

14 June 1974
Tent Talk
Tom Brockway

Mme. President, Seniors, Guests and others -

Recently I was confronted with the choice between standing here this evening or disappointing the only seniors I know who had by filibuster or other parliamentary tactic eliminated speakers who might have brought you a resounding message and even made the New York Times. At once I agreed to speak if only to confirm my belief that almost anything can happen to you if you hang around long enough; but I address you tonight fully aware of Kenneth Burke's warning that commencement audiences listen intently at the beginning to find out what they are in for, then enjoy a period of somnolency which continues until the speaker says AND FINALLY.

I have gathered that my sponsors prefer that I talk about the past of Bennington College rather than discourse on inflation, pollution, the Middle East, Watergate or unemployment among college graduates. So that is what you are in for.

You may have heard that the idea of this college occurred to Dr. Vincent Ravi Booth, pastor of the historic church in Old Bennington in 1923; and you must have wondered how a college of this type could have been conceived in a village which has indulged in little revolutionary thought or action since 1777. The explanation is (1) Dr. Booth wanted a college near his church for his own intellectual pleasure, a college of which he might be president or at least spiritual head, a college whose students would fill his pews when the summer folk had boarded up their houses and returned to Troy, Albany, Cleveland and Chicago. (2) The enterprise was soon taken over by a band of determined women - the founding fathers were mostly mothers - led by Mrs. Hall Park McCullough who recruited the women who kept Bennington

alive during its darkest days, to save their daughters the awful fate of attending Vassar or Bryn Mawr or Wellesley. (3) Mrs. McCullough also got Professor William Heard Kilpatrick of Teachers College involved and that meant that Bennington was not going to be just another woman's college but would demonstrate the principles of progressive education propagating which had already catapulted Kilpatrick to international fame; and it was not to be in Old Bennington by the church but here on the edge of North Bennington with no church in sight.

By the time the college opened in 1932 the trustees had finally found a man to take the presidency, Robert D. Leigh, a professor of political science at Williams; and had made several crucial decisions about the college.

The first decision was that the college should be in Bennington. This was very odd since the progressive education movement was centered in the great cities, and after the Wall Street crash Bennington College seriously considered merging with Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville. But the college remained here because the McCulloughs wanted it here and the pledges worth \$692,000 that Dr. Booth had persuaded Benningtonians to sign would not be negotiable elsewhere. (Not all proved negotiable here).

Though the college remained in Bennington it was hardly a Vermont institution and Vermonters themselves have been puzzled by it. One or two trustees, a handful of students, no faculty could claim to be Vermonters in the early days. I came as near to it as any since I had two grandparents who were born in Vermont and presumably several of my great grandparents were here at the time. The shortage of Vermonters on the campus was disappointing to many of us and Lewis and Barbara Jones bought a farmhouse in Bondville in the hope of meeting some natives. Unfortunately their neighbors all turned out to be Finns and Harvard professors. Whatever Vermont's estimate of the college, old grads have settled in Vermont in increasing

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numbers - nearly 200 of them at latest count - and some of us have been around long enough to be grudgingly accepted as first-generation Vermonters.

The second crucial decision was that Bennington should be a woman's college. This was very odd because the progressive education movement from which it came was committed to coeducation. The reasons it began as a woman's college were: (1) If there were going to be students in his congregations Dr. Booth wanted them to be looking up at him and not sideways at each other; (2) At the first promotional meeting President Moody of Middlebury said he had found that the men were a drawback to the women, the women were a drawback to the men; and the women won all the honors and discouraged the men. (3) Dr. Leigh preferred coeducation but he accepted the trustees' judgment that they would risk sending their daughters, but there was too much at stake in their sons' education to send them to Bennington. Perhaps a better way to say that is this: no more than 20% of the Bennington mothers had attended college in those days so their daughters were free to choose Bennington; but 80% of the fathers were college graduates and you may recall the remark: SON YOU CAN GO TO ANY COLLEGE YOU WISH BUT I WILL PAY YOUR WAY THROUGH YALE. Dr. Leigh would be delighted that Bennington finally saw the light and that qualified male students have risked coming here.

Then there was the famous Bennington financial plan which in theory meant simply that the cost of instruction would be covered by the tuition. If this is the moment to pay tribute to parents for having put out \$20,000 or \$30,000 for a son or a daughter at Bennington, let me tell them how lucky they have been that the original ratio between fees and national income was not maintained. In 1932 the cost of room, board and tuition was \$1,650 - in that year disposable income per capita (i. e. income after taxes) was \$300. Today disposable income per capita is \$3,000 and at the

same ratio the present room, board and tuition would be \$16,750. This item is inserted as token comfort for the recently afflicted.

Now there are two ways to talk about Bennington College - the onward and upward theme and the Golden Age theme. According to the theory of progress, i. e. everything is getting better, this 39th class must be better educated, more socially motivated, and more fully prepared to survive (if not flourish) in a society which does not itself provide much evidence for the theory of progress. I have no reason to doubt that appraisal of the class.

On the other hand at this moment it may be that nostalgia is more satisfying than self-congratulation. Let us look back at Bennington's early days to see if they were in fact a Golden Age. I refer of course to a period during which our students wore dresses and shoes, their boyfriends shaved and patronized barbers, and no man was allowed upstairs after 6:30 even if he were a father or grandfather.

Mrs. McCullough wrote that the day students arrived was a time of great emotional happiness unrelated either to the strains and uncertainty of Bennington's previous nine years or to the country's stagnation and hopelessness. Though the 87 students were all freshmen all but eight had single rooms, and being freshmen there was no hierarchy to figure out; there were few surprises as students made the acquaintance of their 20 housemates: all were white, most had come from New England and New York, had attended private schools, and were mostly Protestants of whom Episcopalians outnumbered any other denomination three to one. These students and their parents had chosen Bennington without knowing who the faculty would be (the catalogue did not come out until August), neither knew whether the new college would last out the year or whether a degree from it would be honored beyond the campus.

Coming to Bennington was indeed an act of faith and it is no wonder that some look back on those days as Bennington's Golden Age when freshmen held every office, ran every committee, and in class decided that EECummings was a better poet than Robert Frost, that the New Deal would certainly solve everything, and that Hitler need not be taken too seriously.

Dr. Leigh had no trouble finding faculty for the universities were retrenching and there were plenty of eager candidates. In his appointments Dr. Leigh had three idiosyncracies about which he was very stubborn. (1) He would hire anyone from Reed College where he once taught; (2) He put faculty wives to work whenever he could; and (3) He was relaxed about Ph.D.'s. To return to (1) he appointed me because I had graduated from Reed though I had just suffered a spectacular descent in academic status: At St. John's College I had risen rapidly from instructor to assistant professor to associate professor. From St. John's I went to Dartmouth and dropped from associate prof. to assistant professor. From Dartmouth I went to Yale and dropped from assistant professor to graduate student and instructor. From Yale I came to Bennington with no rank whatever. Fortunately the preference for Reed graduates ended in 1941 when Lewis Jones, himself a Reed graduate, succeeded Dr. Leigh as president. (2) Dr. Leigh hired faculty wives because they cost less and he believed they might become neurotic and troublesome if left unemployed. (3) He hired faculty with no Ph.D's and many with no MA's or BA's not because he was disdainful of degrees as has been charged but because 30 to 40 percent of the faculty were in the visual and performing arts where degrees were scarce and didn't prove anything - who ever heard of a reputable musician wasting his time attending college (unless he had in mind becoming a college dean); and in literature Dr. Leigh valued poets and novelists over historians of

literature. Few of them had advanced degrees and Kenneth Burke, as learned as any, had no degree at all until Bennington made him an honorary doctor. Kenneth was just about to graduate at Columbia when Professor John Erskine, author of the bestseller THE PRIVATE LIFE OF HELEN OF TROY, tapped him on the shoulder and said Burke I want you to be my assistant next year. Burke went into a state of shock as he imagined himself on the graduate treadmill to a master's degree and then a doctorate, and he fled Columbia without his bachelor's degree to begin his writing career in the Village. The pertinacity of institutional patterns is suggested by the fact that the percentage of Ph.D.'s at Bennington has remained constant for 40 years: virtually 100% in science, 60% in social science, 10% in literature and ZERO % in the visual and performing arts. And in those 40 years no one has noticed much correlation between doctorates or the lack of doctorates and the quality of teaching.

But the great thing about that first faculty was its extreme youth: the average age was 32 and it would have been much less had it not been for two very aged teachers in their 40's and early 50's. Julian DeGray, Jean Guiton, Kit Foster and Ben Belitt must have been no more than 25. During the first year politics and poetry were the dominant themes; everyone was solving world-shaking problems in long papers and writing reams of poetry. Lewis Jones had five students in an introductory course in international relations. They met once a week in seminar fashion and then galloped off in all directions to write term papers on the Manchurian crisis, communism, pacifism, economic planning, and French foreign policy. But the class decided that it wished to make some contribution to knowledge as a class. Mr. Jones had told them that the worldwide depression had ended the notion of progress and that society's surest supports, wealth, laws, morality and religion were crumbling away. So those five freshmen

decided that civilization needed brandnew foundations for men to live by and they set to work formulating a new code of values and a new faith in which students at least could believe. Unfortunately the results of their mighty resolve are not on record; but their effort may be the earliest evidence of a trait often remarked in Bennington alumnae: viz. a willingness to undertake any task however herculean or complicated with no sense of inadequacy.

While political talk flourished, the exuberant teacher and poet Genevieve Taggard got everyone reading, writing and reciting poetry. When EECummings came to talk the students learned all his poems; and they were chanting BUFFALO BILL'S DEFUNCT as he came up the stairs to the theatre; by superb timing they came to the line JESUS HE WAS A HANDSOME MAN just as Cummings entered in the door. Cummings was delighted then and later at a party at Miss Taggards where he met all the leading freshmen-poets. He was profoundly impressed and confessed his admiration in a letter to Ezra Pound: que les demoiselles (meaning no doubt what chicks) of all dimensions and costumes; they sit around in each other's rooms quaffing applejack neat.

Rather than accept Cummings idealization of the Bennington student at face value let me quote a member of the first class Elsa Voorhees Hauschka who recently answered my questions about religion at Bennington. TO MOST OF US TRADITIONAL RELIGION WAS TOO FORMALIZED, TOO FULL OF POSTULATES WE WERE UNWILLING TO ACCEPT. FAITH? WE WERE SO BRIMMING OVER WITH FAITH, THERE WAS HARDLY TIME TO EXPRESS IT: WE LIVED IT, IN OUR OWN CREATIVE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES, IN THE POSITIVE, HOPEFUL, MIND EXPLODING CHALLENGES OF OUR STORMY TRANSIT FROM ADOLESCENCE TO (WE WERE CONFIDENT) MATURE ADULTS.

If these judgments appear overly subjective the conclusive proof that that was Bennington's golden age came in when Bennington students proved to be the heaviest and the tallest in the nation. In a national survey of

college women in 1934 Bennington students were 4-1/2 lbs. heavier than the Smith girls who came in 2nd; and the Bennington girls topped the list in height being 1" taller than the Stanford girls who came next.

But in spite of these indications of superiority the coin has an underside. In a recent Quadrille Lucien Hanks wrote:

WE CAN TELL THOSE WHO DREAM OF A BETTER DAY AT
BENNINGTON THAT THEY MISSED NO AGE MORE GOLDEN, FOR
EVERY YEAR GROANED WITH ITS OWN SHORTCOMINGS WHICH
HELPED TO GIVE BIRTH TO THE NEW ERA.

Were there flaws in that Golden Age? ITEM in October of Year One the faculty met to discuss STUDENT ABSENTEEISM (the students had apparently been reading the catalogue which asserted that COMPULSORY CLASS ATTENDANCE SERIOUSLY INTERFERES WITH REAL INCENTIVES AND INTERNAL DISCIPLINES) The faculty concluded that 40% of the students were just not working.

ITEM. At the end^{of} of the year two/the brightest freshmen Asho Ingersoll and Janet Summers posted this accusatory notice: WE AS A COMMUNITY ARE COMPLACENT, PASSIVE, INDIFFERENT, AND SMALL MINDED AS IS EVIDENT IN EVENING, COMMUNITY, AND HOUSE MEETINGS AS WELL AS IN CLASSES. The charges were then discussed in a community meeting where their dismissal as totally unfounded convicts those happy few of traces of complacency.

Now I must tell you about the Newcomb study which proved conclusively that students arrived at Bennington as Republicans and were graduated as Democrats or worse. That fits in with the notion of a Golden Age if you were or are a New Dealer; but Sonya Rudikoff Gutman of a later class recently noted that in so small and intimate a community there was little room for sub-cultures - those who failed to accept the norms either departed or stayed on unhappily without flourishing. She concluded that

despite its liberalism and social awareness the actual process of socialization and enforcement of norms was in fact rigid and authoritarian as in small primitive social groups. She felt that deviant groups can now establish their own norms since Bennington has become large enough to support a variety of styles and convictions.

NOW I imagine I am already in deep trouble with Vida and other parents who were here in those marvellous times. Certainly if Bennington then resembled a primitive social group there was some variety of thought among the Aristotelians, Marxists, Deweyites and sociometrists. The two giants in drama, Francis Fergusson and Arch Lauterer, hardly spoke the same language; in art every style was evident from sober figures in oak and marble to mad Bauhaus constructs of wire and broken glass. In Social Science the psychologist, Ted Newcomb helped unionize the town of Bennington on the way to world revolution. Most of us thought the New Deal would solve all our problems; George Lundberg, the sociologist, said we could not be saved until we quit talking nonsense about values and relied solely on quantitative measurement. I am afraid none of our panaceas provide an answer to Heilbroner's question IS THERE HOPE FOR MAN; but at least we could differ among ourselves so long as we kept on voting for Roosevelt.

Dr. Leigh is perhaps the chief witness against the Golden Age theory. In the beginning he had asserted what is still in the catalogue that Bennington gives due weight to ethical, emotional and aesthetic values; but by 1938 he told a gathering of school heads that the strategic education in these areas occurs long before college age and there was not a great deal even Bennington could do about it. Throughout his nine years the Student Educational Policies Committee kept pointing out weaknesses and flaws in structure and functioning: the part-time musicians were not

pulling their weight; the counselors were not taking their duties seriously; the literature division was confused and inferior, etc., etc. Dr. Leigh himself confessed to frustration over the Literature Division, said he couldn't get on with Bill Troy its chairman, and wrote a friend begging him to get Troy a job elsewhere. When a summary of the Newcomb report came out Dr. Leigh feared it would brand Bennington College as a place where young ladies went astray politically and he tried to get Newcomb to suppress it. All in all Dr. Leigh had had it by 1941 when he resigned after having set Bennington on its course by his practical idealism, his foresight, perseverance and courage. Now if you wish you seniors can go back to the Leigh era for heroic, larger-than-life models to admire and emulate; or you can find them in every succeeding decade including the 1970's.

What is the Bennington graduate really like? Is it true that she is lively but illiterate, competent but unkempt, superior but self-centered, capable but cliquish, resilient but irresponsible. I hesitate to quote from such biased witnesses as alumnae husbands, trustees or faculty but here is a remarkable witness, the wife of a trustee. Let me tell you what Agnes Rogers Allen thought of Bennington students and alumnae. Her husband, Frederick Lewis Allen was editor of Harpers, author of those delightful Only Yesterday books, and he thought Bennington students were superb. He sometimes brought his wife along when he came to Bennington to attend trustee meetings and she prowled around the campus making critical notes on manners and attire. Many years later she asked me if the college ever did anything to inculcate ladylike traits in those ragamuffins. During World War II she was a big shot in the Office of War Information and she hired a lot of Bennington graduates. They were two types: the brainy and the arty, both a headache for her. The bright ones

quickly completed their assignments and then either came around demanding more interesting work or fell to doing crossword puzzles - very demoralizing for the office. The others, the arty ones, she put to work filing but they found this difficult since they were not familiar with the alphabet.

Well so much for Agnes. If a member of the Allen family were not here I might insinuate that Mrs. Allen's Vassar background blurred her vision of the Bennington product.

My own view of the alumnae is that generalizations are risky - at least I have been able to cite exceptions to most of the sweeping statements about them that I have heard. I would say that Bennington has been fairly free of the homogenizing procedures and atmosphere of many other colleges; differences and diversity have been tolerated and even respected.

But you know how it is and I don't. You have thoughts about Bennington and you will have more as you recuperate and regain your strength. Dr. Leigh used to say that the education of the Bennington student should go on forever and I say that the education of Bennington College should go on forever and you can help by writing out its strengths and weaknesses, ways and means of developing new effectiveness, and sending it to Gail Parker for her next NRT reading - she likes this idea - and for others to read and ponder.

Bennington was a pioneer in recognizing modes of learning and knowing that did not depend on the spoken or written word. Rush Welter recently proposed that Bennington seek ways to develop in students a plurality of resources for seeing, assessing and moving the world, resources that involve intellect, imagination, sympathy and responsibility. Please write in when you have thought of an approach - an avenue or a footpath - to that magnificent goal or to another goal of your own choosing.

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AND FINALLY (AND THIS IS THE SIGNAL) let me quote from one of the seniors, Judith Wilson, who evaluated her college experience at Bennington in the spring Quadrille. While she fears that her college education has taught her to avoid the fray, to attack problems not head on but obliquely, to defuse controversy and anaesthetize emotional responses by treating everything abstractly, she ends her statement with these words of hope:

THERE IS ANOTHER SENSE IN WHICH JUST AS MY EDUCATION HAS BEEN ELASTIC AND ILLIMITABLE, I REALIZE THAT THE NON ACADEMIC WORLD HOLDS INCALCULABLE OPPORTUNITIES. IT IS THIS SENSE OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE OF COLLEGE THAT INVITES ME. I WILL JUDGE MY EDUCATION USEFUL IF IT FACILITATES MY ADJUSTMENT TO AND PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD AS AN ENDLESS ADVENTURE, AN UNINHIBITED EXPLORATION OF NEW GROUND, A CONSTANT PROSPECTING FOR THE ORES THAT MAKE LIFE PRECIOUS: FREEDOM, INSIGHT AND INTEGRITY. MAY YOU ALL HAVE GOOD May you all have good prospecting.