



# A NATURALIST IN OUR TIMES

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CERTAIN important difficulties in human thinking arise from failure to realize man as a part of Nature, fundamentally always subject to her laws and only able to shape his destiny through an understanding of his relations to the biological and physical aspects of his world. But movements, upheavals, and struggles of nations and peoples are not to be thought of as no more than the blind movements of animals. Nations are not merely conscious of their actions after they have occurred, and history is more than the record of necessary and inevitable happenings. Thus, all who would conscientiously and wisely direct, lead, and serve their fellows should aspire to be naturalists—serious students of men in their environment. They need to view human beings, not as guinea pigs in the laboratory, as insects impaled on pins in the museum, nor as crops to be exploited for personal gain, but as parts of a world which, when properly integrated, supplies tolerable conditions for those who desire to live in truth, in knowledge, and in justice.

In this belief, without apology to anyone, I propose to comment briefly upon government, world conditions, and your obligations. I shall not attempt to speak as a sociologist, a political scientist, an historian, or even as a university president, but will address you as an ecologist, that is, as a naturalist who believes that a living being is the product of the reactions of environmental forces upon individuals and that a human being is capable of modifying the effect of these forces.

I hold these things to be evident or

capable of proof to intelligent and informed men and women:

Since we are consciously communal beings, capable of improving our minds and social relations, democracy is for us the best form of government. We may hold this belief even though convinced that our attributes will always make it difficult or impossible for us to govern ourselves with ideal effectiveness.

Education is the most important activity of man, and a truly educated people will insist selfish, secular civilizations whose God is greed yield to unselfish civilizations in which there is equality of opportunity.

During the last two decades Europe has quite definitely experienced an intellectual and spiritual decadence, and the locus of the highest level of civilization is shifting from the Old World to the Western Hemisphere.

Democracy in America as elsewhere will always be in danger unless it can improve continually by training its citizens to use the franchise intelligently, to eliminate the racketeer and the self-seeking politician, and to co-operate consistently in promoting a government "under which a wrong to the humblest is an affront to all."

I do not need to review the facts which support these contentions. Even in the short time you have been in college, you have seen, in Europe and the Far East, the rape of weak countries by stronger nations; the rise to power of crazed, egocentric dictators; whole peoples deceived by ministers in high positions; and such evidences of social ill-health as concentration camps,

great armies poised to strike, regimented schools, a controlled press, and other agencies of dishonest propaganda and terrorism. These are not mere blemishes on the body politic, but significant signs of inner decay—expressions of degenerative trends in civilization. Surely it does not require any great perspicacity to detect behind the unlovely symptoms the infamous machinations of money-mad individuals, the rapacity of soulless combinations, and the lust for power of megalomaniacs. No intelligent person should be deceived by the brutality, elaborately embroidered falsehoods, appeals to the nationalistic spirit, fantastic racial claims, reversions to barbarism in ethics and religion, and other deceptive tactics of authoritarian dictatorships. The disease is essentially a destruction of culture by the virus of cupidity.

Democratic practices as we know them represent the great labor of ordinary souls. These practices also give opportunities to the selfish, and are slow and wasteful in their operations. Indeed, in our own country, government is today so blundering and so tainted by corruption as to depress at times even a confirmed optimist, but it may still be insisted that democracy does less violence to human ideals and is less destructive of human dignity—less hostile to the human spirit—than forms of government which require slavish subservience either to individuals or interests. Being the only method of securing a satisfying human adjustment, it is the only kind of government for which fully-informed, intellectually honest men can honestly fight. Mankind is a unit in hopes and aspirations, and can, if necessary, afford to pay a high price to preserve its faith, ambition, and self-respect. To answer a question phrased by Thomas Mann, it is hopeless folly to seek after good by means which emasculate and demolish the very good for which one is striving. If democracy is a dream impos-

sible of realization, then is man doomed to degradation and self-annihilation.

*Members of the Class of 1939:* Since the center of civilization and culture is moving westward, a heavy responsibility falls upon you. More than any previous generation of our citizens, you have it in your power to preserve man's rightful heritage of individual freedom within the natural limitations of communal living. Since America is no more safe for democracy than is the rest of the world, you will be expected not only to protect the democratic order but also to improve its operations. A part of your necessary equipment has been given you in school, knowledge being essential for intelligent living, but from now on you should, both by study and experience, continue to grow in understanding of man's duty to man and in ability to mold a decent environment for yourselves and your fellow men.

In short, your instructors, naturalists in our times, urge you also to become naturalists. They ask you to make it your business to understand and to explain to the world, by precept and example, that, while equality of opportunity is not the share of individualistic animals, it is a right for the human species, since only when it exists can communal life offer enduring satisfaction to the individual. And, finally, your teachers would remind you for the last time that you may keep in training for your work as worth-while citizens of the world if you will remember that in these years one can witness the gigantic spectacle of innumerable human lives wandering about lost in their own labyrinths, through not having anything to which to give themselves. If it is not to be disjointed and lacking in tension, human life by its very nature has to be dedicated to something, to "an enterprise glorious or humble, a destiny illustrious or trivial." The future is yours to mold for the general good.