

A CALL FOR CIVILITY

Dr. Porter King
Trevecca Nazarene University

After fifty-four years of teaching, learning, administering, parenting, and a range of other jobs, I am part time, adjunct, observer, and unwavering supporter of our country and our educational school system. After teaching three years in Downers Grove, Illinois, I began my Tennessee career, fulfilling a promise to my wife that our son “will not be born on foreign soil.” Five years in public schools, twenty years in college teaching, six years with the State Department of Education, and another twenty-four years in college and university teaching—the time has come for reflection on where we have been and where we need to go.

Archibald MacLeish in *The Great American Frustration* (1968) reflected on three dimensions of our country’s development: the conquest of nature, the conquest of drudgery, and the conquest of self. Even the under thirty generations have seen if not experienced first-hand remarkable achievements in the first of MacLeish’s two categories. From a longer perspective, across the decades since 1968, the accomplishments in all areas are stunning. School buildings heated sporadically and cooled mostly by the breezes, books traded within families and communities, busses that struggled over unpaved roads, teachers who learned enough in the summers to teach the following years—these are only a short list of areas of improvements in the categories of nature and drudgery.

In the third area, conquest of self, MacLeish concluded in 1968 that accomplishments were minimal at best. As evidence, he cited the riots across the country, crazed sports spectators trampling each other to death, crime-ridden neighborhoods extending to wider areas including suburbs and country villages; propensity to eat, drink, take, snort whatever satisfies the craving, no matter the consequences to self and to society.

The September 29, 2011 issue of ASCD’s *SmartBrief* includes these headlines that underscore the relevance of MacLeish’s words, forty-three years later: Promoting respectful schools, Safe environment for learning, Training fifth graders to mediate conflicts, Special needs students receive anti-bullying training, Anti-gay bullying, School safety, District turns tables on bullies. Numerous studies emphasize the need for our society at all levels to gain conquest of self. One research study concluded “Bullying takes a toll on academic achievement.” What happened to common sense? Every teacher, every parent, and certainly every student, no matter what the grade level, knows that learning cannot occur in a hostile environment, whatever the cause of the hostility.

In 1983, then Governor Lamar Alexander (later president of University of Tennessee, Secretary of Education, now senior senator) in promoting the Better Schools Program to the Tennessee Press Association acknowledged that the real place for changing society is homes. However, he cogently observed, “I can do little about homes. Maybe I can do something about schools.” The responses to current reform efforts cite the huge challenges that educators face today. Few people doubt the need for change; unfortunately, the clamor for how to change hinders sustained solutions.

By no means has our country completely conquered nature. Witness the destruction across the nation in the past fifteen months. Remarkable technological advances that have reduced drudgery have spawned a need for a better-educated work force, and consequently increasing numbers of under-prepared workers are seeking fewer and fewer jobs—to the general weakening of the country. Anger, even rage, absorbs each section of our country, and the world at large. A recent National Public Television program recalled the predictions of the sages that may explain our lack of control of self, MacLeish’s third, and most difficult, conquest. After many months, vast throngs still protest in major cities, and according to the program commentator, they “Have neither central purpose nor object of their protests.”

According to reputable news reports, Medicare could maintain solvency if two areas of self-discipline were exercised: smoking and obesity. The report said that the two are about equal in costs to society; however, obesity is “more PC.” Studies report that even minimal exercise would reduce health-care costs and promote a more productive society. Taxpayer-funded lunches, and breakfasts, must be coaxed on presumably hungry children. Consider the incongruence of this: The most valued commodity for the health and well-being of any citizen is a good education. However, much of the expenditure of education budgets must be directed toward urging and forcing people to even attend, prepare lessons, and study. The repeated cry of each generation seems to fall on deaf ears of subsequent generations: “If I had only gone to school.” The Hispanic proverb rings true: “Opportunity is a comb that life gives us when we have no hair.”

In his answer to my question “Is our country really the best in the world?” a wise traveler, keen observer of world conditions, said “No. We have more things, but we are not better.” The craving for things drives much of the crime that underscores the need for conquest of self. One evening news broadcast in one of our largest cities began with seven reports of robberies that involved killings, and five reports of malicious hate crimes. Education is indeed the answer, but fewer and fewer seem to be asking the question, seeking the answer.

Schools at all levels, including universities, face monumental challenges in the three areas of nature, drudgery, and self. In the latter area, confronting the challenge

and succeeding determines the very future of our country. James Banks, commenting on the need for dealing with diversity in our country, warned that our “future depends on it. After all, many civilizations have not made it.” Preparing for a Bible class on I Thessalonians 5 while preparing this article, I quote these admonitions, totally relevant to the point: honor your leaders who work so hard for you, get along among yourselves, gently encourage the stragglers, be careful when you get on each other’s nerves, pray all the time, be patient with each other, don’t be gullible

Reflecting on the opportunities that public and private education has afforded me, and on the many teachers who have “shaped my destiny,” and on the awesome potential and critical need we have before us to conquer self, we must reaffirm civility. Our goal should be that this generation will be known and renowned for inventions and improvements in all areas of life, but it will be remembered best of all for the conquest of self.