

# The Vanguard American

Published monthly by  
*The Vanguard Community Guild*  
Kimballton, Iowa  
Holger J. Koch, Editor

No. 2

FEBRUARY

1945

## Our American Creed

HAROLD PETERSEN, Ringsted, Iowa.

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."—A. LINCOLN.

There is probably no quotation from the memoirs of American statesmen more dear to us than the closing words from Lincoln's second inaugural address. To millions of our countrymen Abraham Lincoln is the greatest symbol of Americanism. He gained this distinction by an unyielding loyalty to what was then and is now the American creed, liberty and equality for all men. From its earliest history this American creed of freedom and equality for all men has been the dominant note in Americanism. Every American school boy and girl knows the words "one nation indivisible with liberty and justice for all." America still believes in an achievement of a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

The American creed is deeply religious. It is far above American life in general just as the Christian gospel is far above our churches and the Christian community. Therefore, like the Christian gospel it passes judgment upon man for his refusal to be governed by it. Daily, Americans are reminded of the great epic note of their history while at the same time they note with horror mounting crime, corrupt politics, race prejudice, monopoly of wealth, and new demands for strong military might. America's record of crime and corruption, of extreme wealth and poverty, and of mistreatment of the colored races is not a pleasant one to behold. But what makes it so glaringly obvious is the fact that we see it all in the light of our American

creed. As the Swedish sociologist, Gunner Myrdal, has written in his great work, "An American Dilemma," "The American Creed represents the national conscience." The world outside of the United States points with scorn to our high idealism on one side and our glaringly true records of injustice and inequality on the other. But it must also be remembered that Americans have, generally speaking, been unusually frank, franker than most nations. in making public their own sins.

However, with all our nation's faults, and they are many—and even alarming—the one hope for America is that the flame of the American creed has been kept alive. In this land where all nations, all colors of skin, and all religions are amalgamating it is significant that we have a truth so fundamental as that which has run through our brief history. Think of all our outstanding leaders, they have in some way or other given new significance to our American creed. Abraham Lincoln is in this light America's greatest apostle.

Since the Atlantic Charter has again come up for discussion let us review it and cherish its significance. It is truly American. Churchill signed his name to it but its spirit is American and not British. President Roosevelt needs to make no withdrawals from its primary principles and aims. In fact, the Atlantic Charter contains fundamentally those principles for which the better America is fighting. It contains the fundamentals for which we in our better moments strive. It is probably the most important document bearing our president's signature. It is important because it is genuinely American.

In the light of what we have actually accomplished our creed does not make us proud. We are ashamed of much in our national record. But we have a goal and we are still reminded of that fact. America has subscribed to a creed

greater than herself—yes, older than herself. This is her judgment, but it is also the hope for her real greatness. It has governed the lives of such men as Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, George, Bryan, Debs, Wilson, and many, many others almost equal to them. It lived in the hearts of the pioneers. It lives in our hearts today. It is the creed of an America which has not yet fully realized its own soul. Some day we shall cease running away from our own visions.

## The Universal Spirit

HOLGER ANDERSEN, Viborg, S. Dak.

When Jesus spoke of the spirit, he referred to it as being that part of the human being which most closely resembles the divine origin of the human race. The form which became the manifestation of His creative power is considered least important. It is the identity of one man to another and to his God which is the determinative factor if the divine will is to be realized as a unifying and integrating bond among us.

Jesus was not merely exercising His mental and imaginative capacities, formulating a workable philosophy of life which would appeal to human reason. He was not trying to create an unrealistic idealism which could appeal to a very limited group of sentimental and emotionally unstable individuals. On the contrary, when He spoke of the realm and the value of the spirit as a consequential influence upon the destiny of the human race, it was no mere idle speculation. It was realism. It was truth. In fact, so realistic and so radical in its concept that man could not grasp its ultimate significance, could not comprehend that this invisible spiritual phenomenon could in any way be the key to the ultimate salvation of the world, but only because it was in diametrical opposition to the status quo.

In recent months, within the somewhat narrow confines of our own specific group, i. e. the Danish-American communities, there has been voiced a repeated exhortation for the preservation of the Danish Folk-Spirit. It is understandable, in view of existing conditions, and therefore the necessity of a spiritual awakening should not be minimized. It is of vital importance to our group that we come to understand the true meaning of the Folk-Spirit, and that we do all in our power to promote and to propagate that ideal. It is not, however, a concept which pertains specifically to our group. It is not confined by any such term as "Danish Folk-Spirit", for it is an important and integral part of all humanity, and has the potentiality of embracing the world in its bond of unity and fellowship.

This spirit which has suddenly come to be identified with the "Danish Spirit", but which had its origin in the message of Christ, or perhaps even before the time of Jesus of Nazareth, is not to be identified with any specific group or movement, for it is universally comprehensive in its scope. Grundtvig (giving him all due credit), is not to be considered the father of the spirit, but we do owe him a debt of gratitude for the re-discovery of its significance. He succeeded in opening the eyes of the Danish people to the reality of the spirit. It was urgently needed and was joyously received.

No matter who, where, or how that sort of an awakening comes about in the life of a people, it will have eternal

significance. As we grope in the darkness and suddenly find a light to guide us, our entire perspective of life is miraculously changed. Our place in the darkness has been altered by the displacement of that which burdens our spirit. Hope replaces futility. We are now able to see and understand our relationship to things about us and are conscious of a purposive existence. Our little life fits into the jigsaw of creation, and we feel ourselves an indispensable part, interlocking with other equally indispensable parts to form the whole, past, present and future.

It is only as we become aware of our part in the whole that we are able to contribute, to add color to the picture, and it is only then that we feel our affinity with our fellowman. Thus to feel the vital pulsation of life from its source to its eternal destiny, and to share gloriously in the effervescent march of time, is to find ourselves. It is the basic requirement for the development of a wholesome life of fraternity and harmony. It is the first step toward the evolution of CHRISTIANS from the blind masses who have learned nothing other than the means of stabilizing and satisfying their own ego's unmitigated craving. (One need not enumerate the enormities perpetrated by the ego in the name of Christianity and brotherhood). Through the dawning of spiritual consciousness, the fire of progress is kindled in the individual, and we feel the warmth of its glow penetrating our souls and giving us the impetus to proceed along the road of salvation to a higher existence—Godward.

This awakening in our fatherland found its natural expression in numerous ways, each characterized by the zeal of purpose as people sought to make their contribution to life and history. Many of the immigrants coming to this country were afire with the enthusiasm of the rich life they had shared in their native land, and sought to perpetuate their forms of expression in the new world—failing because they worked at cross-purposes with themselves and with the nature of the spirit. Trying desperately to preserve instead of imbuing; seeking to retain that which had been their heritage by crystallizing it into forms which were meaningless to a new generation, instead of permeating the new world with the spirit itself and allowing it to find its own expression.

The spirit, thus confined by the narrow and retrogressive limitations of a past generation must either burst from its prison or be strangled by its own stagnation. The song has ended, but the melody lingers on—until it is scarcely audible; a mere echo of its former depth and brilliant tones.

It is our task to promulgate the rediscovery of the folk-spirit. It cannot be done by preservation of forms of expression (language included), because it speaks a universal tongue. As Danish-Americans we can contribute much to our America, but first and foremost it must be our task to revive the folk-spirit—not in the sense that we drag out the old forms and try to revive them—but in the sense that we experience a re-birth and are able to share that with our people so they may find themselves.

I have spoken of the folk-spirit as though it is analogous to the Christ-spirit, and although it might conceivably be considered a liberty, it is my conviction that what is explicit in the folk-spirit ideal, is implicit in the teachings and spirit of Christ. All the more reason for faith in it, because it is the means of brotherhood. It is the means of salvation for all.

# Intermezzo

HOLGER J. KOCH.

THE endlessly recurring debate as to whether mankind is progressing or not is upon us again in all its fury. That we are at the bottom of a curve is obvious. We look about us for new depths—and find none. The confusion and despair are about complete and the occasional shouting of the old battle-cries that once rallied the believers is barely honored by the raising of an eye. More words lie dead on the battlefield than after perhaps any other internecine conflict in history. Much individual despair is voiced and very much more is silently endured. We know there is much for all mankind is so closely bound together emotionally that any one at all sensitive to the feelings that stir in his fellow-men is acutely conscious of the spiritual depression and he who is very sensitive is well-nigh overcome. For good or for evil we are so much one body that hope or despair is quickly imparted to all the members as though they were fed by the same emotional blood-stream. Still, grief borne in common is less bitter and hope shared is the stronger. Furthermore, the peace and good will among men we are hoping for, and which we know can never be established by coercion or upheld by force, again is brought within the realm of the possible when we realize that the shortest, and also the only, way to a fellow human beings heart is through our own, and that a determined will to peace in one part of humanity will in time overcome the enmity in another. Ultimately we shall either perish together or survive together.

In the meantime the cosmic scene for this struggle between forces is something to behold. Whatever other conclusions we may draw from the spectacle, one is insistent: that our spiritual stature has not yet reached dimensions commensurate with the setting by many cubits. Although we have flung our imagination and our will to conquer at the towering heights of existence we have not scaled them—in fact we are still struggling to gain the foot-hills. Buffeted as we are by the winds of fate and destiny we have so far been unable to evolve a conception of human life on a cosmic scale. Man himself seems completely dwarfed by the titanic setting against which he is cast in the role of the conquering hero. Often in awe he becomes instead the spectator of the scene apparently set for giants. But in all the sound and fury of the setting he finds no other actor to play the leading part in the drama. Whenever the stage is set for a new play and the parts given out, his is invariably the one marked "Hero." A dubious honor, he reflects ruefully, for every curtain finds him sprawled in the dust. But there is nothing to do than to learn the new lines and let the drama work itself out to its perhaps predestined conclusion. For such is the moral tenacity of man that he cannot admit defeat. Given no respite by some insistent drive from within he picks himself up out of the dust and measures with a speculative gaze the height beyond the ledge from which he slipped. One thing seems certain: when the final curtain goes down after the conflict of all the clashing forces has been resolved man

is likely to emerge wearing a golden crown on his bloody, battered head. Whatever else our reactions to the bewildering unfolding of the plot, we still must stand in reverence before the majesty of this existence. It seems heedless of our little desires, scornful of our vanities and unmoved by our plight. And then again it may raise the human soul to heady heights of hope and prophetic vision and let it savour such fare as nourish the gods. Even when it kills us it does so with a boundless largesse—as Brand of Ibsen's play we are accorded the honor of dying by no less means than an avalanche. Surely it was meant for us to grow up in—and such spaces above us!

We are novices in living and we will have to play our parts now without knowing the ultimate synthesis of the lines of action developing as we go along, but looking back over the path we have come we find that existence has created a certain pattern of selection—or should we say: rejection—of behavior, our mistakes being more obvious than our successes. The terrain of history is strewn with the wreckage of false starts that came to naught and true starts that veered off at a tangent and collapsed.

In defense of man it must be said that he has been required to combat not only forces without him but nearly all the instincts with which he was originally equipped: fear of his environment, suspicion of his fellow-men, the desire for personal security, all of which made him a potential enemy of every creature or circumstance that threatened or seemed to threaten his existence. Wars were the inevitable outcome and every war was lost. Life does not permit any individual or nation to keep what has been gained at the cost of becoming an enemy to his fellow-men. The most fundamental lesson is the hardest to learn: that mankind is an organic unit and that conflict between the members temporarily nullifies any possible chance of progress, for the individual or the whole. To become an enemy is to stop the flow of blood from the common heart and atrophy results.

Then there is the wreckage of slavery. Physical slavery, degrading to keeper as to slave. Economic slavery, creating bitterness and class hatred with attending revolutions and violence. Spiritual slavery, with persecution of anyone who forsakes the trodden path to widen the front of the advance. Religion, art, society itself become stagnant pools far from the refreshing stream fed by new visions and fresh experiences.

There is the wreckage of the most common of all mistakes: the confusion of values. Ascribing importance to the impotent. Accepting counterfeit goods. Rejecting the living things and choosing the dead. Mistaking the means for the end. As Mumford has it "Lured by his elemental needs, man tends to rest content with their satisfaction: instead of using them as the basis of the good life, he often seeks, by merely elaborating and refining them, to use them as a substitute for the good life."—We call it materialism and we are up to our necks in it.

## The New Folk School

The gardener may be entirely in the dark as to the inner secrets of the growth that creates a rose from seed, soil and sun but he learns quickly not to balk the laws of this growth and is happy to let all his efforts serve them. But in the moral and spiritual field our knowledge far exceeds our willingness to apply it and abide by it. The greater obstacle is not the absence of motive forces but our own insistence on having them serve personal ends. Always inclined to start off at a tangent with only partial recognition of moral laws most of our attempts carry us wide of the mark as a matter of course and the movement becomes tangled in a maze of cross-purposes that finally halts all progress. None the less, there is at the present stage of evolution a constant and increasing attempt at correction and compensation going on, not sufficient to avoid recurring cataclysms but enough to make them less frequent and less complete. Even though the present war is the most physically destructive in history, it is at the same time characterized by a heroic effort at transcending its destruction, at salvaging the human soul. While no responsible person has suggested a way to avoid the awful necessity of going to war under the circumstances a great number of writers and leaders of thought in all countries are trying to find ways to avoid the brutalization of the human personality while performing this terrible task of curbing the ravages of a large part of the race, momentarily gone insane, knowing that we must again be able to look upon them as brothers before we can go on with our living. Also from battle fields all over the world come reports not only of victories over an adversary but of human nature rising magnificently above its own limitation—the one great limitation that might have wrecked the whole redemptive scheme: man's egoism. If man's egoism guards the outer limits of his nature then all is in vain, then history is indeed "the fever the moon died of," then our fears are well founded. The very thing, then, that made him master of all creation would shackle him in a slavery from which he could never escape. But this testimony to our human nature is borne by our soldiers in the face of great danger: that it is possible to rise above all thought of personal safety in order to rescue a comrade or even to sacrifice one's life to make death a little less lonesome for a friend. If man is able to shed his egoism as casually as he sheds his coat then he is in principle without limitation.

For this reason it seems perfectly in order for men to accept such faith in existence as they may find in their hearts. This faith can not be taught or imparted any more than a child can be born by reasoning or admonition. It is the individual's own personal experience and takes place in that terribly lonely hour when none may help, when man begs for the cup to pass from him but is given no release until faith is born. A sorry thing to behold, that faith; so small in comparison with the agony, so inadequate in proportion to the need. Still, the future bows before it because it is **alive**. And to bear something that's alive is to be like God—a little. Only to be barren is damnation.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Life is action and passion. I think it is required of a man that he should share the action and passion of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived."—O. W. Holmes.

First I wish to thank Holger Koch for sending out the little free press letter, which he calls "The Vanguard American." Yes, we truly need a vanguard of leaders in spiritual matters, as well as in our folklife here in America, in order that we may find the real value in life, food for our souls, as well as our bodies.

There are many problems unsolved in American life. Its folklife needs an uplift, better and cleaner entertainment, better radio programs, better readjustments, a curb on cigarettes and drink.

How will our sons survive this awful war? Let us hope they find a heart to build a better world.

I have just read Henry A. Wallace's book, "The Century of the Common Man." He is not afraid of constructive criticism. He loves America, but we must keep our eyes open, and ever try to improve life. We must not be narrow-minded isolationists any longer. It's a small world, and we must help rebuild it to become a better world. Wallace points to the Danish folk school and co-operatives as worth while pattern for the coming new world.

It would be a fine help for our boys and girls, when they come back from the war, to find such schools. They would want to study foreign languages as well as their own American and Danish, history and literature of the world, music, singing, sports, science, manual training, etc.

Community guilds like they have at Kimballton and Tyler would be a fine beginning for every town to have. Clean and wholesome background and good leaders are what we need everywhere in our local communities to start the uplift which is bound to come when the boys come home again. Let us all help bring this about, so our young people may enjoy a richer and fuller life when they come home from the war.

Mrs. THORVALD HANSEN, Luck, Wis.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The ideal personality for the opening age is a balanced personality: not the specialist but the whole man. Such a personality must be in dynamic interaction with every part of his environment and every part of his heritage. He must be capable of treating economic experiences and esthetic experiences, parental experiences and vocational experiences, as the related parts of a single whole, namely, life itself. His education, his discipline, his daily routine must tend toward this wholeness. To achieve this, he must be ready to spurn the easy successes that come, in a dying culture, through self-mutilation."—Mumford.

\* \* \* \* \*

"A committee is a meeting of important people who, singly, can do nothing, but together can decide that nothing can be done."—Anon.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The mind like any other organism gradually shapes itself to what surrounds it, and resents disturbance in the form which its life has assumed."—Holmes.