

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

K. Patricia Cross

I am pleased to be here this evening, not only for the honor of sharing the platform with such distinguished company, but also for the sheer joy of attending an up-beat educational conference where participants have every reason to look forward to a future brighter than their past.

As an educational conference habitue, I confess that I have grown accustomed over the last several years to addressing audiences who are generally convinced that their greatest years are behind them. So prevalent is the feeling that the prestigious Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1973) gave the first chapter of their final report the ominous title "From Golden Age to Time of Trouble." Predictably, the discussion centers around the financial depression, declining enrollments, the shrinking job market for graduates, and the crisis of confidence in higher education. "The prevalent attitude," the Commission observes, "is more to look back with longing than to look ahead with hope... the golden age of the past is more attractive than any conceivable prospects for the future (1973, p. 7)."

The assessment of the Carnegie Commission may be correct for much of institutionalized education, but it probably fails to describe accurately either the past or the future of adult education. As far as the past is concerned, I'm not at all sure

that adult education ever shared fully in the golden age, and that may make adult educators somewhat less nostalgic about the good old days. As for the future, I suspect that like everything else these days, there is good news and bad news ahead for adult education, but I suspect that the good news outshines the bad by a considerable margin. First the bad news.

Quite surprisingly, to me at least, the bad news is coming out of two states that should be providing models of leadership for adult education -- California and Florida. The governor of California is making noises about the viability of what he calls programs that are not in the educational mainstream. "What is important", Governor Brown says, are "the grammar schools and high schools. What they are teaching there, you can't get along without. When we get to adult education and the extended university and the external degree program and some of these other activities, we may be offering a service that is interesting, but it is not what I would call a survival service (Los Angeles Times, July 20, 1975)." And so saying, the governor put a heavy pencil to the budgets of some new degree programs for part-time adult students. Whether there is a conspiracy between the sunshine states, I can't say, but Florida recently axed state support for non-credit "self-improvement" courses for adults. No doubt about it, those two state's actions are bad news, and it could mean that even though adult education did not share fully in the golden age of higher education, it will attain full partnership in the times of trouble that lie ahead. But I think not. In the first place, I suggest that the phrase "time of trouble" refers more to

institutions than to education. Traditional institutionalized education probably is in for some trouble, since the deinstitutionalization of education is the major trend of our times. But adult education has never been very heavily institutionalized. In part, it has operated on the fringes of institutionalization because it has had to. But throughout its long history adult education has typically answered to a grass roots constituency.

The good news for adult education lies in the demands of a public that is increasingly interested in life-long learning. The trends in the growth of education for adults are familiar to most of you. Enrollment of part-time college students is growing six times as fast as full-time enrollment, and the proportion of adults engaged in some type of formal learning activities, outside of full-time schooling, has grown from one in five in 1962 to one in three today.

The reasons are fairly obvious. One of the clearest findings of research is that the more education that people have, the more they want. Thus, the rising educational level of the citizenry creates its own demand, and when this demand is met by educators making a greater variety of learning experiences available to broader segments of the society, a self-perpetuating cycle is set into motion. Fueling that cycle are factors such as the increasing need for knowledge in complex societies, the rapid obsolescence of knowledge in careers and the professions, and the increase of leisure time available to the average citizen. In 1900, the work week was 60 hours; by 1930 it was 48. By 1940, the 40-hour work week had been established, and today it is closer to 37.5.

As most of us know from personal experience, however, workers in the professions have not shared in this increased leisure. But since professional knowledge is quickly outdated, we too find increasing pressure for continuous learning. The Minnesota Supreme Court, for example, has ordered lawyers in the state to return periodically to formal studies or to cease practicing law. In California, public accountants must complete 80 hours of study every two years in order to retain their licenses. Whether learning is at the level of literacy training, vocational retooling, or professional education, we are probably approaching what Milton Stern has called "compulsory adult education."

Whether for leisure or for work, the rising interest in continuing or recurrent or life-long learning is world wide. Governor Brown notwithstanding, adult education is increasingly mainstream and increasingly essential for survival. I see no way that politicians can turn back the time. The learning of adults has pervaded the world-wide community, and as such it represents the emergence of the learning society and the cutting edge of things to come. The challenges for leadership from experienced adult educators are great, but I predict a bright and sunny future for adult education, and I hope that this conference will aid the cause of the national and international commitment to the education of adults.