

Tom Dunigan's words still relevant, Part II

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | January 10, 2007

EDITOR'S NOTE: Last week we printed the first part of Tom Dunigan's August 2, 1970, speech "Time Marches On" given at the Chapel on the Hill. Dunigan was the Oak Ridge High School principal from 1953 to 1971. In last week's excerpt, Dunigan had just commented that the youth of 1970 sought involvement. Here is the conclusion of his speech.

Our high school students are concerned about Vietnam. After being granted permission to have a petition-signing demonstration, they were disappointed to find very little response to that particular method of expressing concern. There is a time for peace and a time for war, says Ecclesiastes.

On many occasions in dialogue with people about peace campaigns I quote a statement made by Nicholas Murray Butler many years ago when he was president of Columbia University: "PEACE is not an ideal at all. It is a condition arising from the achievement of an ideal. That ideal is HUMAN LIBERTY, JUSTICE and the HONORABLE CONDUCT of an ORDERLY and HUMANE SOCIETY. There can be little real peace until those conditions are achieved."

No problem at Oak Ridge High School has caused me greater concern or deeper sadness than those centering around the 100 black students in our total enrollment of 1800. My disappointment arises from the distinct change in the pattern of behavior of some of the black students during the past year and a half. It is my feeling that that change has been inspired mainly by outside and nationwide influences. If there have been changes in faculty attitude, I feel that they stem mainly from faculty response to growing patterns of misbehavior.

For 13 years we operated with only minor problems as a desegregated school and certainly we want to make it clear that we do not have now the kind of serious racial problems that many schools struggle with. We hope we will be able to avoid more serious confrontations. It is understandable that black students striving for a greater unity, power and pride as black people, will be inspired to do some things that seem offensive and unnecessary from the white's point of view.

A few blacks will occasionally engage in actions that most blacks dislike but their obligation of loyalty to their minority situation takes precedence over their personal disapproval of the misbehavior. Some teachers report having excellent classroom relations with a black student, only to find that when they see him in the hallway with other blacks, his response is much less friendly. Such are the complications of life for a minority group so inescapably identifiable at all times.

The commendable level-headedness of the majority of both black and white students has enabled us to come through with far less serious trouble than many other schools have suffered. We are planning and



Former Oak Ridge High School Principal, Tom Dunigan

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working at specific measures that we hope will improve race relations in the schools and in the community.

I and a dozen of our staff and students have just returned from a five-day conference in Nashville on inter-group relations. I and about 75 other teachers, students and parents will spend three days this week here in Oak Ridge in work on race-related matters. We feel some confidence that we can maintain acceptable working relations even though we know that all of us — young and old, black and white — have prejudices we will not soon be rid of.

Those of you who can recall radio programs of the 1930s may have some memories of TIME MARCHES ON! That news program made (things) dramatic as an impressive announcer's voice reported the important events and the passing of important persons around the world. Having narrated these events in grave and dramatic tones the program would conclude with a fanfare of music and its well-known identification. TIME MARCHES ON! It seemed to give me a kind of sense of orderliness, an inevitability, about all the news events whatever they happened to be. You had a feeling that your concerns and sorrows in the day's events would be only momentary matters in this "march of time."

Today there are many new things under the heavens; there definitely is a new spirit in many of the younger generation. In these days many of us are not so confident that TIME will march on in an orderly sweep and grandeur toward the inevitable improvement of conditions for mankind. We often exclaim, "What's the world coming to?"

Rapid changes in the economic, political, philosophic and psychological spheres contribute to a widening generation gap. High speed communications media disseminate these accelerating social changes to all corners of the earth. Religion certainly is one of the affected areas.

College and high school people are noticeably influenced by the existential spirit, even though only a small percentage of them may have acquaintance with names like Kierkegaard, Sartre, Tillich and Camus. As a forerunner of religious existentialism, Kierkegaard's writing carried the dominant theme that "Truth is Subjectivity."

The way many of the younger generation, and some of the older, apply that theme is to say that many of our so-called absolute values are, in their application, subject to the judgment of a particular person at a particular time and in a particular situation. Also, many young people are critical of the cool, uninvolved, objective attitude that we adults usually take toward most of our daily affairs. It's an attitude that we acquire very naturally in a science-oriented culture. They say that our professed religion does not often really involve us to the point of personal commitment. What IS the world coming to?

Mark Gerzon, a 20-year-old, 1970 graduate of Harvard University, has very recently published his book "The Whole World is Watching." It has been called "required reading for those over 30," "an extraordinarily sane, honest, perceptive and finely balanced appraisal of today's generation gap." He speaks for at least some of the younger generation when he says, "Members of this new generation have made 'love' their password.

It is most clearly the ethic of some of the hippies, but it is also, much more subtly, the ethic of youth culture as a whole. By emphasizing that love is God, rather than merely that God is Love, youth reinterprets the Biblical phrase in order to stress compassion for what is human rather than faith for what is divine. "He who does not love does not know God." I John 4:8 could well be the scriptural basis for youth's attitudes. By living by this thought rather than by its converse (which traditional religion seems to do), young people have established their own religion. "They find their God — their ultimate concern — through love, not their love through God." So speaks Mark Gerzon, a voice for the new generation who deserves a hearing. Could that be what the world is coming to?

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Sam Keen, professor of philosophy and Christian faith at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, has said some things that come near to expressing my natural response to that question. "There is a leap of faith that can be taken only as an act of courage in which a man says; although the categories of experience yield evidence that is at best ambiguous, and is sometimes indicative of the finality of death and the triumph of evil, I, nevertheless decide to trust that there is a deathless source of human life in which the meaning created within human history is conserved and brought to fulfillment. It is in this positing of the trustworthiness of the ground of life that we find the essential element of the religious consciousness. Perhaps we are most fully human and free when we have the courage to be both realistic and hopeful."

Epilogue: So what do we do about religion in the public schools?

We teach ABOUT religion wherever it arises naturally in the curriculum without setting up courses devoted solely to study of religion. When religion arises in the classroom, the instructor's attitude in handling it should exhibit a sincerity that convinces pupils of the importance of religion as a central influence in the life of man. Ignoring religion where it naturally arises tends to imply to the student that religion is of no consequence. Recognizing frequently the part religion has played in our cultural heritage is one of the best ways for the schools to give endorsement of religion.

The school should examine its assemblies and other activities as well as classroom activities to see if there is any unfair advantage taken of minority groups. It is the school responsibility on its own initiative to be fully aware of what it is doing consciously and unconsciously in the area of religion. It, also, must know clearly what it can and should do to be loyal to the American culture and, at the same time, be fair to minority groups.

The epilogue above is Tom Dunigan's commentary on religion in schools.

I hope you agree with me that both Tom Dunigan's "Time Marches On" speech and his commentary on religion in schools, although spoken in 1970, has strong meaning for us today. His keen insight into the minds of the youth of his day is most admirable. Some of the same issues he dealt with remain today, just in slightly different perceptions.

It is my hope that by looking back at our history we can gain insights into today's culture by knowing where it evolved from and seeing how a premiere educator of his day reacted to the pressures of his time. It is my hope that Tom Dunigan's comments just might be an inspiration and encouragement to our educators today to continue to take the initiative and leadership needed to assure our youth today get the best possible guidance, education and encouragement to excel in their chosen fields of endeavor. Without knowing our history, we are doomed to repeat past failures, and by knowing our history we can achieve successes beyond our wildest dreams, using our history to guide our thoughts as well as encourage each generation to attain new and more challenging goals.