, Texas