

A SERMON DELIVERED BY REV. H. KELSEY BICKNELL
at Pullman Memorial Universalist Church, Albion, N.Y.

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(c)

THE GREAT WRITE-OFF

It seems to me more distinct, more blatant than ever before. It comes through to me (as I sense and see and hear it happening) with an impact demanding some notice and some comment. There is so much going on about us in our frenzied world just now -- so much that in one way or another, little or great, like it or not, touches us, effects us, invades where we are. We loosely categorize or identify the "goings-on" as change, growth, disturbance, revolution, progress, struggle . . . Almost any descriptive seems to be applicable under one condition or another.

And the speed - the sheer speed and frequency of events, to say nothing of their weight and influence. Consider just a few: the war and counter-war on WELFARE; the strikes and rebellions on COLLEGE CAMPUSES; the fair insanity of SKY-ROCKETING ECONOMY; the across-the-board, last ditch struggles of churches for IDENTITY AND SIGNIFICANCE; the whole gamut of eruptions and deteriorations lazily (if not irresponsibly) accounted for by a so-called GENERATION GAP. The sheer frequency and over-lapping, to say nothing of the weight and influence, make it no longer possible to simply cluck tongues, sigh heavily in disgust, and blame everybody and everything in sight. There isn't a soul sitting (or standing) here who isn't involved somehow, effected somehow, reacting somehow, and responsible somehow.

That which I want to emphasize for a few minutes this morning is a part of the re-acting somehow . . . and as I noted earlier: it comes through to me as more distinct and more blatant than ever before, demanding notice and comment.

Now I'm speaking and offering these comments to a gathering of "church people". In my particular orientation, that, in itself, suggests and promises potential results, potential denouement - a little different than, a little more than the ordinary. (And just here I toss in as parenthetical: If the "little more" and the "little different" cannot be expected here, then why are we here anyway?) So - - and hoping that we find it possible to recognize ourselves as "church" in that sense - - that part of the re-acting somehow to the impact of the so much that is so rapidly going on about us in our frenzied world . . . that part I identify as THE GREAT WRITE-OFF, and I believe its actuality deserves your attention and your awareness.

I am more than a little disturbed and disappointed that people (not all, but a great many) are less and less TOLERANT, less and less PATIENT, less and less RATIONAL, less and less BENEVOLENT, less and less UNSELFISH, less and less ACCEPTING AND UNDERSTANDING, less and less themselves. If an idea does not stand the "carbon copy test", it is written off. If an objective is not tailor-made for existing pigeon holes, it is written off. If that person is not of our generation, whether we be young or old, he is written off. If behavior or morality does not measure up (or down), it is written off.

I see, and read, and hear, and feel it all the time. And so do you.

The child, or the youth, yields to the temptation of writing off the parent (the older generation), and vice versa. What makes any of us think that the answers to the problems and inconsistencies of life, society, or the individual are the exclusive possession of the men and women in any one age group? True - the older generation (usually) can claim hard-earned wisdoms nurtured through more years of experiences, good and bad. But - just as true, the youthful, untried, restless, and eagerly inquiring can (usually) claim less atrophy, less stagnate satisfaction, and more daring energy. Where are tolerance and patience? Where are unselfish acceptance and understanding? Rather than here yielding adversely, might not both better yield to the temptation to know one another more fully, to accept one another's sincerity, and to honestly and eagerly seek the advantages of the benefits each has to offer the other? I suggest that the so-called generation gap is a myth; a catch phrase fired from an ill-aimed effort at excuse making; a suggested phenomenon, exploited by a few (but enough) of the voices of journalism and the lecture podium to manufacture a convenient band wagon and

scapegoat. THE GREAT WRITE-OFF has, unfortunately, become the reaction.

The student body (though in minority numbers) yields to the temptation of writing off the faculty and administration, and vice versa. What makes either of those segments of our great higher educational system and structure think that the other is dolt, dunderhead, or diabolical? Both have missed the mark, to be sure. But so have both amassed great merit in ambitious intent, integrity, clearly identifiable goals, and remarkable accomplishments. Where are tolerance and patience? Where are unselfish acceptance and understanding? Rather than here yielding adversely, which, as we well know, results in violent, destructive rebellion or in retaliatory subjugation -- might not both better yield to the temptation of rational, peaceful, patient confrontation with the other, honestly and openly accepting each other's sincerity and integrity? There are fair and legitimate limits within which both must be allowed to function. Beyond these (again, as we well know) emotions, and emotions only, take over. THE GREAT WRITE-OFF then becomes the unfortunate reaction.

The church across the street (more often than any would care to admit) yields to the temptation of writing off the church across the street, and vice versa. And, in close identity with this is the temptation of the church to write off the unchurched, and of the unchurched to write off the church. What is it that makes any church believe that it has purchased all the tickets and booked exclusive passage on every conveyance that may (at some remote date) slip peacefully into the harbor of mankind's sanity, equilibrium, and "salvation"? There are some who need a tramp steamer; there are some who need a leaky row boat; there are some who need a first-class luxury liner; there are some who need a surfboard; there are some who need to swim, entirely on their own. THE GREAT WRITE-OFF easily becomes the reaction in the face of the swim of things that are going on in man's struggle to identify himself in life as something more than simply the image of other men. Long-cherished beliefs are written off. Then, from across the street, a newer (so-called lesser) belief is written off. Stalwart belief in man, confident belief in progress, sincere belief in a God, energetic belief in liberalism -- each, in turn and variously (from across the street), written off. Where are benevolent patience and unselfish tolerance? Where are individuality and acceptance? Where are understanding and oneness of unbogged purpose?

In the backlash of all that is so rapidly and so frequently and so effectively going on about us in our frenzied world -- we are reacting somehow. More distinct, more blatant than ever before, and with an impact that demands notice and comment, a part of that 'reacting somehow' comes through to me as THE GREAT WRITE-OFF. I say to you (or to anyone): CONSIDER before you react.

Lillian Smith has written: "Every creative act, every honest question or honest dissent, every gesture of courage and faith and mercy and concern will count; every new awareness will count; every time we defend the human spirit it will count; every time we turn away from arrogance and lies, this too, will count in the project called Human Being Evolving."