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There's A New World Coming

by

George A. Sinner*

A number of years ago the Peter Pauper Press published a series of books of proverbs, which I was fortunate enough to purchase. These short, tried and true gems supposedly come from every country of the world and they are handy to have when one needs some clever tidbit to demonstrate his wit if not his wisdom. I got them out the other evening in search of a packaged philosophy in proverb form. I came upon a Japanese proverb that said "What is left unsaid is rich as flowers." Then I found one of Chinese origin that read "Schoolman stick to your books. Farmers, to your pigs." And then I found an African proverb that said "Only he who has crossed the river can say that the crocodile has a lump on his jaw." It was then I decided to forget the whole thing.

When I told President Starcher of my decision he reminded me of that old Irish proverb that says "Friends will listen, even to your foolish talk." And so, friends, here I am.

A few months ago I was asked to address the North Dakota Conference on Youth. It was about the time of the latest of the bombings and at the height of the political campaign. It seemed for certain that there was no hope for reason and no hope for education. On the one hand some of the critics of our society had lost patience with education and reason and decided the only hope for change was to blow everything up and start over. On the other hand the political demagogues were on the rampage. All who criticized the national bent were called saboteurs and traitors and were obviously responsible for the violence within. It was a dismal period, and for the youth of the State I needed something from which to springboard hope, for we must believe in hope, we must believe in education, we must believe that the truth will make us free.

There is a song written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil that seemed to fit the occasion. It gives me hope and it gave them hope. Mama Cass Elliot sings it.

There's a new world coming, and it's just around the bend,
There's a new world coming, this one's coming to an end.
There's a new voice calling, you can hear it if you try.
And it's growing stronger with each day that passes by.
There's a brand new morning rising, clear and sweet and free.
There's a new day dawning that belongs to you and me.
Yes, a new world's coming; the one we've had visions of
Coming in peace, coming in joy, coming in love.

*Mr. Sinner, president of the State Board of Higher Education, spoke at Commencement Exercises at the University of North Dakota, Sunday, December 20, 1970, at the University Fieldhouse on the campus at Grand Forks.

We need this in education--a new vision, a new world. We will, I know, be called un-American if we suggest that we need a new world. But that's all right. We're in good company. Jefferson talked about a New Society which believed that all men are created equal. Lincoln, a hundred years later, spoke of "a new world conceived in liberty". Another hundred years later John Kennedy dreamed of a New Frontier "where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved."

We do not need to apologize for our dream of a new world. We need only to lament our lack of commitment to it. That is what is un-American.

I have to assume certain things. I have to assume that we need a new world, that we are far from perfect, and that there is evil in the world and in our country. In many ways we have only a failure of our national promise. It comes as a bitter, painful shock to all of us, but there is no longer any use to deny it. There is evil in America. We have failed in many ways to reduce human misery. George Orwell was right--the paradox has reached full blossom. With unlimited productive means at hand over half the world is hungry, and many in our own country are hungry. I shall never forget an account of starvation in India by Dorius Jhabvald that I read some time ago. His column, written for the Foreign News Service, appeared in the New York Times. He wrote:

Each night as darkness halts the traffic on Howrah Bridge on the Hovehlm River in Calcutta, scores of the poor, the homeless and the hungry bed down for sleep on the cold steel and concrete. As dawn stirs this mass of unfortunates, some will scurry off to jobs which will bring just enough to keep them alive. Others who have streamed into the city from outlying villages in search of food, will shuffle aimlessly along in hopes of getting a cupful of rice or cereal. Still others will not awake at all. For sometime during the night, death assisted by malnutrition and disease, will bring an end to the fruitless search for food. What takes place at Howrah also happens in dozens of Indian cities and towns.

There is terrible hunger, too, in the Americas and in the United States. No wonder some are questioning our system which has reduced man's labor to the computer column called cost. No wonder the motives of our emphasis on technology are questioned when we have failed so miserably to reduce human hunger and exposure.

But Orwell was right on another issue, too. How near have we come to accepting the idiom of his 1984, that "war is peace." War is peace. Caught up in a habit of war, we have hinged our foreign policy on it and have resorted to the diplomatic table only when war has failed. Again the tragedy and human suffering made a mockery of our supposedly holy cause. How many lives have we offered up in the name of anti-Communism? What massive abortions have we worked in the womb of the earth with our tanks and our defoliation and our atom bombs? How many of our own sons have died, or given up their mental and physical soundness because we have believed that war is peace? We can scarcely believe that the My Lai massacre was committed by Americans, but how many such massacres have occurred in the

psychosis of war? We have righteously decried violence and bloodshed and made it a way of life. Gordon Livingston, a resident psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins Hospital, home from serving as a major in Vietnam, says it well in his article in the December Progressive:

Responsibility for American actions in Vietnam cannot reasonably be ascribed to any small number of our representatives there, nor can it be attributed to some fundamental defect in human nature or the nature of war itself. Our search for culprits leads us to the mirror of reality, there to confront ourselves with Walt Kelly's triumphant cry, "We have met the enemy and they is us."

America's presence in Vietnam, indeed its place in the world, is predicated on a self-image or moral rectitude. The belief in the essential humaneness and good will of Americans, even in time of war, is ingrained in our national mythology. The events in our history which contradict the myth are neither widely known nor celebrated, but they are there. For example, in the 'incident' at My Lai some observers heard echoes of another day in 1890 when at Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, soldiers of the U.S. 7th Cavalry massacred about three hundred Sioux, most of them women and children, in what was the last significant event in the ignoble conquest of the American Indian.

The ethic of the legitimate use of violence is deeply rooted in our culture. Our folk heroes, real and imaginary, have almost all been violent men. The level of violence in our entertainment parallels that in our streets, and we have learned to accept, if not enjoy, both.

These are the words of an American major, and in that there is hope.

The violence has been part also of the sickness of racism that has run through our culture, a denial of our basic national premise that all men are created equal. How piously have we talked of love. It has been the watchword of our Judo-Christian ethic. How we have lived the lie of racism. We have talked love, but, God, how we have practiced hate. Now we have a new racism, one that is supposed to end racism, as if 200 years had not proven how ridiculous it is.

I cannot help myself, you see. There is evil in America. Neither technology nor righteous intellectualism are the answer. They simply haven't worked. They have only served to numb us and to glaze our eyes. So where is hope?

President Starcher has given me a new book by John Gardner entitled The Recovery of Confidence. I have read only part of it, but his opening paragraph not only outlines our failings but indicates the chance for hope. He writes:

We worry about the future as we have never worried before. And we have reason. We see the brooding threat of nuclear warfare. We know our lakes are dying, our rivers are growing filthier daily, our atmosphere is becoming increasingly polluted. We are aware of racial tensions that could tear the nation apart. We understand that oppressive poverty in the midst of affluence is intollerable. We see that our cities are sliding toward disaster. And these are not problems that stop at our borders. The problems of nuclear warfare, or over population, of the environment are impending planetary disasters. We are in trouble as a species. But it may be that we were in greater peril when we were less worried. We may even be on the mend.

We may not find a way out of our present troubles until we have the courage to look honestly at evil where evil exists, until we call injustice and dishonor by their names, and until a large number of Americans from all sectors of opinion--right, left, and center--are willing to acknowledge their own special contribution to our troubles.

This is the challenge of education today--that of providing an awakened, sensitive, alive understanding of man's needs. We dare not graduate a single student who is not aware of the evils of our country--as well as its achievements; who is not committed to the use of modern know how to solve human problems. We do want our production capacity to feed and shelter the people of the world. We do want an end to killing. We do want to love each other as ourselves. We must focus all of our educational strength on finding ways to achieve these human goals. They are wrong who have given up, who shout their polemics in the name of peace, who hate in the name of love, and who destroy in the name of sharing. They are wrong, and we must prove them wrong.

They are equally wrong who believe in systems and slogans and simple solutions, who conclude that every comment, every question, and every criticism is a Communist plot.

We who believe in mankind, who believe in education, who hope, must not be bullied. The task is difficult, and we will make mistakes, and we will fall short, but we will bring closer the dream of Jefferson, Lincoln and Kennedy. Alas, I do not know. How we do it? I have only general notions. I am not for junking the whole system, but neither do I think it is all that sacred. It is not the system, anyway. It is the mood. We must somehow find out how to make the man who is educated for technology more of a believer in himself, in the happiness that will come from making the world a better place, and in his ability to do just that. I am the first to admit that the sociologist and the liberal arts people have been busy beating their breasts but have accomplished little more. They may very well have known about the evils of war and greed and racism. But they have been little more effective in bringing about change than has the technologist.

Somehow we must mix the two. We must stop the intellectual inbreeding of professionalism and cross-breed the plumber's craft with the philosopher's understanding so that those who know the mechanics of growing and building and manufacturing and designing will also be aware of the human implications of their skills and knowing that the bell that tolls the tempo of human misery tolls for the universal human family.

And then the understanding and the skill and the disposition may work together to slow the pace of that misery.

It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the progress of evil, and forget how great is our capacity for good, both as individuals and as a society.

We must stop the awful negativism of anti-Communist war and begin again the positive building of a world brotherhood of peace.

If we can find the way then the warning of Orwell will have served its end, and we can in the best American tradition of rebirth sing out hope right along with Mama Cass Elliot:

There's a new world coming, and it's just around the bend
There's a new world coming, this one's coming to an end.
There's a new voice calling, you can hear it if you try.
And it's growing stronger with each day that passes by.
There's a brand new morning rising, clear and sweet and free.
There's a new day dawning that belongs to you and me.
Yes, a new world's coming, the one we've had visions of
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