

Thoughts on Education

Dr King

We start with the sure feeling that Mrs. Hamer (or any of a number of people like her whom we have come to know) has withing herself of a strong, self-affirming force which makes her know she is good, makes her know she is good, makes her sure of what is honest and what is not. "What is the source of this positive force -- relationship to the land? Physical freedom? Wiseness to that poverty brings? It is important and not important to isolate what Mrs. Hamer's knowledge. It is important if we are trying to develop a new concept of education. It is not important because we have each felt the impact of what Mrs. Hamer knows in a personal way that has changed our course of thinking.

What I have learned is that the beginning of knowledge is self-love, not just for the Negro because society has continually told him he is bad; but for all of us in America who have learned that self-love is bad and to be denied. Education should free us so we feel we have worth as individuals. Knowledge in the formal sense should add to this feeling of self-worth.

I have heard a lot of bitter feeling expressed about the kind of education we have received, in what are considered good universities and the "best universities" in America. Much of what is said is justified. We were taught to value the accumulation of facts totally unrelated to real experience and to feel ashamed if we did not accumulate and give back in a certain way. We were taught to honor men who could speak a certain language and the words became the end of meaning. We feel bitter because now we know Mrs. Hamer and realize how much we have been cheated.

I have also heard a great deal of enthusiasm over the discovery of "what the people know" that we don't know. And a kind of frenzied desire to keep the people as they are, i.e. keep them away from Northern influence, from education as it exists. Now we come to talk about what education should be. But we cannot do this until we first understand where the people end and we begin. I think that those most concerned about a new concept of education are those who have been through the present system and find it lacking. There is something self-destructive about having to deny totally the value of one's experience -- regardless of how much bad existed in those experiences. It is to deny myself in some strange way. Further it is unrealistic not to accept your experiences as a part of the good part of yourself and well as the bad. If we assume that self-affirmation is the basis of education, we have to believe that the positive -- self-loving part of us did not begin after we came to Mississippi or into the Movement -- it existed in us before, regardless of the damage done by an educational system, a political system or our families. We have to first affirm that we are good in spite of and sometimes because of our past experiences.

We are in danger of enslaving ourselves and "the people" because we want to hold on to something that we have discovered and found valuable to ourselves. In a sense we have to deny our own experiences, we are living through the lives of others. The clearest way to say this is to talk about mothers who have to exist through the lives of their children (I'm not sure many of us know what that means). Why? Because she can find no meaning in her own life and in some cases finds it much easier to let her children live her life rather than facing the complicated problems of finding meaning for herself. While I'm speaking symbolically, I think that the glorification of "the people" to the point of unreality is our way of returning to childhood where things were at one time good and fresh. We feel now we can create the new, good society that we have not had a chance to enjoy, for the people of Mississippi. In an effort to avoid contamination by institutions in our society which we feel are bad, we become closed, suspicious and rigid. This is the death of freedom. We should be open and fluid. This is the beginning of freedom. I do not believe in utopias.

We need a different kind of education, not only in terms of universities, but beginning with the whole attitude with which families rear their children. But bitterness against the university, the family, the capitalistic system cannot create something creative. Indignation at injustice and anger, were probably part of the drive that brought most of us into the Movement. But there is a difference between healthy anger that leads to action and bitterness

Part 2 Thoughts on education

which leads to revenge. It seems to me that the solutions will not be in no education at all, in the formal sense... any more than the solution to capitalism is poverty.

Then what do we do?

One suggestion is that SNCC begin to write its own education materials with the goal in mind of developing an awareness of tradition, a self importance which cannot be provided by the school system. This would include means of having people express what they feel and know in song, dance, poetry, writing or political activity. If we are open and flexible it would also mean not being afraid to expose ourselves to materials produced by people outside the Movement -- people like Montosouri, Laubach and even James B. Conant. Certainly SNCC and the people in Mississippi know enough about themselves to be able to evaluate what is good and what is bad about these methods what is usable in Mississippi and what is not. There is no doubt that SNCC has very special knowledge about Mississippi, about what they have learned from the people of Mississippi. The question is whether they can be free enough and allow the people of Mississippi the freedom to choose between alternatives.

We have been thinking a great deal about what new directions Tougaloo should take. I wish that SNCC would also concern itself with Tougaloo since it has the potential to become an important part of a new education in the state. Tougaloo now has, like most Negro colleges, some of the worst aspects of white educational institutions -- emphasis on externals like dress, grades, proper manners, an artificial social life -- because these are the things that help you become a part of white society. But it is impossible to become a part of white society. The alternatives are bitterness or withdrawal. The one most desirable but unattainable white society and forget you are a Negro. But there is still present the inheritance from parents, grandparents a special knowledge -- the kind of knowledge that Mrs. Hamer and Mr. Steptoe have of deep down sureness of self. To begin with this and nurture this knowledge into consciousness by the study of Negro history -- the encouragement of self-expression, of not being afraid of original thinking. But much more exciting than this, an attempt to relate the college to the community in such a way that the stimulation for a student to read comes from his own first hand knowledge of people, problems and needs and a beginning knowledge of who he is. This should include working in the community centers, nursery schools, health projects, mental health projects, FDP activities.

I have spoken frankly and out of love and frustration. I am not on the staff, so to speak at all may seem like heresy.

But my personal investment and personal gain compel me to care enough to speak.

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