ME NEGRO CHILD IN BOSTON

some reflections

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April 1963

A committee was appointed by Mayor Collins in March to do something to celebrate the 101st anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. A central theme should be that all Americans achieved a greater freedom and dignity when slavery began formally to end with the preliminary proclamation issued after the battle of Antietam in September 1862. Nevertheless, this act has been more significant to Negro Americans than to any other group, and any celebration of it should center around what these Americans have and have not achieved in our country.

The initial suggestion offered the committee was to organise a ceremony this summer in combination with an Elks convention. After a search for some better idea, it was decided to try and dramatise the situation that faces the Negro child in Boston, and I was asked to dig up some ideas in a paper. If the present is wretched but the future promises something better, then one can counsel patience and hope. If the future will be conditioned by the schools and neighborhoods and job opportunities presented our children today, then perhaps there is less reason for either patience or hope.

As background for this hastily written paper I have used the Sargent Report of May 1962 on the Boston public schools, a Harvard thesis on Public School Education of Negroes in Boston (May 1960) by Nancy St. John, discussions with persons who have seemed concerned and informed, plus reflections added of my own.

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A child is a member of a family and of a community; the community is most formally represented to him by its schools. American cities as a whole are decaying, losing population, and threatened with bankruptcy. Boston is worse off than most. No other major city suffered as large a proportionate population drop: 1950 = 801,000; 1960 = 697,000. Yet some problems have been faced. Boston retained or achieved distinction in some fields of community life - medicine, music, airport and parkway construction - but no one in his right mind would make any claim of excellence for the Boston public school system.

Though there was money for other purposes, there lacked money to construct new schools (in 1920 13% of Boston children attended schools over 50 years old, in 1960 30% did), and there lacked the will to keep the schools that existed in decent shape. The Sargent Report of 1962, which tries to be courteous and blame nobody, gives a heartbreaking picture of the physical decay of so many of our city's schools: dark, gloomy hallways, dirty and smelling basement toilets, cracked walls with rotted window sills, poorly heated and ventilated rooms.

There lacked money for better salaries to attract better teachers so that Boston enjoys the statistic of having over 50% of its teachers over 60 years old; and with this limitation given, the extra limitation is added
of narrow recruitment, Boston Teachers College and Boston College being the background of most of the system's teachers. Any criticism, any visitor was resented because it was assumed that any criticism from the outside could only be hostile. Some cities had tried new ideas in educational methods or in the relationships between school and society, but not our town. The single reason most given for the departure of middle class families from Boston to the suburbs is the desire to secure decent schooling.

If the city's schools as a whole are poor, the ones for Negroes are at the bottom of the heap, whether in physical facilities or academic attainments or social standards. Up till the recent present Boston has just not been interested in its public school system and even less so in its Negro schools. When Nancy St. John wrote her thesis on Public School education of Negroes in Boston for a Harvard seminar of Professor Gordon Allport, she stated that no previous studies had ever been made and no group in Boston other than the NAACP had shown any interest. Nor was interest encouraged, for Superintendent of Schools Dr. Haley and the then school committee had forbidden her to interview principals or visit schools.

On the other hand, it is unfair to blame the schools for a general social problem. If Boston's total population is rising, its Negro population is rising: 3% in 1940, 5% in 1950, 9% in 1960 and an estimate of 15% in 1970. The Negro percentage of Boston's elementary and junior high school population is even higher—around 18% in 1960 because Negro families are younger, have more children, cannot move to the suburbs and don't as much attend the parochial schools where almost one third of Boston's children go. Graver than any population rise is the rise of more intense segregation as white families leave for the suburbs and Negro families migrate in from the South. A school like William Lloyd Garrison or Phillips Brooks reflected its community by being practically all white in 1950, half and half in 1955, and almost all Negro in 1960. And graver still than the change in racial composition, as Mrs. St. John reported from her interviews with Negroes in Roxbury, is the change of class composition. Middle class families leave, proletarian families come in from the South with less skill in city life and little ability to take advantage of the educational facilities that do exist.

The new migrants are transient (in some Roxbury schools one-third of the children will move in one year), are not prepared to learn, have poor reading skills and diction, are restless and full of pent-up aggression. There is poor discipline and little parental contact. The teachers who cannot transfer out give up and become cynical or lazy or defeatist. The fighting and vandalism played up in the press were probably exaggerated, Mrs. St. John felt, but worse really than this was the answer of "they're doing as well as can be expected" to anyone who complained.

Boston has historically been faced with the challenge of trying to handle a set of existing problems while an entirely new set of problems is being forced upon it. It is worth reading Oscar Handlin's "Boston's Immigrants" to gain a historical perspective of what the Irish immigration meant in the 1850's, of the absolute lack of human contact between the old and new groups, of the inability of existing standards of education, religion, social welfare, or government to absorb the newcomers into the city, of the pressure of numbers that seemed to preclude any partial solutions of the newcomers' problems. The process of adjustment was slow. Sometimes success—a popular, a rising standard of living—brought the two groups together sometimes sympathy over tragedy. Boston has solved the problem of religious and national differences less well than many American cities, but it is a problem we have learned to live
with and most of us can appreciate our neighbors' oddities and feel that our city is richer because of them.

The city that a Negro child faces in Boston is part of a national question. White population in the 14 largest metropolitan areas increased 3.7% from 1940 to 1950, while the Negro population increased 67.8%. The figures for 1950-1960 were and President Kennedy's effort to establish a Department of Urban Affairs with probably a Negro secretary as head was one answer to this question; Congress's rejection of this answer reflects the rural, Southern and conservative attitudes of American politics. A great deal of money is needed for solid urban renovation and not much money is really available if 75% of our national budget goes to pay for past, present, and future wars.

This is also a question for the state house and city hall. Massachusetts does have a Negro attorney general, as no other state in our country has or, possibly, has had since Reconstruction. But a more typical approach on the political level is the Negro contralto who sang the Star Spangled Banner at Governor Peabody's inauguration; compensation of symbol for reality. A stringent new law against housing bias has recently passed the legislature, but does the Commission against Discrimination have the budget to enforce it? Urban renewal does offer possibilities of better housing and with it better schools, but the effect too often has been to destroy what neighborhood stability and property ownership exist and to force by higher rents the creation of new Negro slums in other areas. Certainly one result of the new expressway will be to cut off the South End even more effectively than before from the rest of the city.

Boston has many decaying older industries and some exciting newer ones, many connected with electronics, as well as the advantages to be gained from the large scale new construction that one sees here and there across the city. How does the Negro benefit? The low standards of the segregated public schools where he begins his education and the low income of his parents exclude him almost as effectively as any Mississippi law from the technical and liberal arts schools for which Boston is famous. He does not obtain the training to become and engineer or an architect. He does not enter the apprentice training to become a construction worker or an electrician. No matter what their spokesmen say at conventions, one historic function of American unions has been to protect white jobs by excluding Negro workers. The more technical and automated American society becomes, the more marginal becomes the position of the Negro lacking both skill and capital. The argument of the Black Muslims that the integration and success of 1% of the Negro world have been employed as vicarious compensation for the 99% who neither succeed nor integrate is not entirely false.

What of value is being done to improve matters so that a Negro child of 5 or 10 might have a better world to look forward to by the time he becomes a man? Everybody knows one decent, minor ameliorative project.

The greater concern for the quality and leadership of our public school system is encouraging. A program of new construction, a concern to find better leadership, better paid and trained teachers, and new methods will help all children. One experiment is the Higher Horizons project tried out in New York. This is a change from the old idea that slum children get only cheap education because they're not worth anything better to the new idea that slum children start from so far behind that they need better and more costly education to catch up with other children and express any human potential God may have given them.
The city-wide campus high school sketched out in the Sargent Report, to serve through special facilities and skilled teachers the children gifted enough to benefit from them is one step. Though how would our dreary old teachers and dreary old children fit into these bright new buildings?

I have been heartened also by what I have seen of the Northern Student Movement's tutorial program with South End and Roxbury children. Similar to projects tried in North Philadelphia, Harlem, Hartford and New Haven, this is an effort to bring college and some high school students to work, on a one-to-one basis, with Negro children, trying first of all to solve personal problems in reading or arithmetic so that the child can succeed instead of fail in school. To encourage them also to believe that education in general has value, to believe, because of one other person's interest, that the world is a reasonable place. And, also, to bring the realities of American society to middle class students who will share the leadership of it. This NSM program had about 30 individual tutoring contacts in 1961-2, 250 tutors and 600 tutees in 1962-3, and has organized a full time program in the South End for this summer.

Conclusions - What might a committee do?

1. Publicize a census of representative segments of our community—businesses, labor unions, churches, schools, service organizations—to ask the question of what have you done in the last two years to make it a bit easier for our Negro fellow-citizens to better themselves, to move more freely in what is supposed to be a free society? What do you plan to do in the next two years? Would you, will you hire a Negro secretary as well as a Negro janitor? If not, why not? Are employment agencies a source of help or of sabotage? To test our new anti-bias law by sending agents to rent rooms in nice neighborhoods and calling up legal penalties against people who employ a run-around. To show children that you can get ahead and make some money and gain a little dignity. To encourage a certain toughness on these issues so that the Muslims cannot say they are the only aggressive ones.

2. Investigate and publicize the realities of ghetto education in Boston. In what way does the present school system merely reinforce the status quo?

3. Reward imaginatively the children of promise—a concept absolutely alien to the Boston public school system. Find out who are the best students in every class in every school in the Negro districts and give them a parcel of a paper-back books in recognition of their scholarship and in hopes they will go further. A pack of half a dozen books bought at quantity discount would cost about $2. Volunteer ladies could wrap the packages, retired Harvard professors could hand them out. (A project similar to this is being tried this spring by Morehouse and Spelman colleges in Atlanta as an experiment in academic motivation among 10th and 11th grade students in Southern Negro high schools.) Find children who draw well and give them packages of paints and paper. Find high school students who have done well in social science and hire a bus and take them to the U.N. There are South End children who haven't even been to the Boston Common, much less to the Museum of Science, because all of this is a part of the world outside their ghetto. Volunteer man power could be found if such a project were publicized. For basic costs—if one didn't waste money an over-head—$5000 would make a big impact.
4. Demand a change in the laws against public dissemination of birth control information, so that any efforts to raise personal and community standards are not wiped out by a relentlessly rising population, where women become sodden with child bearing and their children turn into moving bodies instead of individuals. Bring the issue into the open.

5. Develop a habit of speaking truth instead of tautful evasions or self-righteous slogans. The official-approach is to say that the racial question is difficult, but everybody - businessmen, union officials, educators, ministers, race leaders, politicians - is a nice guy and doing a nice job. The partisan approach is to beat the drum on one side only of any issue: police brutality or Negro crime, bad schools or bad performance in the bad schools, apathy about voting or gerrymandering the Negro districts so that the vote won't count, Muslim un-American repudiation of Christianity and integration or Muslim frankness about describing society as it exists.

6. Publicize the two-sided quality of this question's politics. If the Negro community of Boston hasn't developed much leadership, neither has any white political leader, from the Mayor and Governor on down, shown any real concern. We don't want to wait until the Negro is half the city's population as in Washington or New York, before his political and social needs are considered. The question is one of will. If a Callahan has the drive to persuade or bully the community into letting him show an express highway of vast cost and vast social destruction and doubtful utility through the heart of Boston, another sort of man can use the same resources to rebuild a community. Even if Americans are less concerned about children than they are about automobiles.

But, of course, if Boston had the will and vision to build a just society to include its poor and non-white citizens, this would be so unusual in America that the flow of poverty-stricken in-migrants from elsewhere would treble and all the gains made at such cost would vanish.