

some notes on education

I have been thinking about this: Mrs. Hamer is more educated than I am. That is -- she knows more.

But, not if knowledge is a lot of different information, not if knowledge is explaining that information in many different ways: explaining it politically, or in terms of history. Not if knowledge means a lot of different facts in my head.

Not if knowledge means being ready to get a job in the machine society. Not if knowledge is knowing about injustice, because I know that, too. I know what is unjust. I know what to say in Atlantic City or Washington. I know the things I feel and the words to speak. I know what every citizen deserves. I know what every human being deserves.

She knows too. But she knows something else. What does she know?

She knows that she is good.

If she didn't know that, she couldn't get up and sing the way she sings. She wouldn't stand there, with her head back and sing! She couldn't speak the way that she speaks and the way she speaks is this: she announces!

I do not announce. I apologize.

I am a poet. I write very beautiful poems and many people love the poems. But a poem, and anything someone feels deeply, must be spoken, announced. I give my poems to people and let them read the poems. I should stand up and announce the poems. A poem, in this revolution, is like an announcement; it is an announcement about truth and justice, hunger and cold, and about caring for people. We have to shout these things. We have to announce them!

I cannot announce. There is something inside me... and it is IN rather than MISSING FROM ME. Something inside me that makes me hide in all kinds of ways.

I am proud of the poems. I know that they are good. People who read them say they are good. I know it in myself. I trust the poems. I trust my mind which, after all, produced the poems. If I did not trust the poems, I wouldn't give them to people to read.

BUT THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG. THERE IS SOMETHING I DO NOT TRUST. AND IT MAKES ME HIDE. It makes me hide in a strange way. A physical way! I sit in the corner instead of in the middle of the room. My hands shake. My throat closes up. My chest gets tight. Why? Why? Why?

Because somehow I don't trust part of myself. I DON'T LIKE PART OF MYSELF. That's why I hide it. Mrs. Hamer never hides. She knows more than I know. She knows she is good. And somehow -- I think I am not good. I am not worth while. Even though I have worthwhile things to say, even though somebody asks me to say them, even though I am sick and tired of people being silent, sick and tired of injustice and suffering.

I still cannot announce. She can announce. I believe that is because she is not ashamed of herself, of her body, of her strong voice, of anything about her. I believe she is not ashamed because she knows she is good! BUT HOW DOES SHE KNOW? Did she learn it in school? From SNCC? Or maybe it is that I 'know' something. Maybe I was taught something. MAYBE I WAS TAUGHT THAT I WAS BAD.

2 some notes on education

I believe this self-hiding and apologizing is true of many people. Even when they have plenty to say, the words with which to say it, the sense of justice which demands that it be said, and the knowledge (intellectually) that they have the absolute right to say it.

And I believe this ability to announce which Mrs. Hamer has - is part of what draws the 'intellectual' to her. And I believe she knows more. She knows she is good.

Not because Negroes are good. That is meaningless. Because human beings are good. More universal than race, and far more personal than race...altho her strength in announcing is related to being Negro in some sense. For one thing, additional confidence stems from the presence of justice 'on our side', from the history of victories now, from the determination to be free as Negro, from the fact that everything she tells is absolutely true.

But - why can't we all be announcers? We know the facts, and we have the determination (or do we) to be free.

She knows.

She knows she is good.

How does she know? Did she learn it in school? Did she learn it from SNCC? Does she really know it?

Or do we 'know' something else? Did we learn something else in the schools, and the cities and towns?

Were we taught something she wasn't taught? Perhaps taught that we are bad!

The question is not now whether we are hung-up. I think that is clear. We, staff. We, poets. We, Americans. We, intellectuals.

I know that I am. And the question is not whether release is desirable. It certainly is. My poems are only half poems - and I only half free. I want to be free. I want to announce these poems, because they are true and good and beautiful...and I must 'know' that I am also.

The questions are - some of them anyway:

Why Mrs. Hamer announces and I don't?
Where did she learn this and I didn't?
Is it learned?
Or is its opposite learned?
Is goodness a given? Badness a lesson?
Why did she survive learning badness?

What can we do?

I believe goodness is given. Man is good. Children allowed to grow freely at home, freely in their society - freely, meaning naturally - do NOT learn shame. It does not matter that the wider society is telling them they are bad. It really does not matter as much as other things matter. If it did, then northern intellectual middle class Negroes would be less hung-up than Mississippi Negroes and, in their personal lives, I believe they are much more hung up, more apt to apologize, to be unable to announce. Why?

We were born 'good' - able to announce, to be physically free as far as physical slavery is psychological and not physical (jails).

If we are born 'good', then 'badness' is taught. Shame is learned. I learned it.

Mrs. Hamer did not learn it in spite of being a Negro in the Delta of Mississippi.

It is learned somewhere else. The question is - where did I go that she did not go, learn what she did not learn - shame - so that, in this sense, she knows more. She knows that she is good.

I went into society. I was there. And that is where I learned that I was bad. Bad: not racially inferior, not socially shameful, not guilty as white southerner, not 'culturally deprived,' not unequal as woman...but Bad.

Personal, separately, individually BAD. It had very little to do with racial guilt, just as Mrs. Hamer's personal 'goodness' has little to do with being Negro. Race adds to, it does not cause this kind of personal - I am good, I am bad.

3. Some notes on education, cont.,

Society - the whole thing. Which works so incredibly well, so subtly, so totally that it is almost impossible to trace the course of learning badness.

Each person has to dig into his own special history. We can merely talk about some of the institutions which taught us shame -- some taught better than others because they captured us first, or at the most vulnerable time, or more subtly.

Every institution has worked with every other institution to see that we are completely smashed to as ourselves. It does not follow that replacing these with new institutions will prevent this recurring: an institution is, by nature, un-natural. Selves are natural; community is natural. I don't want to talk about the necessity of institutions, because I just don't know whether that is so or not. I want to talk about some institutions which helped to smash me.

the family: suffice it to say, because my mother did not receive enough love and was also smashed by the time I was born, she did not give me enough. It is not her fault. things happened, in the family, which taught shame. Little things - like not being told where babies come from and being made to feel 'bad' for even asking, like sex is hidden and shameful, it is shameful to run outside without clothes, it is 'wrong' to play with this child and instead you must play with that child and, at age six, you must stop playing with the cook's little boy - he is not only male, he is black! So we grew, to use a term, in insecurity and guilt.

the school: and we tremble in fear the first day. the public school system in America is so horrible, so suck, so damaging that many never recover. The first battle is between teacher and child. Usually, she is teaching because she doesn't have anything else to do and is underpaid, under-rated, smashed. The child must pay for her frustrations. Second battle is between conformity and creativity. It is for the most part, only a skirmish. Few children will ask creative questions, or act naturally, more than four or five times. If you are bored with reading DICK AND JANE and say so, or twist in your seat, or drop your pencil - you've had it. And in addition to smashing your nature, you learn very soon something is wrong with you to ask such questions in the first place and confusion sets in conformity and shame. It's one or the other. No matter what you feel, you must act the opposite way -- assuming you have the natural feelings left.

I used to throw up in class once a week. And my brother, by third grade, had a severe stomach ulcer. He was seven years old. Of Course! And we were not exceptional!

the church: seems to exist because of an idea that man is evil and must atone for that evil. And, to continue to exist, must disseminate that idea.

The problem is -- you cannot atone. You were born bad. That is "original sin" and no matter what you do, you are a sinner.

Even little babies are sinners.

Irregardless of the degree of fundamentalism, every religion that I ever heard of, is based on some aspect of the doctrine of man's evil nature.

4. Some notes on education, cont.,

For this reason, without pretending to be subtle, the church is a fully accredited anti-human, inhuman institution. It exists because man is bad.

I enter high school. I am almost finished. I have learned to mistrust every single feeling I have, and to repress these feelings, and to act in the opposite way. So, I am guilty, repressed, and more or less schizoid.

I join clubs. Make grades. Go to college for the finishing touches and everything is reinforced with the additional factor that now I am finally doing something "worthwhile."

I am not worthwhile, but college is - so I give it all I've got. Maybe it will compensate for my badness. I emerge, I crawl out, clutching a diploma, a transcript, a strange accumulation of meaningless data, a place in society.

I fit exactly. I was made to fit.

Sometimes I wiggle and stretch. I get smashed. After all the grades and honors, I am still guilty. Made to feel shame. I stop wiggling. Or, at best, finally, I outcast myself - but the self I outcast has its scars. I write (never announce, I accomplish (never live), I relate (never touch), I am witty (not joyful), and freedom is a kind of historical concept about people and governments, unrelated to me.

I DO NOT KNOW I AM NOT FREE.

And my fellowmen have no remote idea what produces their concerns and migraines, their ulcers and sterilities, frigidities, and crack-ups ... and don't want to know

So we build bombs. We are fairly confident that we are under control, but you can't be too sure about the Russians. And, even about us, nowadays, so we girdle ourselves with HUAC-FBI-CIO and nothing breaks forth which can't be easily covered again.

I learned I was bad, that something was wrong with me. Once I really learned it, I learned it over and over. Having too much shame to read the poems, I do not read the poems and the - I am ashamed for not reading the poems and so it goes and it is a statement of miraculous and beautiful man that he has survived at all!

I was there. Mrs. Hamer was not there. Not in. And it is very ironic that segregation, in a very real sense, freed the Negro from a society which enslaves the self.

Segregation, separation, denial of choice, feelings of inferiority, hunger, poverty - are negative. To keep someone away from society is negative... BUT THE SOCIETY IS ALSO NEGATIVE. Society, in and of itself was and is NOT desirable, ~~was~~ and is destructive. The right to choose is desirable, and essential.

I learned shame. Somehow, the shame was directly related to my physical self.

That is why I cannot announce. Reach out. Which is the same thing.

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5. some notes on education, cont.,

And that is why we lack full power. That is why the poems are less than they really are. and the movement. And the staff.

And that (lack of full power of selves due to shame) THAT IS HOW AMERICA has destroyed what SNCC might have been.

HUAC did not need to come to Atlanta. All we had to do was to refuse to break out, to smash out, of what we had learned at home, in school, and in SNCC, the institution!

And that is tragic.

The maintaining of SNCC for its own sake, the creation of an institution, the maintaining of an institution, the party line, the values, the = isolation of each other, of non-SNCC people, the judgments, the conformity, the rigid refusal to burst

is because enough people in SNCC
are afraid to be free!

Absolutely threatened by the possibility of becoming free and that is why, enough people in SNCC prefer "revolution" to freedom.

We don't want to be free. We are afraid to be free. We don't know what it means to be free. It's almost unknown. We fear the unknown and, at the same time, we have an inkling that freedom would be good.

But we are bad.

Freedom would be fun.

But we are bad.

We are a protestant culture; guilty. We are bad. We do not deserve freedom. We must atone. Be solemn, atone, Be somebody, clutch power. Be SNCC, hold tight ... but do not be free.

SNCC is afraid to be free, but the people of Mississippi are not afraid to be free!

And Mrs. Hamer knows more than I.

What else? The negative - being kept away from society - is strengthened by positive elements: Negroes maintained a closeness with the earth (which is of course ironic), with physical earth; a closeness with each other in the sense of community developed out of dependence, some of which is very desirable in spite of the 'self-sufficiency ethic; a matriarchal society, which while it must not negate the man, will be proven to be a better and healthier structure; the strength of being poor.

All of these have ambiguities. Obviously. And I have a poem which goes... at the end: "poverty ... negates the strength of being poor"

And another poem:.

6. some notes on education, cont.

when people don't have anything
they have community

I have walked alone
and children ran
to me

I have stood alone
and feathers
fell

when my hands
were empty
they
were
held

Mrs. Hamer knows that she is good. She does not believe she is bad. She is not afraid to announce. She is not afraid to be free. Because more than anything else, society did not get the chance to teach her otherwise.

Finally, I perhaps know something that she does not know. The fact that I know that she knows more, is to know something she does not know.

To stand up and sing is joy. To be aware of the self who stands up and sings joyfully - is an additional joy. That's all.

To know justice and speak out is good and a joy. To know already what Camus said of justice is good and a joy. But to enjoy the clean prose of Camus is an additional joy. That's all.

We are good. To live is to experience that goodness with others and with earth; to be joyful, enjoy

The 'good' education should increase joy.

The 'good' education should allow us to know we are good and others are good and earth and music are good... because knowledge of goodness is an additional joy!

And we have the right to be free. Freedom is good and we deserve it.

We, too.

js

Jane Stembridge