

Immersion Program - Junior Woman's Club - Feb 14, 1972

Delighted to be asked to describe my experiences.

Basic question is important

- why would a middle-aged, middle-class college professor/administrator go unshaven, unkempt, and unprepared onto the streets of Camden with \$2.00 in his pocket?
- what I will say tonight will be an attempt to answer that question
  - perhaps the answer will mean as much to you as it has to me.

But let me objectively describe what the Immersion Program was

- I have to say was because it has been phased out.

It was a Program administered by the State Department of Community Affairs wherein citizens of the state could, with minimal support, experience "street life" in one of three

cities: Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden.

- During its existence \_\_\_\_\_ number of people were immersed.

Why do people want to go onto the streets?

Several reasons seem valid

- curiosity

what is it really like to be a bum?

- Vicarious Thrill

It's something different to try

- proof of credentials

don't tell me what it's like

to be poor and black!

I know, I've been there!

- grade school social studies

- city people should see a farm with baby pigs and chicks; rural people should see the city with its stores and factories

These are reasons but at best they are fairly unimportant

The significant reasons seem to be three:

- (1) historical
- (2) sociological
- (3) spiritual

### Historical

There has been an increasing involvement with Americans of all ages in the social problems confronting us.

- For a decade at least Americans have walked, rode, and marched back and forth across this country to help other Americans deal with the system
  - examples as varied as Selma, Ala. to McCarthy's Presidential campaign
- Part of the effort has been to share life with those in trouble
  - to identify totally with their problems

- Secondly, there has been, at least I believe it so, a revolution in America: in terms of value systems being passed between generations
- our revolt was short lived and not effective
  - Values of our parents may have been questioned
  - they were seldom rejected.
  - young people are rejecting older values and substituting them with what seem to them as simpler, truer, better, clearer, more appropriate values
  - they have in very few cases invented their own
  - thus, many young Americans are rejecting materialism
    - they substitute a more primitive, rural system at least on the surface
  - Example of Stockton Student as Farrier

The line of imitation or those who set goals seems no longer to be ~~vertical~~ upwards but either sideways or downwards

5

Finally, there have been a number of attempts to synthesize a life style from a variety of disparate sources

- identification (trying on another style)  
simply increases the number of possibilities to choose from.
- Communes are a very good example
  - there are, it seems to me, legitimate reasons for communal life (even though it holds minimal interest to me personally)
  - the world we know is hardly ~~on~~ going to continue
    - Toffler's Future shock
    - to adjust to this change, new life styles are being worked out
      - these will include patterns we have little concept of
      - commune publicity probably overdone
        - examples -
          - revolutionary commune
          - middle-aged commune
        - what is important, for ~~my~~ discussion, is the synthetic quality of forming a life style out of many
          - different, certainly, from what we did

I am suggesting then that there are fairly clear historical reasons for an ~~activity~~ like the Immersion Program

- These have to do with the identification of a variety of life styles and a "taking on" of the more appealing forms

Secondly, there are important Sociological reasons

- There is a good deal of talk today about "polarization"
- I assume ~~by this~~ this term means a considerable widening of the space between value systems probably to the point of little hope of reunion.
- we need to look at some very basic causes
  - at least as I understand them
- There is a tendency in society to make life pretty much the same all over
  - I suppose I'm talking about "conforming" (hated word)
  - perhaps I can inject a ~~more~~ more exciting tone to it.
  - architecture, etc.

7

Middle-class society (I'm not sure about the other two classes) seems to be more and more isolating itself off from difference, disagreement, or ~~disagreement~~, confrontation, with anyone or any situation not like our own.

Bennet In The Uses of Disorder notes that we tread through circles of people exactly like ourselves.

- when we note differences we eliminate them for harmony or stability.
- our neighbors, our schools, our houses all seem to be the same
  - that is what we think
  - actually, we're not the same at all but because each of us thinks that all the others are, we all manifest sameness
- one could say, at this point, so what?
  - it's here that Bennett turns the screw tighter

His postulation is that adolescents go through a stage where they assume singularity and sameness are the values to seek,

- the mature, stable adult is the person who passes through this phase and later seeks difference and diversity

Most of us, Bennett claims, do not pass through this phase and we then lead our adolescents to expect sameness — and the cycle goes on.

Like Bennett, I believe that ~~desire~~ diversity is to be sought

- that I am limited to the degree that I am similar to others (or think I'm similar to others)

Finally, there are spiritual reasons why one might seek an activity like the Immersion Program

- Thoreau in his ~~book~~ Walden talks about why he went to ~~the woods~~ states that he went to the woods to get to the bedrock, to his foundation, to his identity.
- There are a number of what are termed Outward Bound Programs which, like the Immersion Program, tests the participants against standards and experiences they would never confront in normal life.

It seems to me, then, that the Immersion Program is understandable when set against a historical search for life styles, when one considers the price we pay for the same sort of middle-class life, and if one is interested in getting inside himself to find out how he would fare.

Let me give you some facts and descriptions about the Program itself

- 300 people took part

24% local fed officials

11% Interns in govt

13% educators

10% service organizations  
LWR, YMCA

5% business men

32% students

3% writers, journalists

2% clergy, religious

38% female

62% male

9% minority

91% mainstream

It was designed to "sensitize" or expose citizens  
to the conditions of the poor and minority  
in our cities.

10

Read descriptions 1, 2, 3

11

You can imagine my trepidations as we left for  
Camden

1. Arrival at Doorz - Open
2. Discussion
3. Dispersal
  - Police
  - Salvation Army
  - Ghetto
  - Return
4. Breakfast (Mon)
5. Walk Streets
6. PM arrangement with Health Dept.
7. Walk Streets
8. Panhandling
9. Places to Sleep - Doorz - Open
10. Breakfast (Tues)  
Getting Job
11. Sitting in Sun - Nasser's Death
12. Walking (Ben Franklin Bridge)
13. Rutgers Camden
  - blisters, legs ache
14. Return to Doorz Open

## What does it all mean

- (1) I was acquainted with lower-middle class poverty
  - we still had each other
- (2) I've been active in the "movement" and therefore had passing knowledge of the black and the poor
- (3) I found I wasn't terribly imaginative about how to solve my problems
  - reduced to essential levels
  - how I solve problems now
  - group
  - telephone
  - resources
- (4) Lonely and Boing
  - what happens in bad weather
- (5) Agencies don't always care
- (6) There is, for the not totally down and out a kind of culture which, I suspect, blunts the pain.