

## THE YEARS OF SUBTERFUGE, HYPOCRISY, AND SILLINESS

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### Declarations And Proclamations

The United States declares its independence. The United Nations declares the right of disabled persons. UNESCO brings together its member countries to declare a plan to prevent disability but also to integrate those so afflicted. Similarly the Center on Human Policy brings together its supporters to declare the inalienable rights <sup>of</sup> all human beings and the inviolate responsibilities we have to each other. And so it goes. Nations, official organizations, and private societies take it upon themselves from time to time to declare what's good for society or portion of it. Sometimes the declarations stick, like the Magna Charta or our own Declaration of Independence. Sometimes, they are not worth the paper they're printed on because they are forgotten even before the print is dry. The Emancipation Proclamation is one thing, while going to a spare-ribs restaurant to celebrate Brotherhood Week is something quite different.

### Slogans

What countries, states and large organizations do with declarations and proclamations, smaller and less official groups accomplish with slogans.

And so in virtually every airport, on the television, on billboards we read, "A mind not used is a terrible waste". Who will argue about that slogan with the United Negro College Fund? Or who will argue with Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy with its new slogan on behalf of the mentally retarded, "Don't think that we don't think." "There's nothing wrong" with such slogans, but they leave out too much that shouldn't be left out, or they reflect a set of values out of balance with what should be the needs and aspirations of a decent society. For example, when have you last seen a slogan, "Friendship not expressed is a terrible waste." When have you seen something like, "Don't think that we don't have feelings." Lots of important things left unexpressed are terrible wastes--like love, compassion, decency. Lots of human strengths go unnoticed by the mob--such as being helpful to another person, or courage in the face of adversity, or kindness when it could be overlooked.

Again, it isn't that any of these slogans are "wrong"--but they oftentimes do not tell enough, and they sometimes camouflage the real issues--such as, "America first", the "moral majority", "America--love it or leave it", and "let's return to our basic values".

Our history is strewn with subterfuge, hypocrisy, and downright silliness dressed up as glorious proclamations or slogans.

Recent And Old History

A few years ago, the world celebrated the International Year of the Child. If that effort resembled earlier attempts to coordinate and strengthen society's attention to the needs of its children (and it did), then we should not have been surprised, nor should we have expected, great gain from such endeavors, however well intentioned. Indeed, there is usually a risk in such forced attention on what might better be left to more natural interest. Most children can't play the violin. That shouldn't surprise anyone. Most children can't play the oboe or the piano, or the tuba, or even the harmonica. Not playing a musical instrument is not a problem unless, of course, we make a problem of it. Hyperbole often creates more new problems than it ameliorates old ones. For sure, hyperbole places matters in the limelight. That is, hyperbole labels people and movements; and labeling can be a mixed blessing. For example there are certain aspects of mental retardation that have emerged as problems long before than<sup>?</sup> their being defined by experts--widely recognized signs as those involving language, self-care, mobility, and appearance. Putting special or professional emphasis on such characteristics and, especially, on others which might not ordinarily be recognized by the typical lay person has the virtue of professionalizing and fine tuning "common sense" understandings. However, that kind of attention increases the risk

of unnecessary labeling. Professionalizing common sense understandings sometimes does mischief with common sense values and practices--and that may not be good for society or the individual. And as there are common:sense and professional understandings of individuals, this same dichotomy works with respect to groups or categories of peoples--such as when special years are proclaimed on behalf of the disabled.

In 1970, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Mental Health announced a "Year of the Child" (Task Force on Children Out of School, 1972). The Commissioner committed his own department to collaborate with other departments and agencies in the Commonwealth to reorder priorities on behalf of greater and earlier attention to the needs of children. To realize the specific goals of educating the public to the needs of children and of increasing resources to meet those needs, conferences were to be developed, local boards were to be urged to assign high priorities to the needs of young children, and new programs were to be sponsored to implement those priorities. And so, in accord with this forceful commitment, there was the expectation that significant budgetary increments would be forthcoming to improve children's programs. At the same time, public awareness campaigns promised what the state was going to do for children and, also, what each individual citizen should do immediately.

Little if anything was accomplished in connection with that campaign. As a matter of fact, the Department of Mental Health innaugurated the program after it had submitted its budgetary request to the state legislature, one which was unremarkable insofar as priorities for children were concerned and, consequently, one which was silent with regard to increased special funding for children's programs. Similarly, federal funds to the Department were not utilized for this purpose. From an idea developed by a mental health official while at a San Francisco convention of psychiatrists--"I saw the Chinese having the 'Year of the Something' and thought we should have the 'Year of the Child'" (p. 51)--to a State's commitment to address the needs of children is a leap which appears to be more a fact of the willing creative mind than the reluctant pocketbook. But that's politics, and it probably exists elsewhere than merely in the one State which was caught with its hyperbole showing.

The creator of the "Year of the Child" in Massachusetts did not have to travel further than a good university library to find the inspiration for his slogan. In 1909, Ellen Key published the English edition of The Century of the Child. Her argument was for society to make this a better century for children than the one just ended. And while she had some interesting ideas concerning the rights of children to choose their parents, the general rights of women, the

content of the future schools, the nature-nurture question, child abuse, and child labor, there is little in her book which suggests that anything she recommended was taken seriously, much less adopted by society. Compelling hyperbole and good newspapers are similar in the sense that they seem to be more important at the moment than in the long run, and more interesting when fresh than on reconsideration. This is by way of saying that the hyperbole we have accumulated concerning the disabled may more often than not be of little illumination as we enter into more thorough examination of the problem.

#### Future History

Of course, society and its institutions need their declarations, proclamations, and slogans. As disability itself, arm and flag waving, card carrying, and assorted types of oratory on behalf of the disabled is not a new phenomenon. But wouldn't you think that, our society better educates itself, as society more adroitly identifies its shallowness and puffery, we would give up some of the considerable effort it takes to create and publicize these slogans--and spend more of our time working on behalf of the disabled. Who was it who said that good deeds and accomplishments should be revealed more than announced?

## References

Key, E. The century of the child. New York: Putnam, 1909

Task Force on Children out of School. Suffer the children: the politics of mental health in Massachusetts. Boston: Task Force on Children out of School, 1972