OF MISSILES AND MISSIONS

an address to

The Rotary Club of Omaha

February 25, 1959

by

Rabbi Sidney H. Brooks

I hope you will forgive me if I approach the major idea I would like to share with you today frankly and personally. It would be foolish merely to say things I think you want to hear only to avoid controversy.

I am reminded of the classic story of an undoubtedly legendary colleague of mine. There was a time when a rabbi was as much a judge as a theologian. After listening carefully and patiently to the plaintiff in a dispute, the rabbi said, "You are absolutely right, my son!" The rabbi then made the same remark to the defendant after listening with equal attention to an exactly contrary report of the circumstances. The rabbi's wife happened to be present at the trial and on the way home she could not refrain from asking her husband: "How can both litigants possibly be right?" To this the rabbi replied with the gentleness becoming both a husband and a rabbi: "You, too, are right, my dear!"

Let me then be more decisive and talk about ourselves and what I believe to be a deeper implication of our association together. If there be any here who do not understand the basic purposes, advantages and programs of Rotary, it would be amazing to me in view of the constant rehearsal and repetition of them. But I doubt very much whether all of us understand the impact which we have both individually and collectively upon the basic values in our society.

One of my first counselors in preaching once said to me: "If you want to be listened to, give 'em hell!" I do not intend simply to get attention by being critical. But I firmly believe that while we purport to represent the finest

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cross section of American business and profession life, in reality we are only a part of that life. And more importantly we have omitted from our concern what is, in my judgement, the most vital and promising potential for making the American dream a world dream, and for demonstrating the inner spiritual strength of democracy as well as its capacity to handle men and machines. In short, we have placed no real value or found any recognized place among us for men whose primary concern lies in the fields of speculative research, music, art, literature, theology, or philosophy. This is not just the failing of Rotary; it is the failing of the society which our association reflects. It is the vast opportunity which we have to change this climate of opinion that merits our close attention.

Not long ago our President told me of a conversation with a man who said: "What does Rotary do--besides have lunch together?" This is a terribly frustrating question for anyone with the slightest knowledge of the actual accomplishments of our organization. I am, of course, among those who would defend with pride the creative activity of this club in contributing to the welfare of our community and its citizens. Our members are more than successful business men and professionals. They are leaders in their churches and synagogues, in social welfare agencies, on hospital boards, in the public schools, in civic organizations and at the universities and colleges. But these activities are always secondary interests. Excepting special instances of periodic work in a specific project, such activities are second choice. First, understandably and justifiably, comes a man's own occupation.

But the real question is: are not the fields of education, welfare and culture deserving of more than secondary interest? Were it not for our slavish and blind adherance to the wholly unrealistic conception of what success means, many of our finest brains and spirits would not be questionably spent in a lifetime of frantic competition in overpopulated fields, but could make lasting contributions to the intellectual growth and spiritual strength of our entire nation.

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Let's look at the record for a moment. The list of classifications in our Club is, I think, a pretty good and fair cross section of the business and professional life of American society today, Still there is not in the entire list a single teacher, research scientist, historian, theologian, philosopher, social service worker, group worker, case worker, political scientist, artist, poet, novelist, sculptor or musician. To be sure, there are men among us highly proficient in these skills. There are men whose daily concern falls within these areas of thought--but only insofar as they function in executive and administrative capacities. Every one of the men whose initial impulse was to follow a career in the arts, or in human welfare, or in education, or in religion, today finds himself in executive capacity in order to survive. And so among us are men who are the victims of the very social structure we as community representatives have helped to create.

Do you remember that pathetic and frightening interview with Albert Einstein toward the end of his life? Einstein's experience as a theoretical physicist was in itself a sad commentary on the state of mind of our world. Actually, he became widely acclaimed only when what he had discovered was proven to have "practical" value--the kind of practical value most precious in our day: that of finding a more explicit and ingenious way to destroy other human beings. But be that as it may, Einstein was once asked by a magazine reporter to comment on the situation of scientists in America. His response was this: "If I had to plan my career all over again," he said, "I would not try to become a scientist, scholar or teacher. I would rather choose to be a plumber or a peddler in the hope that I would find that a modest degree of independence is still available under the present circumstances."

Now fortunately for us, Einstein never had that choice and our world was not to be robbed by its own callousness of the rich legacy of wisdom Einstein bequeathed to us. And yet, isn't it germain to our present plight to ask: how many

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Now fortunately for us, Einstein never had that choice and our world was not to be robbed by its own callousness of the rich legacy of wisdom Einstein bequeathed to us. And yet, isn't it germain to our present plight to ask: how many

of today's young people who are in the process of making that choice will say an emphatic "No" to their first choice of work and to that for which they are intellectually, spiritually and tempermentally suited rather than risk a life of economic struggle and social disdain? I for one am convinced that this is our failing. We talk out of both sides of our mouths. We say to our young people: "Cherish your ideals and your faith, be inventive and original, do what you think will help you to contribute most significantly to our society and our world", until--one of our own young men comes home with a serious and expressed desire to enter the ministry or the arts or teaching or social service. And then we suddenly are coldly "practical". Then we point out how little success in terms of dollars and cents are possible in these areas. Talk about ambivalence!

Often I am told by way of seeming compliment: "You know, Rabbi, you'd have made a superb business man". And frankly, I'm flattered. I'm glad to know that of all tasks to be done on this earth and in this life I might be capable of doing more than one. But with complete seriousness I'd like to reverse the compliment and say to you who are, for the most part, business men: "You know, many of you would have made superb clergymen and teachers and artists and philosophers". And, unlike the case in which I might have been just another superfluous and mediocre business man, our world would have been far the better if we could have had some of your brains and spirit and talent to guide us full time in intellectual and spiritual endeavor. If this had come to pass, perhaps we would not be poised on the brink of destruction every hour of the day. And perhaps we would really have enough real resources of spirit to avoid some of the damning situations in our country that do more than any Russian communist can possibly do to undermine the prestige and demonstrable rightness of the democratic way of life.

Let me say by way of illustration that two recent incidents have impressed this idea indelibly on my mind and reinforced the validity of the thought for me.

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Not long ago LIFE magazine ran a full issue on the subject of American entertainment. The article surveyed with great detail the myriad of forms invented by the citizens of our land to have fun. The most staggering fact of all was the cost--just a nice round figure. Our nation spends over two billion dollars a year on just plain fun. Think of it! And now think of it in connection with what was undoubtedly the most pathetic and unnecessary tragedy of recent years--the Chicago school fire. That terrible catastrophe was ~~badly~~ baldly and unashamedly called an "accident"! It was nothing of the kind. It was not accidental. It was deliberate!

Do you mean to say that a nation which chooses to spend two billion dollars a year on fun: travel, night clubs, gambling, dance bands, records, sports, movies, shows and other forms of escape can't find the pennies to build decent school houses? It is possible that a nation which has the genius, desire, inventiveness and sheer determination to send a rocket even half way to where a Russian rocket goes, can't build a school house in Chicago or Omaha or anywhere else that is safe for our children? Of course we can! We simply make choices--some very bad choices in what we want to do. And too many of us find self-indulgence and scientific exhibitionism more important than putting the principles of our faith into terms of concrete realities. And that's no accident; it's deliberate. It has to do directly with our sense of values, the values of education and faith, of human welfare and human destiny.

I think quite often of a young man who for early formative periods of his life was a student of mine. He thought then that he wanted to go into the rabbinate. One summer he took a job with a construction gang. Writing me of his work he reported that he was building a sewer. I replied that in my judgement it was one of the more useful things he would do in his whole life by way of direct service to his fellowman. But I hastened to add that it was not one of the most significant or eternal. Real wisdom lies in knowing the difference in situations

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not quite so transparent. Real wisdom will lead us to create the kind of climate of opinion that will put both in their proper place.

What can we do? Well, first of all I think we must disabuse ourselves of some attractive but thoroughly false assumptions.

The first is that only the work of practical scientific achievement can save us. Or to put it in more familiar sounding words: that a crash program producing a nation of scientists will solve all our problems, ease world tensions and, in effect, stop the cold war with a winner's medal in our hands.

Now this view is both unrealistic and misleading. It's unrealistic because you cannot take a nation of well balanced minds and suddenly turn a high percentage of students into realms of pragmatic sciences simply because some think we need to. In every class room there will be intellectuals who simply cannot balance a chemical formula if they stay there for ten years. But these are not second-class minds. We need them in other areas of competency just as critical as in scientific achievement. We do not need thousands of surplus scientists. We need only one Einstein, one Oppenheimer, one Teller, one brilliant, daring theoretical student of science against thousands of ordinary technicians. But it is equally necessary to disabuse ourselves of the misleading idea that only so-called "practical" skills can save us. If we insist they can, we say also that arts and letters, philosophy and pure research, history and sociology, poetry and music, ethics and religion are expendable in this critical time. Sheer blindness!

What kind of survival are we talking about? Gadgets that will destroy our earth? Power in the hands of trigger happy men on both sides of the iron curtain who don't know how to use that power! We need our scientists. God knows we do. But we also need the men and women who will study how power and wealth and knowledge are to be used for human good. We need our missiles to the moon, but we also need our missions to humanity. We need people not to restrain the hand of

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the scientist, but to direct it so that the powers unleashed in our world will be directed to human happiness, health and understanding. I believe the creation of that kind of climate of opinion by example, encouragement and support is a direct responsibility of ours.

There's another assumption with which I would quarrel. It is that the educational system in America has been laggard! Nonsense. Over our false sense of shame in the scientific race with Russia we have turned our backs on the equally important products of the American educational system which has produced, in spite of woefully inadequate support, a nation of respect for human rights, love of culture and deep spirit even while we devalue these characteristics in our puny material reward of them.

I have talked with enough educators and teachers to know how futile has been their pleading for more schools, higher pay for teachers, better equipment, higher taxes for school maintenance and grants for research and study. And yet, our schools have produced well trained students in all fields, not because these students got the recognition they deserved, but because some people so loved to teach and preach, to dream and to create that they persisted in doing so. These men and women are the heroes of American life. These are the people who need our acclamation now and our encouragement and our full support in the future.

My final dispute is with the long time conditioned assumption that America--these United States--must always be the first, the largest, the best of everything in this best of all possible worlds. Why? Are our minds better? Or is it our souls? I think neither. I believe we have much to give the community of nations to the world of mankind. I believe we also have much to learn from others. I do not think that a Russian scientific discovery means that America is stupid or going to the dogs. I believe that a Russian achievement in any field is a human

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victory, a tribute to the mind of man. I believe that it matters not who arrives at a truth first, but that it matters much that we get there. And this has to do with moral truth as well as with scientific.

These are my disputes. And for myself I am satisfied that the course of our salvation lies opposite to the spurious claims I have argued. I believe that our spiritual growth must match our technical advance. I believe that our schools are good and must be broad in their inquiring in all areas of study in the search for truth. I believe that America is but one nation among many with whom we should, indeed must, learn to live if we are to live at all. I believe we should socially and materially reward those men and women dedicated to teaching and preaching, arts and letters, social service and human relations. And I believe we ought encourage our finest young minds to follow them.

And who can help to create this climate of opinion better in our community than we? Who has more prestige, more wisdom, more skill than our own group? None, I think. But we waste our talent and overlook our opportunity. I hope we shall not always.

Perhaps we as a nation are too literal about it all. We are a quick minded practical people. And yet there is more to life than easily recognized goals and a single path to the kind of world in which we want to live. It's more varied than that; it's as varied as there are numbers of inventive minds and spirits among us.

Let me tell you a story which I love out of my own tradition. It comes from a setting some centuries ago and tells of a wonderfully sweet and pious scholar who died. He was being escorted to his abode in the world of eternal life. As he entered, he looked about and slowly he realized that the place looked familiar. From the door, the room looked just as did the schoolroom on earth where he had spent the greater part of his life in religious study. And then he was further

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startled to recognize the faces of the men seated around the table with their heads bent in prayer and in meditation. He saw they were all the men most precious to him in life--the famous masters and teachers whom he had revered and who had preceded him in death. Yet, here they were in the same dark and dismal schoolroom they occupied below. Here was the same chill, the same dim light, the same inadequate schoolroom they had on earth. And so the rabbi asked his guide: "How is this possible? Here are the great teachers of my people, the sainted rabbis in this dreary place! Surely they deserve a reward beyond this! Why aren't these masters in Heaven?" And his guide replied: "Indeed, you do not understand. For you should know that these servants of God are not and cannot be in Heaven, but Heaven is surely within them!"

I dare to believe this can be true of us. Heaven---or the world we would like to create lies not outside us but within us, in our desire, in our guidance and inspiration of our youth, in our unflagging zeal to serve our God and our fellowmen as it is given us to do.

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