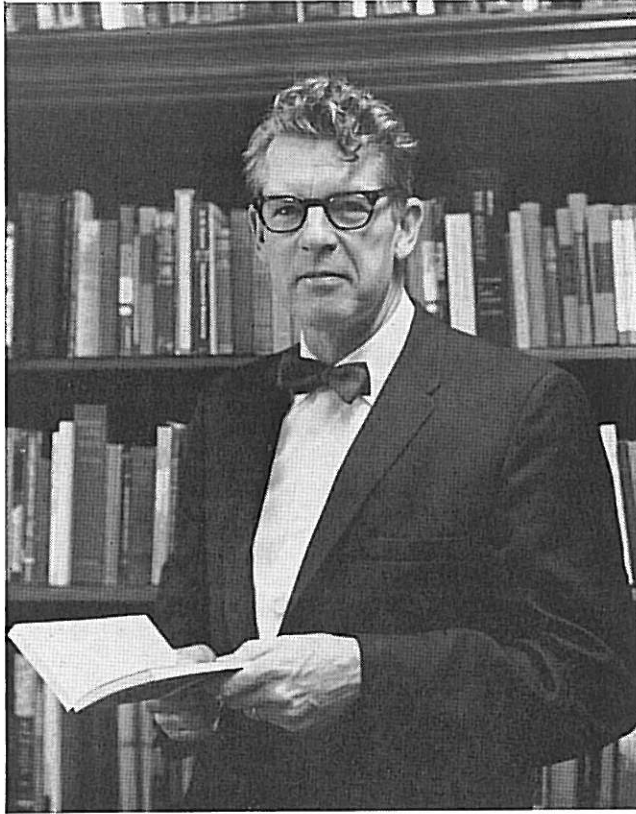


# 'What'll We Do?'

A professor and father suggests listening to "these fiery and earnest young rebels."



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*This text was prepared by Professor Stocking as an address which was given Freshman Parents' Weekend, Oct. 25, 1969. Because it was written in response to a request for a 12-to-15-minute talk, Professor Stocking was reluctant to see it treated as an article. He reminds us that it was offered only as one very small observation on one facet of a large and complicated problem.*

— The Editor

Two years ago the Williams campus was sizzling with a hot debate: everybody was arguing about the artistic merits, if any, of that controversial movie, *Bonnie and Clyde*.

I don't know how long this movie will stand up as a work of art, but I do know there was one scene I will never forget. After a few successful bank robberies, Clyde and his brother, in a state of wild and exuberant excitement, engaged in a loud conversation, which went something like this:

"Boy! Isn't this great!"

"Yeah! This is marvelous!"

"O Man!! Now we're going to have some fun!!"

"You said it!! Now we're really gonna have ourselves a *time!*"

"Yeah!!"

Then there was a pause; and after several seconds, one of them said, "What'll we do?"

It's a good question. It is a big question.

And it is also a question which is troubling the minds of young people all over America.

Indeed it is *the* question which we who teach in liberal arts colleges have been diligently trying, for years, to get our students to ask and answer on their own. And now they are asking — and answering — this question with a serious and passionate intensity that we never dreamed possible.

"What'll we do with our lives?" they ask. And they often answer (or so it seems), "Well, first of all, not anything you older people want us to do."

This kind of answer, in turn, causes those of us who are parents and grandparents to ask, "What'll *we* do?" "What'll we do about these fiery and earnest young rebels who seem so terribly wrong, yet whom we so dearly love — whether or not we dare let it show?"

It's a question we ask while standing unsteadily on our side of that wide and apparently bottomless canyon known as the generation gap.

It's a question I have asked, not only as a parent and grandparent, but as a teacher.

In fact, not long ago I got to wondering, in an idle moment, about possible ways in which I might try to move closer to the student generation in my own classes. I speculated, for example, about whether it might not be good strategy to begin my English courses with a discussion of some literature my students know and like. But I emphatically rejected this idea because I knew that the stuff young people go for is junk — simply not worth our time. Of course my view of the literary tastes of young people was based on almost total ignorance.

I was jolted into an awareness of my own bigotry when, on a social occasion, the teen-aged daughter of the house forced her favorite record on those assembled, and I tried — just for sport — to leap over the generation gap, and listen. And as I listened, I began to realize that I was hearing a genuine work of art.

As a result of this highly educational experience, there are now nearly 40 freshmen at Williams who have recently been forced to write a paper on a lyric written by Paul Simon and sung by Simon and Garfunkel. The lyric is called "The Dangling Conversation," a phrase which identifies the ruined relationship between a fellow and his girl. Their love for each other, once the core of their lives, is now gone. They are still together, however, and their lame efforts to make conversation remind the speaker of what they have lost, and how they have moved away from the strong and powerful center of life, out to its flimsy borders.

The little song is in three stanzas. The first places the speaker and his girl in a room where they are drinking coffee, and it used the analogy of a still-life watercolor to define the listless atmosphere of the late afternoon. Another metaphor is that of sea shells lying near the ocean. When you put a shell to your ear, you hear a roar; and the song uses this inarticulate roar to dramatize the lack of any coherent meaning in the lives of the one-time lovers. The speaker has frequently heard this roar of nothingness in the spineless small-talk of himself and his beloved.

It's a still-life watercolor of a now-late  
afternoon  
As the sun shines through the curtain lace,  
and shadows wash the room.  
And we sit and drink our coffee, couched  
in our indifference,  
Like shells upon the shore. You can hear  
the ocean roar,  
In the dangling conversation, and the superficial  
sighs, the borders of our lives.

In the second stanza poems of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost are offered as representing a series of achievements or victories, in contrast to the lovers' own failure and defeat; furthermore, the lovers themselves are like unsuccessful poems.

And in the final stanza we learn more about the lovers' dangling conversations. They speak of things that supposedly "matter," but the subject of their conversation are those of the phony chatter one hears at intellectually pretentious cocktail parties: namely, the current state of the theater, and the validity of psychoanalysis. These questions, of course, do not really matter to the speaker, who notes how the fading of the light in the late afternoon parallels the gradual disappearance of their love. As darkness fills the room, the two people drift farther apart, and the speaker sees his beloved as a stranger, lost in the trivia of life which has no direction:

Yes, we speak of things that matter, with  
words that must be said.  
"Can analysis be worthwhile?" "Is the  
theatre really dead?"  
And how the room has softly faded, and I  
only kiss your shadow,  
I cannot feel your hand, you're a stranger  
now unto me, lost in  
The dangling conversation, and the superficial  
sighs, in the borders of our lives.

When I read these words, I know that I am in the presence of authentic art; and the fondness of young people for songs of this calibre surely indicates the early formation of a literary taste which is solid, thoughtful, and already on the way to maturity.

This particular lyric, like many of those sung by Simon and Garfunkel, is rather bleak and cheerless in what it says. And I find that when I talk to members of my generation about such songs, I tend to hear one standard comment. It goes something like this: "These young people irritate me because they're so cynical — especially for their age! They're concerned with human isolation, despair, the loss of love, how grim and dark and pointless everything is! It's disgusting for adolescents to have such attitudes!"

MY response to such a remark is to say, "Look, supposing these young people *are* aware of loneliness and drabness in modern life, and the mess which has been made of civilization. First, are all these things real, or are these young people simply inventing them? Of course they're real! Look at the headlines of any newspaper, any day, of any week! And second, what are these young men and women doing about their feelings of futility and cynicism? Well, one thing they are doing is singing. They are transforming these ugly facts, and their own feelings about these facts, into song, into art."

I feel that the population explosion of guitars in recent years is one sign of great health and great promise. Wherever you see young people today — in San Francisco, in Copenhagen, in London, or along the highways — you see guitars. I like this sight.

Furthermore, not all of the songs we hear sung are, in fact, cynical. During the recent Moratorium I stood among several hundred college students who were conducting themselves with poise and dignity while a small group of boors were taunting them with obscenities, cat-calls, and insulting names of the most appalling vulgarity, in an effort to lure these students into a brawl.

The students were faced with a decision about how they should react to these taunts. For they knew that mere name-calling is a childish weapon, whether the names are unsavory terms from the gutter or take the more elegant form of Vice President Spiro Agnew's "effete, impudent snobs."

How did these young people respond to the name-calling? They sang. They sang a pop song, repeating over and over again the chorus:

Come on, people!  
Smile on your brother.  
Everybody get together.  
Try to love one another,  
Right now.

Such a response, I felt then — and I still feel — was by no means the worst answer they might have made to the question, "What'll we do?"