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Adjusting to Change

These days a college diploma in itself is not very helpful or much in demand. However, the graduate who has worked for and experienced some of the great intellectual growth possible at a university will achieve both future economic benefits and a better life. In the uncertain days ahead, involving changes that can only be dimly perceived, the truly educated person will meet vicissitudes with enhanced poise and equanimity.

Some of the values of higher education cited in a recent article* were such achievements as the ability to clearly define a problem and know how to go about trying to solve it, and a sense of our cultural and intellectual heritage that makes it possible to view the present and to face the future with a perspective that fosters confidence and maturity of judgment.

Today, two of the most difficult qualities to attain are perspective and good judgment. We are flooded, even overwhelmed, by communication from the mass media. Trying to attain perspective and judgment under this stimulus is like trying to do creative thinking while a dozen people are shouting at you. In the search for perspective and judgment, little of substance can be found in the excitement of the moment. Rather, one should continue practices fostered during undergraduate days and look for more scholarly inspiration.

If one views the passing scene from a standpoint that disregards the excitement of the moment, it is much easier to identify major significant changes. One's clarity of vision is also improved by the knowledge that while circumstances change, many important facets of humans do not. Many if not all of the traits that make humans human have persisted through the ages: the strengths and virtues, the weaknesses and follies. In our own way we are superstitious, are prone to believe in miracles, are willing to be swayed by demagogues, are ready to engage in forms of mob action, including witch-hunts. We are forever trying to eat our cake and have it, and to get something for nothing.

A further aid to identifying the really significant changes, so that one may adjust to them, is to analyze the source of the forces producing them. There is a mysterious chemistry of human interaction that gives rise to unexpected manifestations. These may be short-lived phenomena such as streaking on campus. Or they may be of substantial duration and have large-scale effects at the time—for example, the Crusades around A.D. 1100 and the tulip craze in Holland around 1630. During the past two decades there has been a series of what seemed at the time very important events, such as disorders on campus. With the passage of time, the emotions that create such manifestations fade away, and often little remains.

There are important changes arising out of human interaction that have enduring consequences, and these are changes that merit careful attention. An example from the past is the Industrial Revolution. An example from the present is the continuing scientific-technological revolution. Our recent experience in coping with energy and environmental problems illustrates a need for individuals and for society as a whole to develop better ways of adapting to changes resulting from the scientific-technological revolution. To most people science is a form of magic capable of producing miracles both good and bad. Unable to make judgments about it, they alternate between excessive faith and feeling helpless and acutely uncomfortable.

In the future, applications of science and technology inevitably will have an increasing role in affecting people's lives. One can choose to live in ignorance and hence be subject to blind fear, or one can enjoy through knowledge a more relaxed attitude. One can live in a state of helpless confusion about the changing world or one can perceive more clearly than most the outlook for the future, the better to adjust to it and shape it.

—P. H. ABELSON†

*J. F. Padgett, *Liberal Education*, vol. 51, pp. 473-477 (December 1975). †This editorial was adapted from a commencement address by P. H. Abelson at Tufts University, Medford, Mass., May 1976.