

Health Education Tomorrow, from a 75-year Perspective

Howard Ennes, M.P.H.
President, SOPHE, 1957-8

My children, who are here with me this morning, probably will cringe when I say that I'm not a preacher — but the fact is that I've longed for an opportunity to use the greeting:

“Dearly Beloved”

— for that is how I feel as I speak with you. I am so proud to be witness to what you are doing in our profession.

When John Allegrante and Elaine Auld asked me to come here, I accepted without thinking of what it means to stand up here this morning in front of you folks. Frankly, I'm rather anxious. After all, most of you were not even born when I started in a career in public health, three-quarters of a century ago. Many of you were youngsters when I was president of SOPHE in 1957.

Now just look what you have accomplished over this past half-century!

You each are better prepared, you know so much more that I did then, or do now. The scientific basis of our profession is so much stronger and has such depth — even though there is much more to be done in practice and research.

But I must remind you — not to be too smug about it — much of what you are working with now is built on what your colleagues of older generations created — in education theory and practice, in the social and environmental sciences, in information technology, in behavior research , and so on.

I recall my early colleagues, some spoken of here today — friends like Claire Turner, Dorothy Nyswander, Helen Martikainen, Lucy Morgan, C-E. A. Winslow, Ira Hiscock, Ruth Grout, Mabel Rugen, Mayhew Derryberry, Sol Lifson, Bill Griffiths, Beryl Roberts, Vivian Drenkhahn, Elena Sliepcevich — I could go on. Such a range of interests and skills, focus and dedication! In retrospect, giants!

But to their peers, they were just folks, just like you and me, with talents and foibles, with desires and defeats — but each and all committed to making a contribution by helping to improve the health and well-being of others in practical ways — and, I might point out, even in spiritual ways, as my dear friend Sally Lucas Jean so lovingly attested.

It was the aim of these and many others of your professional forerunners to empower and facilitate the “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” of those they served. We owe so much to them for the goals they set for us!

Consider the span of history you and I have lived through. My span goes back three-quarters of a century and consequently my perspective is somewhat different from yours. I don't expect you to fully visualize my times, and I certainly don't pretend to comprehend much about yours — what you call ‘music’ is quite beyond me! But what am I saying? We had our own Jazz Age and our Golden Age of extravagance and unbridled greed!

You and I have just come through another Golden Age of greed, and now are suffering from the reckless behaviour of some of the same types that brought on my Great Depression. It truly is a shame we don't seem to be able to learn from experience.

Curious, isn't it, how today we are still confronting many of the same problems that we struggled with during the Great Depression and after. I am reminded of the words I heard Franklin Roosevelt speak in his inaugural address in 1937:

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.

“I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meagre that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

“I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

“I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

“I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.”

Can you imagine how I felt — a 20-year-old trying to gain a foothold on life — when I heard those words and observed the ways things were going around me?

It is quite true, of course, that since then as a nation we have gone forward in many ways — but in essence have we truly advanced in fundamentals? In access to health care, for example, or in infant mortality?

In the echoes of history, what gives me hope are the parallels I see in how we began in the '30's to pull ourselves up, literally by our bootstraps. We did so in collaboration with a government operating in a spirit of democracy, despite furious resistance of neo-Nazi elements who actually tried to assassinate FDR.

At the time, we didn't know about that, of course. We were desperately handicapped in those days not only by government control of information, but by limited access to news, even though the mainstream media of the time were a bit less prone to self-censorship — possibly because of the frightenly personal impact of the Depression.

You are more fortunate today, for you have the internet, an invention of government, albeit stimulated by military pressures.

Unlike today, back then a more responsive government actually listened to its citizens, and together invented a whole range of initiatives to meet the realities of the day —

WPA, the Works Progress Administration, rebuilt the nation's infrastructure and libraries and community facilities, even made it possible for writers and artists to earn a living.

The Civilian Conservation Corps not only saved generations of lost youth but retrieved and enhanced our environment.

TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Rural Electrification Administration, lit up the country.

And you know of the many other initiatives of the early New Deal — what it did to rescue the banks and to rebuild our financial structure with checks and balances in the manner of our Constitution.

But what many do not know is the degree to which the people themselves were part of this Renaissance. I was there, and I can tell you that during New Deal times individual involvement and community organization were essential ingredients that shaped and powered progress.

Sadly, World War II intervened and then Korea and Viet Nam. While the impact of the military-industrial complex invigorated the economy, it also diluted and redirected community action for social goals, not to be reinvigorated until the Great Society came into being.

Many of you were part of the community action landscape of the '60's and know of the vitality and invigorating effect that on the ground participation had. Then in the Nixon years, you observed a pulling in toward citizen apathy.

Now why have I taken you on this rather sketchy historical scan, and omitted so many very critical episodes?

I've done so because I'd like to focus your attention on what lies immediately ahead for us as public health educators, and what you are being called on to do in your professional practice and as citizens.

In point of fact, it seems to me that you and I are facing circumstances having many similarities to that which brought about the New Deal 75 years ago — a broken government and a failing economy, and a myriad of national problems of public health, education, environment, human rights, even war and empire.

However, there is something relatively new on the scene — actually, of course, there are many ‘new’ things:

Improved communication technologies, significant scientific advances, more awareness of the environment, social and physical, a heightened concern for human rights.

But we of the health education profession are, historically, rather new, and stand in a unique place as a vibrant, active link between established institutions and live human beings.

Day-by-day, as you go about your professional activities, you see the ‘people aspects’ of these so-called ‘national problems’. You see first hand the effects of economic inequities — of racial and ethnic discrimination — of disintegrating families — of misplaced priorities — of the impact on the community of the behavior of FDR’s corporate “economic royalists”.

You are, I believe, in a position to be aware of people’s anger, seething below the radar — you can see it, that is, if you look.

By the way, if you want some help in opening your eyes, I refer you to Naomi Klein, “The Shock Doctrine” — Chalmers Johnson’s “Nemesis” — David Sirota’s “Hostile Takeover” — Naomi Wolf’s “The End of America”, rather reminiscent of Tom Paine’s works.

I wish I had the time this morning to look at some the larger issues we face today as a society and a nation — issues of the economy, of environment, of poverty, of housing, of health care, of education, of war and peace — all matters of fundamental human rights, as put forth in our Constitution.

It would be interesting to explore some of these issues. For example:

Health care has been a recurring issue over all my years. Again and again I observed and sometimes participated in efforts to deal with its various ramifications, almost always to be deflected by financial forces to the exclusion of basic human needs.

The notable exception is Medicare — yet even today it is under attack by forces of commercialisation — fearful, I expect, that its low cost efficiency might show one way toward actually providing universal health care.

After several years of being involved in insurance company affairs, it is my unhappy conclusion that so long as a financial profit concept remains the controlling element, no real progress can be made in meeting this basic human need. In my view, universal health care is a moral responsibility of government and of each and every one of us.

Not just health care, but each of these issues have implicit public health and health education dimensions, local as well as national.

And in a short 10 days all of us confront what may well be a watershed national election — assuming there is not another ‘October surprise’ and that all of our votes are actually counted.

In light of that, let’s think about our predecessors’ goal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the context of the brutally real world in which you and I are trying to function daily.

It would be comforting, in our day-to-day exercise of our professional skills, to be able to close our eyes to the larger socio-political swirl around us. However, in my personal experience, such compartmentalisation is simply not appropriate — indeed, is counterproductive — for those of us in the caring professions.

Permit me to put our situation today as I see it — for what that's worth:

In ten days presumably we will have voted in a new administration of our government. Actually, that will change very little so long as the real power remains where it is now, and unless specific action is taken to deal with critical problems.

We must acknowledge the existence of the forces that are weakening our democratic society, recognize that they exist, must be confronted, must be negotiated with — no matter who is in the White House.

I say to you, as citizens, that the next few months after the election will be absolutely decisive. Whoever may be president is certain to be hamstrung to the extent the citizenry fails to overcome financial-corporate pressures, and fails to express the concerns of real people and their values.

We must be clear, specific, and overt if we are to achieve the goal of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”.

As ethically-guided health educators you will, of course, continue to serve professionally day-to-day as you see the needs of the people you serve. But I trust you also will join with the many others of our citizenry who already are taking action in their neighborhoods and home towns.

I'm sure you know that there is today — even as in my earlier days — a growing movement of citizen involvement. I refer you to Frances Moore Lappé — remember, “Diet for a Small Planet”? — Her recent “Getting a Grip” and “Democracy’s Edge” report many exciting community efforts.

You have much to contribute to these efforts right where you are. I hope you will.

The fact is that your vote on November fourth is a beginning — but only a beginning.

Your responsibility — as a professional and as a citizen — is to follow through — to keep up — to speak up — to aspire to inspire before you expire.

I hope I have done that for you, dearly beloved.

Thank you!

