

News from Syracuse University

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For release at 8 p. m.

Tuesday, April 14, 1970

"Mankind must change if we are to reduce inhumanity, if humanity is to survive," Prof. Burton Blatt said tonight in Grant Auditorium in the first Syracuse University Centennial lecture.

Blatt, director of Special Education and Rehabilitation, is one of six especially designated Centennial Professors scheduled to deliver Centennial lectures this year as part of the 100th anniversary celebration of the University's founding.

In his talk, "Man Through a Turned Lens," Blatt said: "My thesis is that society will not eradicate institutional back wards, will not guarantee human rights, and will not eliminate hunger by tearing down back wards of 'guaranteeing' human rights or feeding hungry people."

The following are excerpts from his prepared text:

"In humility, and with knowledge that I am no better qualified as accuser than those to whom I speak, I seek redress for certain acts committed by and against mankind.

". . . Have you been to Dachau? Can you add all of the Dachaus to all of the Siberias? Is there a man willing to catalogue our own Southern history, life in demented mental hospitals, Vietnam, and the world of man-made sub-humans some call state institutions? In his own manner, each man thinks about evil. And, in his curious mind, there are times and situations where he is comforted by its presence. But, is there a man who will tolerate a flood that is endless and fathomless and senseless? . . .

(more)

"I believe our one chance lies . . . in describing, dissecting, and comprehending our debasements and agonies. We may save ourselves, not with promises of a new good life to goad us, but with plain accounts of the real-unreal world we have fashioned for ourselves and, now, must either change or eternally wallow in its slime. . . .

"I ask you to change humanity by changing yourself, to solve the riddle 'I' before you attempt to solve the human puzzle, to commit yourself before you commit mankind. I ask you to think of yourself, not society, and how you must evolve, not what civilization must endure. . . .

"I ask you to reflect upon the consequences of our unique American slave system, injustice in our schools, and the evil perpetrated within our mental hospitals and state schools for the mentally retarded. I ask you to view contemporary American life and your personal activities and convictions with the same diligence and remorselessness we, in America, judged Hitler's policies in the Warsaw ghetto, Stalin's at Lubyanka, and Mao's, Castro's and Mussolini's. . . . the American list is not unlike most other nations' . . .

"As I tell you there is no future for the mentally retarded--there will not be any until they are returned to their brothers as men and women--as I tell you these things, I meander about human beings as 'mentally retarded.' We are trapped by civilization's penchant for creating insane problems. And, our brothers and we will not be rescued by psychologists or sociologists or special educators--and, although they will better describe and teach us about the benchmarks of civilization, not even by poets or historians. We have a modest chance to permit the now-retarded, the now-disturbed, the now-abused to enter our world--albeit an imperfect world--and, I believe, that chance depends upon a decision society must make, but only insofar as each man must make his personal decision."