

Remarks by Dorothy Canfield Fisher for the
Breaking of Ground Ceremonies of Bennington
College

August 16th, 1921

Chance may be (as not only gamblers but most people in their hearts believe) the ruler of our lives, but I don't think it is purely by chance that it is a woman's and not a man's college which here today adventurously launches its educational ship into unexplored oceans. For me this gathering has a closer connection than at first meets the eye with the modern change in the position of women and in the role played by women in life. I hardly realized how far this change had gone till a casual remark I heard the other day made by a middle-aged man of a philosophic turn of mind brought it home to me.

We were talking about a small boy of our acquaintance who--like many boys in all generations--likes dolls. But his family, firmly cemented into the rigid old traditions of what is decent and what is not decent for the trousered members of the human race, will not let him own a doll. He is reduced to borrowing and surreptitiously playing with the dolls of a little girl neighbor. If your acquaintance with young children is at all large you have all probably seen some such case among little boys--often the most interesting and original of the tribe.

in
I said, "Isn't it queer? You and I have seen our lifetime the complete disappearance of the iron-clad tradition that regimented all little girls--even the active, energetic ones who only wanted to play tag and climb trees--into playing with dolls whether they would or no. Little girls can be themselves now, without raising public opinion to the boiling point. But there is as yet not a crack to be seen in that other steam-roller idea which tyrannically ordains what all little boys must be and do."

"Ah," said my male interlocutor, "women have been emancipated. Men have not."

It is true that emancipation does seem to bring with it--at least for the first few generations after the new freedom--a vital impulse forward into new possibilities. Take the Czecho-Slovaks. They are among Europeans, the latest to arrive at the status of independent national life. And they are by far the most ardent and daring and enthusiastically unconventional when it comes to possible improvements to be made in national life. They are doing things with public schools and libraries that take away the breath of Americans, who having had a century or so of libraries and public schools have lost the edge of their interest and belief in the possibilities of those institutions. It is not impossible it seems to me that women and hence educators who help to direct women's lives, are, just for this generation or so, the Czecho-Slovaks of education. Admitted later to its benefits than men, they may very well have an attitude towards its possibilities that is fresher, more enthusiastic--more naive if you will, but remember that naivete is only the cynic's name for faith.

To take one of the most discussed details of the Bennington Plan, the attempt to choose students from among young women with some living, personal intellectual interests, rather than only among those who

(more)

(Mrs. Fisher continued)

have been marked in this or that way by examiners. The recent investigations into the startling variations made in marking the same papers by different examiners makes an exclusive reliance on marks seem rather--to put it mildly--an inaccurate way to find out whether young people were worth educating. A rough and ready workable way on the whole, usable when great numbers make a more accurate acquaintanceship impossible, but certainly a system to be used flexibly and to be supplemented whenever possible by other means.

So the directors of Bennington College asked themselves, "why aren't the present methods of selecting a student-body like all other human methods, capable of improvement? Why not try a few carefully thought-out new devices to supplement the one we have used so long. Why not, in this modern world based on experimentation, just try out some other ways of choosing a student-body?"

That is--it cannot be too often repeated---the keynote of the Bennington Plan. As this new educational ship at last glides down the ways into active life, its navigators, standing to the ropes, feel the stirring tingle of the nerves that comes from the knowledge that the cruise is to be one of exploration--with the uncertainties, and the occasionally nerve-racking need for mental alertness and fortitude characteristic of explorations when compared to the usual ferrying back and forth on the old well-chartered ways.

Nobody has, about any of the Bennington Plan, the comfortable settled certainty that is the prerequisite of complacency. The framing of the curriculum, for instance, leaving certain old subjects of study out of the requirements, and inserting new subjects among the possibilities--this has been done and is being done with an immense amount of thought and care, and such a vital hopefulness as is inspiring even to think about--but not with complacency or even with certainty. Only with faith in a very old ideal of education, one often forgotten in the perplexities of making an ideal a reality --the conviction that the educational institution exists for the sake of the student, not the student for the sake of the institution. The desire of the new college which is starting today, is the simple old desire of all educational institutions, to secure first, in each student a person with some living intellectual interests of her own; and when it has secured her, to give her the opportunities she needs for developing her own individual powers. The planners of this College because of their own experience of the disadvantages of too much rigidity in a curriculum, are breaking away from the tradition that it is impossible to build an education for each individual around his own individual intellectual interests and are out to see how far they can manage to do this very thing, by the use of unlimited ingenuity and devotion. Will this part of the Bennington Plan work? We will all know twenty-five years from now. It is a very ambitious undertaking. It is admittedly much easier from the administrative point of view to organize an enterprise to open the doors and to say, in substance, "Take it or leave it." And yet--athletics are not run on the take-it-or-leave-it plan. The particular capabilities of each young body are considered by experts trained to know a crew man from a football back, as far away as they can see him. Quaint is it not? that the example of athletic training of individuals, rather than of masses is one of the heartening sights for Bennington College people hoping to prove it possible to educate individual human minds as well as bodies in that way?

One of the great obstacles to the flexibility required by this plan for individual attention, is, of course, complexity of organization, and richness and complexity of material background. I have said it is not by chance that this is to be a woman's college. It is also not by chance that it is to be located in Vermont--a state with traditions of simplicity of life and regard for individuals as against the mass. Nor is it only by chance--acting through the

(more)

austere medium of general hard times--that we meet not only in Vermont, but in the shade of a vermont barn. It all goes together, is all a part of the intense effort of the founders to keep their attention fixed on the human values of their enterprise, not to become weighted down with material considerations.

But even so, with all the simplicity, flexibility, and firmness of purpose possible, will this plan for individual development prove feasible? Who can tell? How can you know till you try? But, Clo not forget what a rush of new life comes into the heart with the act of trying. It has a virtue in itself, this impulse to explore the unknown and the untried.

The long winter vacation is another innovation that is to be tried out here without any self-righteous certainty that it is right and other methods are wrong, but only very hopefully, after much consideration as fresh and vivid as possible of the actual present situation among college students, rather than of the situation of some years or decades ago. And the choice of faculty--at least the principle and hope underlying the choice--the search for dynamic personalities with vitality, with a contagious warmth of interest in their subjects, and with an enthusiasm for teaching rather than for men and women with a creditable list of titles, degrees, and publications to be put after their names in the College Catalog. This is not even, like the turning away from examination mark and required subjects and long winter vacations, an idea specially characteristic of Bennington planners. Everybody has been talking for years about the desirability of more vitality and enthusiasm among college professors. The innovation Bennington College is making here is to resolve to pay its professors decently before it does anything else, and to be willing, if necessary to get the dynamic personalities, really to give up those impressive-looking and prestige-bestowing degrees and publications after its faculty's name in the catalog. They do not even here claim any special credit for courage, only that they are in that specially favorable situation for innovations, created by being at the very beginning of their enterprise, not as yet slowed down by any past--their past being non-existent.

In thus characterizing this occasion as the launching of a ship that is to do some exploring, rather than to follow the routes already marked on the academic chart, I must not omit to call your attention--for it is a most inspiring part of all this Bennington College story--the rousing cheers which are the send-off for the beginning of the Bennington College Exploring Expedition, from the directors of the older institutions of learning. Do you know why they stand so warmly friendly throwing their hats in the air as work really starts on the new ship? It is partly because they are really generous, zealous in forwarding education as a whole rather than their own private interest. But largely because this is, really their ship and their venture. Who thought up all these new ideas for Bennington? They did not drop down from Mars. They are the fruits of the meditations of older educators who out of their long experience have learned some of the weak places in the older methods. They are the ones who have planned, and they will man this exploring expedition. So, since it is not by chance this is a woman's college, nor by chance that it is in Vermont and starts with a barn as main building, nor by chance that it has the god-speed of some of the finest educators in the country, so we may feel pretty sure that the exploration it is to do will not be left to chance, but will be directed by wisdom as well as by inventiveness, will be characterized by a sense of proportion and balance as well as by enthusiasm and courage, that though it seems to break with the past more than most colleges do, it will have its share of respect for the wonderful benefits the past has brought to us, along with forward looking intuition of the future. And the beginning of any enterprise for which one may reasonably have such hopes can be nothing but just what this date is to us here today, one of the cheerfulness of all our experience.