

Civil Disillusionment

Barbara Taylor

“I CAST my vote, perchance, as I think right: but I am not vitally concerned that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority.”

There was a time, prior to my coming of legal age, when I was vitally concerned that right should prevail; I was willing to leave it to the majority if, and only if, the majority agreed with my conception of right. I knew that, when I became old enough to cast my vote, it would count. It would be important. It would be a ballot cast for the right.

With youth's expectancy, I waited for my first presidential election, not idly or passively, but industriously and actively. I was a block captain, an active participant in the future of this great country! On me fell the myriad routine duties: telephone calls, personal calls, card addressing, house-to-house canvassing, and all the consuming tasks too unimportant to be performed by those under whom I worked. Nevertheless, I had to start my political life somewhere, and I was content to be simply a small part of a vast, "right" organization. At neighborhood meetings, I listened to inspiring speeches, and absorbed further instructions for intensifying the campaign. These were the people who "made the wheels go round," the experienced party workers. For them I did everything I was told to do . . . twice!

Confident and exhausted, we were at last prepared for that glorious November election day. Off I went, early on election morning, in my automobile that was decorated from front to back with streamers and posters. All day I tended to the babies so the mothers could vote, and I drove the old, the sick, and those with no transportation to the polls. The beautiful Indian Summer day made my spirits soar. Everyone was excited. Or was it my excitement that colored the leaves so red and the flags so bright? Perhaps not one person whom I drove to the voting place was at all enthusiastic. I do not know. On that sparkly November 3, 1952, it never occurred to me that across these great United States there were probably thousands of citizens who, if they voted at all, did so without any enthusiasm whatsoever. I was at last twenty-one; this was my country; I was a citizen, and now I could vote for the right. Nothing was more indicative of a deep-thinking, conscientious voter than his decision to "scratch." I knew this showed individualism, and, believe me, I was a right-thinking individual. I "scratched."

As the day passed, it became more apparent that the "right" party was winning. The block captains were invited to a huge neighborhood celebration planned for that night. Everyone would be there. It was rumored that even some of the candidates would make brief appearances.

Trying to hide interior shivers of excitement beneath a restrained adult exterior, I joined a party from my street to walk to the festivities being held on a big vacant lot several blocks away. I will never forget how cool the fall night air felt on my hot face, nor will I ever smell leaves burning without remembering that slow saunter toward the rally. As we moved along, we were joined by other groups of party workers, gangs of teen-age boys and girls, friends and neighbors from all around. Each time we met a new group everyone stopped to exclaim, slap one another on the back, congratulate, and laugh.

Impatient! I was wild! There was music coming from the next street over by now, rhythm still without tune. The dum-da, dum-da, of Spanish guitars underlined the keening slide of a Hawaiian guitar. There it was—naked lights strung back and forth, a stage, music, people, hundreds of people, balloons, little children, a knife thrower and his girl, excitement of victory for the "right." At the very moment we stepped to the edge of the crowd, a motorcycle screamed around the corner followed by a gleaming black car. The noise became deafening. Shrieking women completely engulfed the men emerging from the car. These were the victorious candidates. Onto the stage for a few brief words of thanks, down into the crowd for congratulations, out to the fringes of darkness to eat thick roast-beef sandwiches at the plank tables, into the shadows to take long draughts of whiskey from passed bottles—they never quit laughing or shouting while going back and fourth. The victorious candidates were the core of a quivering mass.

Pushed and shoved directly in front of the little stage, I looked up at the legs of the country band leader. From his gleaming black boots to his big white Stetson, he looked expensive. His shirt was fringed and braided, and his stomach was so grotesquely distended that it held his guitar at arm's length. He screamed into a microphone so close to his mouth that his sweat dropped onto it. In the din he seemed to be shouting epithets. The knife-thrower strapped his girl to a huge wheel, and started her spinning, spinning. It was as if the noise of the crowd and the colors of the spiraling wheel rose and fell together like wave after wave of nausea. The soles of the girl's feet were filthy; the knife-thrower's white satin shirt was stained and snagged. Mouths gaped all around; the singer, the spinning girl, the painted women, the laughing men, the wailing babies were all one—one writhing animal covered with wet, moving mouths.

I pushed, I shoved, I made my way back from the platform out to the edge of the mob, and still farther back toward the tables. As my eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness, I could see the garbage and trash strewn everywhere. Sitting alone, on the end of a table, was a little baby boy, sucking his thumb and holding a piece of turkey. He looked solemnly at me, and I looked solemnly at him. Far back up on the stage were the candidates—kissing my friends, squeezing my neighbors, waving bottles in great circles

above their heads.

These were the men I had voted for; some were my "scratches," and they had nothing to do with me, my country, or even "right." I will cast my vote, but yes, I am willing to leave "right" to the majority. It seems that in order to do *something*, I would have to do everything, and that is too much for a woman.

Social Pressures and Conformity

Linda Dodson

ARE WE really free in this country? We are guaranteed certain irrevocable rights, but nothing guarantees a free mind. We may speak out against what we do not like, or write against what we do not like, but social pressures often do not allow us to decide for ourselves exactly what it is that we dislike. Our mind governs our actions; social pressures influence our patterns of thinking. Fettered minds are for weak people. Our minds *are* in chains. We are herded into categories, informed of our needs and beliefs, and goaded concerning matters which should be individual decisions.

This deplorable situation sinks strong roots into the high-school youth. High-school students band together naturally; a certain standard is set up and they adhere to it with amazing loyalty. They seem afraid to dress, talk, or act differently from the person sitting in front of them in class, afraid to break away from "the crowd" and follow their own preferences. The student learns early and well to conform to social pressures, to the "accepted thing." How can one develop individuality in such an atmosphere?

A more dangerous problem of pressure in high-school concerns the making of important decisions pertaining to objectives and morals in life. For example, parents, believing they are encouraging their child to apply himself, are actually brow-beating him so that he will enter medicine, law or some other field which will bring status to themselves. Or another instance can be cited: Students who want to be "popular" often become superficial, insincere people. Their objectives are concentrated on impressing those around them; their values are governed by what people think constitutes being popular. These people must adhere to the stereotypic patterns set up in their high-school society.

Although the idea of conformity to social pressures is not as prevalent, the same trends are definitely extended into the college level. People have a definite idea of what the college student should be like and the student follows along; in order to achieve a degree of popularity, he is pressured to conform to the accepted perspective on campus. A veneer of sophistication reigns, but an undercurrent of ineffectiveness is always present.