

If the hope was not fulfilled, the parents went into a tailspin of guilt, blaming themselves for having done something wrong or at least something not right. This feeling of the parents was happily seized upon by the children, for it allowed them to be failures through no fault of their own. Laziness, sloppiness, indiscipline, selfishness and general piggery, which are the natural talents of children and were once slapped out of them, now became either crimes of the parents or sickness in the children, who would far rather be sick than be disciplined.

Into this confusion the experts entered, and American parents put their troubles, and their children, in the hands of the professionals—doctors, educators, psychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists. The only trouble was and is that few of the professionals agreed with one another except in the belief that the child should always be the center of attention—an attitude which has the full support of the children.

I have been putting off writing about the most serious problem that Americans are faced with, both as a people and as individuals. We discuss it constantly, and yet there is not even a name for it. Immorality does not describe it, nor does lack of integrity, nor does dishonesty. Many people, not able to face the universal spread and danger of the cancerous growth, split off a fragment of the whole to worry about or to try to cure.

But I begin to think that the evil is one thing, not many; that racial unrest, the emotional crazy quilt that drives our people to the psychiatrists, the fallout, dropout, copout insurgency of our children and young people, the rush to stimulant as well as hypnotic drugs, the rise of narrow, ugly and vengeful cults of all kinds, the distrust and revolt against all authority—this in a time of plenty such as has never been known—I think all of these are manifestations of one single cause.

I'm not going to preach about any good old days. By our standards of comfort they were pretty awful. What did they have then that we are losing or have lost? For one thing, they had rules—rules concerning life, limb and property; rules governing deportment and manners; and finally rules defining dishonesty, dishonor, misconduct and crime. The rules were not always obeyed, but they were believed in, and a breaking of them was savagely punished. The rule-breaker knew he was wrong and the others were right. The rules were understood and accepted by everyone.

Adlai Stevenson, speaking of a politician of particularly rancid practices, once said, "If he were a bad man, I wouldn't be so afraid of him. But this man has no principles. He doesn't know the difference." Could this be our difficulty—that gradually we are losing our ability to tell the difference? The rules fall away in chunks, and in the vacant place we have a generality: "It's all right because everybody does it."

We are also poisoned with *things*. Having many things seems to create a desire for more things. Think of the pure horror of Christmases when children tear open package after package and then, when the floor is heaped with wrappings and presents, say, "Is that all?" And two days later the smashed and abandoned "things" are added to our national trash pile, and perhaps the child, having got in trouble, explains, "I didn't have anything to do." And he means exactly that—nothing to do, nowhere to go, no direction, no purpose, and worst of all, no needs.

It is probable that the want of things and the need of things have been the two greatest stimulants toward the change and complication we call progress. And surely we Americans, most of us starting with nothing, have contributed our share of wanting. Wanting is probably a valuable human trait. It is the *means* of getting that can be dangerous.

The evil that threatens us came quickly and quietly, came from many directions and was the more dangerous because it wore the face of good. Almost unlimited new machine power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life-span. Leisure came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all of the good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity. We have the things, and we have not had time to develop a way of thinking about them.

I strongly suspect that our moral and spiritual disintegration grows out of our lack of experience with plenty. We had a million years to get used to the idea of fire and only 20 to prepare ourselves for the productive-destructive tidal wave of atomic fission. Our babies live, and we have no work for their hands. We retire men and women at the age of their best service for no other reason than that we need their jobs for younger people. To allow ourselves the illusion of usefulness, we have standby crews for functions which no longer exist.

Why do we act the way we do? I believe it is because we have reached the end of a road and have discovered no new path to take, no duty to carry out, no purpose to fulfill. I think we will find a path to the future, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now.

Something happened in America to create the Americans. Now we face the danger which in the past has been most destructive to the human; success, plenty, comfort and ever-increasing leisure. No dynamic people has ever survived these dangers. If the anesthetic of self-satisfaction were added to our hazards, we would not have a chance of survival—as Americans.

But I expect that we will survive as Americans. A dying people tolerates the present, rejects the future and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory. I find in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. Our restlessness is still with us. Young Americans are rebellious, angry, searching. The energy pours out in rumbles, in strikes and causes, even in crime—but it is energy. Wasted energy is only a little problem compared with the lack of it.

The world is open as it has never been before, and for the first time in human experience we have the tools to work with. Three fifths of the world and perhaps four fifths of the world's wealth lie under the sea, and we can get to it. The sky is open at last, and we have the means to rise into it.

We are in the perplexing period of change. We seem to be running in all directions at once—but we are running. And I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have cut ourselves off from the self-abuse of war by raising it from a sin to an extinction. Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness—the fascinating unknown is everywhere.

How will we Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made? We will make mistakes; we always have. But from our beginning, in hindsight at least, our social direction is clear. We have moved to become one people out of many. We have failed sometimes, taken wrong paths, paused for renewal, filled our bellies and licked our wounds. But we have never slipped back—never.