

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS: TEACHERS AFFECT ETERNITY

A very good friend of the Overstreets was Professor Abraham H. Maslow who provided the world with a theory of human motivation that has become extremely popular in psychological areas of research. Maslow described a hierarchy of needs that move from physiological needs to safety needs to belonging and love needs to esteem needs to the ultimate need for self-actualization. If one is to be ultimately at peace with oneself “what a man *can* be, he *must* be.”¹ Harry and Bonaro Overstreet appear to be two people who fit the description of becoming everything that they were capable of becoming. Their accomplishments in the fields of philosophy, psychology, adult education, mental health, poetry, and political ideology were astounding. Their contribution in writing and lectures were awesome. One suspects that Professor Maslow would agree as he addressed one article on “Science and Self-Actualization” in July 1965 “For the Overstreets with all my admiration.”² In his book, Motivation and Personality, Maslow quoted freely from The Mature Mind in describing the concept of love in self-actualizing people. He noted that Overstreet described love of a person, not as possession but as an affirmation of that person’s right to his unique being.³

When the definitive history of the adult education movement in the United States is written, the names of Harry and Bonaro Overstreet should loom large in describing the vitality of the movement in the years following World War I. Their influence as authors and teachers stand alongside other famous names in the field: Eduard Lindeman, Everett Dean Martin, Lyman Bryson, Alvin Johnson, Cyril Houle and Malcolm Knowles. The Overstreets, however, carved out a special niche for themselves in the growing field of adult education. They were not teachers of adult education methodology; they were not academicians teaching the curricula of adult education; they were not administrators of adult education programs. The Overstreets were unabashed “missionaries” promulgating the vital importance of adult education to the health of democracy. Every book they wrote and every lecture or dialogue they presented stressed the value of adults continuing to learn throughout life in order to lead fulfilling, mature, responsible lives. Their own role in helping citizens achieve such a goal was to be superb teachers of content. They engaged in extensive research to gain the latest factual information on whatever topic they were

writing or speaking upon. They then used their creative talent of expression to make this information clearly understandable to both professionals in the various fields and to the general lay public.

The influence of the teaching and writings of the Overstreets is difficult to assess, as it would be for most individuals. However, as teachers, they probably have a greater claim to influence than do people in most other professions. It was Henry Adams who wrote in his justly famous autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams, that “a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”⁴ Malcolm S. Knowles, adult educator and author of The Modern Practice of Adult Education, spoke of this in regard to the Overstreets not long after Bonaro’s death. He said that he thought their influence was inestimable because of the thousands of people they had reached and helped. He added that the Overstreets had a marked impact on him and many others not only because of their teachings and the example they set but also because they gave to those who worked in adult education a very real sense of pride and worth.⁵

The problem investigated in this study was: What were the contributions of the Overstreets in the field of adult education, particularly with respect to their collaboration; what was their philosophy and purpose; on what areas did they focus; what methods did they use, and how was their work received. An examination of their lives through their writings, lectures, correspondence, conversations with the writer, and comments received from contemporaries provided the answers.

The Overstreets’ Developing Roles in Adult Education

The Overstreets were teachers of youth within the academic world who found themselves increasingly interested in the continuing education of adults. This interest began for each of them when they started to lecture to adult students: Harry at the Labor Temple and New School for Social Research and Bonaro when she was invited to lecture on poetry at the Tulare Evening School.

Harry’s first written treatment of the subject of adult education occurred in 1925 with the publication of his book Influencing Human Behavior. That book stemmed directly from lectures given at the New School, and while behaviorist psychology was the main topic, Harry wrote in the foreword that he was extremely impressed with the many meaningful contributions made by his adult students from the maturity of their experience. For Harry this was compelling evidence

of the promise of adult education for mature students. It was in a review of that book that Eduard C. Lindeman prophesied that even better books would be written by Professor Overstreet. Perhaps Lindeman was thinking of Harry's ideas in the book on adult education and his forecast that adult education would have great importance in the future of the nation's social life and ethical behavior.

The books which followed Influencing Human Behavior continued to stress the value of adult education. David Stewart, in a review of a book by Stubblefield, noted that in a history of adult education in America there have been many meaningful books that do not have "explicitly adult education messages in the usual sense of the term."⁶ Stewart commended Stubblefield for recognizing Everett Dean Martin's The Behavior of the Crowds and he himself added Harry Overstreet's About Ourselves as "another example of a significant piece of adult education literature."⁷

About Ourselves, published in 1927, was Harry Overstreet's second book and in it he went deeper into the adult education philosophy of Bishop Grundtvig of Denmark and into Edward Thorndike's psychological experiments with adult learners. Harry's writings continued in this vein with books such as The Enduring Quest, many articles in adult education journals, and his regular contributions to philosophy and psychology journals. In addition, Harry was by this time lecturing throughout the mid-west for the Chicago Adult Education Council and directing adult education summer sessions at Mills College in Oakland.

About this time Bonaro Wilkinson was becoming absorbed with adult education under the tutelage of David MacKaye who was an innovator in the field. She became increasingly involved in adult education classes and workshops both as a student and as a teacher. It was through a visit to one of his classes that she met Harry Overstreet.

In August 1932 Harry and Bonaro were married in New York City and began what would be many years of joint contributions to the field, although for a while as individuals and not as a team.

In the 1930s Bonaro's involvement in adult education continued to grow. She and Harry wrote fourteen articles for the *Journal of Adult Education* – more than any other contributor. By 1938 it was Bonaro who was called upon to deliver the banquet speech at the annual meeting of the American Association for Adult Education. Harry had been one of the founders of the

association, had served on its executive board since its inception in 1926 and for a long time was an associate editor of its journal. Joint lectures between the two were initiated in 1934 although they did not become commonplace until a few years later. Their first collaborative book was Town Meeting Comes to Town in 1938 which celebrated one of America's great civic adult education traditions – the town meeting. Both had lectured at Town Hall for the League for Political Education and both were familiar with the style of the extremely popular national radio program which emanated from Town Hall for more than a decade. It was the Overstreets' contention that the radio program was a significant contribution to adult education but many more things similar to it were needed. One year later Harry retired from his post at CCNY and he and Bonaro then had more time to devote to adult education.

Within six weeks of his retirement from the academic world Harry and Bonaro were asked by the American Association for Adult Education to serve as Research Associates and to undertake a comprehensive study of the education of teachers and others leaders in the field of adult education. This effort took them throughout the country for more than a year and their findings resulted in the publication of Leaders For Adult Education in 1941. They found that adult leaders were not limited to professional teachers but involved people from all walks of life. The ideal teacher was not only a “specialist” who knew his subject well but was also a “generalist” who was capable of keeping in mind the whole experience range necessary to balanced living. The teachers and leaders of adults needed to have a firm “sense of community” and must also continue to be learners throughout life. The importance of Leaders For Adult Education was recognized by later adult educators such as J. Roby Kidd, Cyril Houle and Harold Stubblefield.

During the completion of the work on this book Harry was informed that he had been unanimously selected for election as the next president of the American Association for Adult Education. He was moved by this honor because he felt closer to adult educators as “fellow workers” than to any other organized body. While many of the responsibilities were largely nominal with regard to authority, the office did lead to frequent participation in state and local adult education workshops throughout the country. One of the areas both he and Bonaro stressed during the year of his presidency was the need to develop greater community consciousness through the adult education movement. More and more they emphasized the need to grant full

civil rights to the country's black population because in order "to defend democracy we must act out democracy."⁸

The years of World War II changed the focus of their activities somewhat. There was little time or human resources available for adult education research but there was a need for adult education to attack discrimination of every kind at home and to put an end to fascist ideas both at home and abroad. The Overstreets focused on their writing and lecturing. Harry Overstreet wrote Our Free Minds in 1941. It was a call to action for Americans to defend their prized freedom. And Bonaro's popularity soared during the war years because of her intensive efforts in both poetry and prose. Between 1941 and 1945 she wrote five books and for more than two years had a popular full page newspaper column each week which was often a long narrative poem that was like a letter from home. Many of these poems were presented as radio dramatizations throughout the country and many were reprinted by Armed Services organizations for distribution here and abroad. There were also many requests from universities and associations for permission to reprint them for distribution. Bonaro had become a well-known literary figure. In all of her columns she held firmly to her liberal social views and never shied away from national problems. When the war ended she wrote the half humorous, "We're Eating Breakfast Today in the Postwar World," with an admonition that "peace will not come until we learn to feel as our own the suffering of mind and flesh that is not our own."⁹

During the war years the Overstreets had created an innovation in their lecture method which they termed a colloquy. In it, the two of them had a dialogue on an important subject before welcoming questions from the audience. They liked the flexibility of the colloquy, and it seemed to fit two professionals who had mutual respect for each other and a gift for being comfortable with an informal method. The colloquy became a kind of trademark for the Overstreets. It has not easily been duplicated by others.

Immediately after the war they devoted a substantial amount of time as community consultants. Two of the workshops they planned and conducted at Gary, Indiana and in Hawaii have been discussed in an earlier chapter. These were typical of many other such workshops in which the Overstreets researched both the issues involved and the characteristics of the community before arranging for leaders in the community to meet for a workshop lasting over several days. In this post-war period Bonaro wrote How To Think About Ourselves which was

published in 1948 and then was reissued thirty years later. As astute an observer as Lindeman wrote “if ever there was a generation that needed this exercise, it is our own.”¹⁰

The Overstreets’ next effort was a return to adult education research on an organization with which they had maintained very close relations over the years – the Parent-Teacher Association. Their findings were published in 1949 in the book , Where Children Come First. They concluded that parent education must become the education of the whole adult because parents needed to function well as mature people in order to function well as parents. They indicated that concern about the child must involve parents and all those other institutions that affect children. They also noted that too often forgotten were the social causes for which the P.T.A. has fought. These included juvenile courts, child labor laws and the protection of the handicapped.

At age seventy-four Harry Overstreet produced the work with which his name is most associated, The Mature Mind. It was a book in which he integrated the findings from a number of social science disciplines into a “maturity concept.” This concept he described as a series of linkages one had to develop throughout life. The maturity concept explained the process by which adults could attain an intellectually and fulfilling stage of life. Harry saw adult education as the way in which adults could move beyond the routine into stimulating experiences that would aid them in attaining psychological maturity. The book was a huge commercial success and was on the best seller lists for several years. It was translated into seven languages and sold well for many years here and abroad. Many of the ideas expounded in the book had been tested in lectures and courses along the way. For example, an eight-week course Harry offered at the University of Michigan Extension Service in 1945 became incorporated as one of the chapters of the book. The Mature Mind had been a major research and writing project for Harry for more than seven years and was a testimonial to a remarkable work ethic. Harry’s chief focus was on the research, writing, and rewriting of the book while still continuing to work with Bonaro in producing many books and articles, leading workshops and delivering lectures. In accomplishing all of this they both had a secret which gave them an advantage. Each of them had a research assistant and constructive critic at his or her beck and call at any hour of the day or night. This was a resource they could not have afforded to hire. Norman Cousins described them as functioning synergistically.

The Overstreets' books and lectures continued to be in even greater demand after the publication of The Mature Mind. Bonaro next published Understanding Fear which was in print for more than thirty years and which some considered one of the best books written on the subject of fear. Harry wrote The Great Enterprise which was a logical extension of The Mature Mind. He described the irresponsibility of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his tactics. Throughout the book the importance of adult civic education was stressed.

Together Harry and Bonaro devoted much of their time and effort to the mental health movement and wrote a number of popular books on the subject including The Mind Alive and The Mind Goes Forth. They became controversial figures when the extreme right wing succeeded in having their books removed from overseas libraries. Never ones to shrink from a good fight, they succeeded in clearing their names and getting a letter from the Director of the International Information Administration which expressed heartfelt apologies for the injustices to them. Their books were returned to all State Department libraries and their thoughts and views were carried over the Voice of America. Throughout all of this they were writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column, "Making Life Make Sense," and Bonaro continued to write poetry.

The next step in civic adult education was to confront communist ideology. When Soviet tanks stormed into Hungary in October 1956 the Overstreets began research for a serious book for mature citizens on Communism. The result was What We Must Know About Communism published in October 1958. By sheer good fortune, the Secretary of State read the book and recommended it to President Eisenhower. Photographs of the President carrying the book and looking into it were carried in newspapers around the country and abroad. Their lectures were no longer limited to the United States but included many countries in Europe and Asia during the next several years. Both at home and on trips abroad they continued their research on communism and produced The War Called Peace: Khrushchev's Communism and The Iron Curtain. Through all of this there never was a time when the Overstreets did not emphasize the importance of adult education.

When Harry Overstreet was ninety years old he and Bonaro were on a full lecture schedule which took them around the country and to the Panama Canal Zone. He was nearly ninety-two when he delivered his last lecture, a colloquy with Bonaro, in Oxford, Mississippi.

After Harry died in 1970, Bonaro continued lecturing and teaching for the University of Virginia and several other colleges and adult education associations.

The Overstreets' Methods of Work and Leisure

Friends and colleagues were impressed with the enormous amount of work that was accomplished by the Overstreets. They were often asked what their “secret” was for getting so many things accomplished – lectures and books and articles. Interestingly, the Overstreet personal files contain occasional musings about themselves and their activities. One such paper written by Bonaro, undated, but in the 1957 files, was called “Random Observations About Overstreet Existence and How It Is Managed!”¹¹ and it helps us to understand their love of life and their seemingly endless energy.

Bonaro wrote of their routine of rising very early every morning either to do research or to write until lunchtime. Then they would exchange the results of their work, read it and discuss it. She wrote of their being lucky in being able to work “almost exclusively at things we enjoy so that very little of our available energy is drained in conscious or subconscious resistance to what we’re doing.” She went on to state that while lucky, it was not wholly accidental because they had both chosen the teaching profession and loved it, and then went on to choose a broad field of teaching experimentation – that of adult education. In addition, they had chosen to work as a team both in writing and lecturing and thus together had “savored work-adventures” which enabled them to decide “to take on those which seemed most worthwhile and most fun.” She detailed how they tried to distribute their time in a “balanced way between writing and lecture-teaching” and to reach each year a fair representation of groups in business, industry, mental health, government, schools and colleges, parent education, community education, and churches. She said they tried to keep always on the pioneering front in the field of human relations: and “to be constantly learning from other people and constantly rendering such service as we can.” She detailed one very important factor which was that “of refreshing ourselves pretty constantly from the deep fountain of human wisdom and beauty: not letting too much time go by, ever, without giving our spirits a good dose of poetry, philosophy, great drama, music, history, social vision.” They maintained their own equilibrium and optimistic outlook on life by drawing on all those people “back through time who have contributed to the dignity and loveliness and justice of

man's estate." They also found it important to have some time to "stand and stare, visit with friends, and do nothing."¹²

The "work adventures" the Overstreets chose usually focused on those in which adult education could provide factual information on the vital issues of the day. The Overstreets believed that if adult education was to achieve its potential it was vital that it reach the masses of ordinary citizens. A useful guide to bolster their beliefs was the success of the folk schools of Denmark and their own experience with institutions such as the New School of Social Research and Town Hall.

The Overstreets' Contributions Assessed by Contemporaries

The remarkable popularity of the Overstreets, while impressive, is involved with only one aspect of their influence on the adult education movement. Of vital importance as well is their influence on the individual faces in the crowd – many of whom are noteworthy in their own right.

Adult Educators View the Overstreets

Many prominent adult educators have spoken and written of what the Overstreets meant to them and to the adult education movement. All of them indicated that they valued Harry and Bonaro as personal friends, an interesting sidelight on the Overstreets' gift for developing and maintaining friendships. Most also spoke of their admiration for their discipline in accomplishing a substantial body of work.

Malcolm Knowles enjoyed many years of friendship with the Overstreets and expressed his admiration and indebtedness to them on several occasions. The foreword to Knowles' first book published in 1950, Informal Adult Education, was written by Harry Overstreet. Knowles provided an inscription to Harry which read, "To Harry Allen Overstreet, whose life and works have chiefly inspired this book and whose grand foreword gives it a real send-off."¹³ Knowles acknowledged the Overstreets' influence on other occasions. In an inscription to the book, The Adult Education Movement in the United States, he wrote to Harry and Bonaro "with deep gratitude for the contributions you have made to this movement and to my understanding of it."¹⁴ Later, with the publication of The Modern Practice of Adult Education, Knowles wrote to Bonaro, "With gratitude and thanks for the great contributions you and Harry have made to my maturing as a person and as an adult educator."¹⁵

J. Roby Kidd, the distinguished Canadian author of How Adults Learn and Education For Perspective and an internationally respected authority on adult education, spoke of his association with the Overstreets, particularly at meetings of the American Association for Adult Education (later the AEA/USA). He was impressed with their generosity to the young practitioners in the field of adult education. He recalled how they encouraged those new to the field to discuss their views openly and to not bend to the supposed wisdom of their elders. Kidd indicated that a source of continuing joy to him in discussions was “Harry’s keen sense of humor and his ability to listen carefully to others.”¹⁶ Introducing Bonaro at a reception for the Board of the International Council for Adult Education hosted by the International Associates of Adult Education at the Organization of American States in Washington D. C., Kidd referred to her as “the first lady of adult education.”¹⁷

In his book, How Adults Learn, Kidd quoted passages from The Mature Mind and Leaders For Adult Education. He also quoted Harry as responding to a question concerning the most important attribute of a teacher. Harry replied, “He must be a learner himself. If he has lost his capacity for learning he is not good enough to be in the company of those who have preserved theirs.”¹⁸

Dorothy Hewitt, then the Director of the Boston Center for Adult Education, wrote to Harry and Bonaro after reading Our Free Minds saying that she was “simply thrilled with it” and her inclination was to start a campaign to see that a copy is in the hands of every United States citizen. She reminded them how proud and delighted the entire staff of the Center was with Leaders for Adult Education and how they looked forward to visits from the Overstreets. She went on to tell them that for her they were “positively inspiring” for the “courageousness and the clear vision you have shown.”¹⁹

Everett Soop, adult educator and a former head of the Extension Service at the University of Michigan, reflected that a significant contribution of Harry’s was the development of the panel discussion method of presentation. He also was impressed with and enjoyed the two-person colloquy developed by Harry and Bonaro. He stated that he had “always been impressed with the thorough preparation for assignments they accepted. I always admired their daily work schedule.” He added that he often turned to Bonaro’s poetry for contentment.²⁰

Paul H. Sheats, an adult educator who was for many years the director of the UCLA Extension Service, reminisced about his association with Harry during the Town Hall days of 1944-46 and thereafter: “He was my mentor. . . I admired his courage and benefited tremendously from his writings and philosophy. He was a model for all of us working in adult education.” Sheats stated that Bonaro also had been “an inspiration to me through all of the years we have known each other.” Sheats stated that he had been influenced by Bonaro’s “warmth, her constant practice of humanistic principles, her love for and interest in people of all races and accomplishments.” He added, “The Overstreets set a mark to which all adult educators should repair.”²¹

Per Stensland, the Swedish adult educator who came to the United States to study adult education and who taught at Teachers College in New York City, was a neighbor of the Overstreets. Stensland observed that in their book, Leaders for Adult Education, the Overstreets did not include themselves although “everyone knew that they were in the first row of leadership.” He said that Harry and Bonaro were for many years “the key professional couple in adult education.” He went on:

Their quiet, steady commentary on what we all tried to do, and their vision of what we must do to keep our world decent and reasonable were important forces in American adult education. In moments of deep change – which some of us understood only poorly – Harry and Bonaro kept reminding us of a great tradition of liberalism and fearless education.

Stensland said that Harry and Bonaro were “guides, explorers, transmitters of ancient but always endangered truths.” He added that they were never obtrusive in these roles but remained “quietly dignified and always pointedly asking basic questions about ourselves as educators and persons, and about our work, the education of adults.”²²

John Morton, adult educator and a former head of the Extension Service at the University of Alabama, related that Harry and Bonaro had a deep insight into the problems that troubled people and had practical ideas for relieving human problems. “in their writing, lecturing, and teaching, they helped many people.”²³

Mary Ely, long associated with the adult education movement and editor of the 1936 edition of Adult Education in Action, wrote to Bonaro “You will always be my guide in joyous living and learning.”²⁴

Arthur P. (Jack) Crabtree, adult educator and former president of the Adult Education Association of the United States glowingly expressed his views of the contribution and influence of the Overstreets on the adult education movement both in phone conversation with the writer and in response to a survey in January 1982.. Crabtree felt that during the formative years of adult education in this country the Overstreets were “the genuine trailblazers.” He said that while many “were content to concern themselves with the molehills of the movement, the Overstreets ever looked to the mountain.” He praised their efforts because he said they strove to educate a society, transcending the parochial concerns of individuals. While others gave lip-service to the needs of a problem-solving society, they went about the business of meeting those needs. Crabtree believed that the Overstreet’s concept of adult education enriched its scope and significance. He recalled that Harry had once written that “philosophy is a set of values which determines what one will, or will not, do,” and Crabtree stated that he believed this is a practical definition that we all can understand. He went on to indicate that he firmly believed that it was fortunate for the adult education movement in this country that the Overstreets lived at a time when they could point out the value system that we all should follow in shaping the course and character of American adult education. He recalled his nearly fifty years in the adult education movement, and especially the early days of the depression years when he was State Director of the WPA program in Indiana. He had felt ill equipped to deal with the thousands of people and the myriad problems involved because he had very little training for the position. Crabtree went on:

In searching for a light in this period of frustrating darkness, the Overstreets appeared as a welcomed beacon. Their works and writings gave me the sense of direction and purpose I needed, but even more practically, to assist me in the day-to-day performance of the position I held. Throughout the years, their leadership has been invaluable. It has impressed me with the abiding principle that democracy is the ultimate hope of all societal governance and that adult education is a vital imperative in this transcendent task for all mankind.²⁵

Crabtree had always been an admirer of the Overstreets. In an earlier letter written in December 1962 when he was the Supervisor of Adult Education for the University of the State of New York, he wrote “During my thirty years in Adult Education I have had two “heroes.” The first was Ed Lindeman. I had the rare privilege of close friendship with Lindeman for nearly twenty years. My second “hero” has been, and still is, a gentleman by the name of Harry Overstreet..²⁶

Appraisals From Professionals in the Fields of Overstreet Endeavors

Within the Overstreets' correspondence files there are countless references which attest to the contributions and impact of the ideas and efforts of the Overstreets in the various fields in which the Overstreets worked. These include prominent professionals in the fields of philosophy, psychology and mental health, parent education and political and civic education.

Noted philosophers such as Sidney Hook and William Pepperell Montague indicated their respect for the work of both Harry and Bonaro. Hook, a former student of Harry's at CCNY and who is referenced often in the text, was an American social philosopher and author of Education For Modern Man and The Paradoxes of Freedom as well as philosophical books on Marx and Hegel. Hook pointed to what he considered an important aspect of their work. He believed that in gearing their educational activities "to emphasize the central importance of freedom and the open society, they stressed the values of overriding significance for our time, values often ignored or taken for granted, or not adequately grasped in the welter of courses in adult education."²⁷ Hook was also of the opinion that there has "never been proper appreciation for Overstreet." He said Harry "was a man of extraordinarily sweet and generous disposition" with a "genuine dramatic talent" that "enabled him to personalize a situation and problem of human conflict and values."²⁸

William Pepperell Montague, noted American philosopher who taught for many years at Columbia and Barnard, was a great admirer of Harry Overstreet. He wrote that Harry had "rendered to the cause of philosophy in America a unique and valuable service."

He related how Harry, when he was called to the headship of the philosophy and psychology department at City College, found himself "confronted with large numbers of students who were indifferent and even angrily hostile to the study of philosophical problems." He said Harry had met this situation by acquiring a thorough knowledge of "the social and political problems in which his students were interested and then adapting his courses in philosophy to deal with those non-philosophical needs. Montague said that as a result of this "bold departure from conventional methods he succeeded in imbuing thousands, literally thousands with a genuine philosophic attitude of mind." He went on to say that Overstreet had supplemented all this with his work in adult education through his lectures throughout the country and through his widely read books. He said that Harry had "effectively conveyed many

significant philosophic insights” to readers who could utilize their clarification. He added that Harry Overstreet had “proved himself a very real and very distinguished philosopher.”²⁹

Two from the field of psychology who attested to the value of the Overstreets’ work were the distinguished psychologist Gordon Allport and the eminent psychiatrist Karl Menninger. They, too, were lifelong friends of the Overstreets.

On December 8, 1961, Gordon W. Allport, author of The Nature of Prejudice and Personality and Social Encounter, wrote to Harry that it baffled him how Harry and Bonaro actually read books. He said “Anyone can acknowledge their receipt and list them in bibliographies. But few people who write take the trouble to read.” He went on to tell Harry how much he appreciated his opinion of “Pattern & Growth in Personality”:

I am glad you note its newness and my attempt to keep up-to-date and also my skirmish with the riddles of motivation. Much that I have learned about writing has come from reading your own books.

Yep, the world sure is hard to save – and one has to have a good old evangelical commitment to keep trying. I cheer your continued endeavors. . .³⁰

Karl Menninger, who was a leader in the mental health movement and one of the founders of the Menninger Clinic and the Menninger Foundation for Psychiatric education and research in Topeka, Kansas, admired both Harry and Bonaro and was appreciative of their willingness to lecture and hold workshops at the Menninger Clinic. In his book, The Human Mind, he quoted extensively from Harry Overstreet’s About Ourselves. In The Vital Balance he wrote to his friends “The Overstreets – whose inspiration and wise counsel have helped so many people.”³¹ Menninger also enjoyed Bonaro’s poetry and wrote a long humorous attempt at verse to tell her how much pleasure he had received from reading the poems in Signature.³²

Others in the field of mental health spoke of Harry and Bonaro’s contributions to the field. Bert Kruger Smith of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, University of Texas felt the most significant contribution the Overstreets made “was their positive and human approach to the potential growth of human beings.” He stated that although the Overstreets were “scientific in their informational base, they were extremely human and often humorous in their approach.” Thus they were able to capture the attention of people and to impart a great deal of information.³³ And Dr. Bernice M. Moore, a member of the staff of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health

added that the Overstreets “were superior teachers who gave much to the adults whom they taught and with personal generosity.” She explained:

They were excellent speakers. Their material was always well prepared and based on scientific studies in the field of mental health and the behavioral sciences. Audiences listened closely and were generous in their appreciative responses to the Overstreets both in listening and in questioning when discussion was opened to the audience.³⁴

For many years both of the Overstreets spoke as featured speakers at national and state Parent-Teacher Association conferences and wrote numerous articles for the national Parent-Teacher magazine. Virginia Kletzer, a former national president of the Parent Teachers Association, wrote of the many valuable contributions they had made to parent education. She added that starting with The Mature Mind the Overstreets had produced a “series of profound studies of the inner needs of people, their relationships to their fellowmen and their responsibility to society.” She went on to note the sensitivity of the Overstreets to the rights and needs of minority citizens and to the underprivileged. She observed that “all this is basic to adult education in a democratic society.”³⁵

There were many individuals in government, both elected and appointed officials and numerous government agency executives here and abroad who were appreciative of the Overstreet’s efforts in political and civic education. People prominent in the media – radio, newspapers, publishers – also spoke highly of the way they were able to reach and educate ordinary citizens about communism and the dangers of political extremism.

In a letter to Harry and Bonaro on February 21, 1964, Mrs. Paul Douglas, wife of the illustrious United States Senator from Illinois, thanked them “for what you have been writing over the years” and for sending them a copy of The Iron Curtain . She went on to say that Senator Douglas was reading but had not yet finished the book but that she had and wanted to tell them how important they both thought it was. She continued:

In fact, I can’t think why we have not put the stress where you suggest! It seems so self-evident, now that you have pointed it out, that the walls are their vulnerable targets. In the past we have both used much of your material in our own talks, And we shall keep right on doing so! We are grateful to you for the insights.³⁶

Leo Cherne, Executive Director of the Research Institute of America, noted economist, accomplished sculptor, and for ten years the Chairman of the International Rescue Committee noted what he most admired about the Overstreets:

The opposition to Fascism is clearly admirable and virtually always risk-free, especially within academic and intellectual circles. The opposition to Communism, however, is quite another matter. The fact that the Overstreets, models of reasonableness, integrity, unchallenged scholarship, put the weight of their writing behind the opposition to Communism, gave respectability to that course which few others could confer.³⁷

Henry Cabot Lodge, former Senator from Massachusetts, U. S. representative to the United Nations under President Eisenhower and U. S. Ambassador under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, wrote favorably of What We Must Know About Communism describing it as “a thoroughly useful compendium of information about Soviet communism.”³⁸

Roscoe Drummond, noted journalist and former national columnist, believed that in their books on communism, Harry and Bonaro “have done as much if not more than any other two Americans to expose the evils and uncover the deceptions of Communism and the extreme left.”³⁹

William C. Mott, Rear Admiral (Ret.), former Executive Director of the Council on Economic and National Security, and former Judge Advocate of the Department of the Navy, reflected that as Chairman of the Standing Committee of the American Bar Association on Education About Communism it had been his good fortune to be able to bring those “two great scholars before all kinds of adult audiences.” He went on to say their “monumental works on the meaning of communism backed up their clear oral presentations of the subject.” Mott added that “while their knowledge of the aims, objectives, and practices of communism was great, they were perfectly capable of discussing problems of the human race in psychological and philosophical terms. They were, indeed, consummate lecturers and brilliant writers.” He concluded by stating, “Their influence on my life has been profound.”⁴⁰

Leonard Sussman, former Executive Director of Freedom House, attested to the contributions both Harry and Bonaro had made to Freedom House through the writing of informative articles for distribution by Freedom House and the writing of important ads for major United States newspapers. In addition he remarked about Bonaro’s contributions to that Board of Trustees, saying that Bonaro had served a unique function by bringing to it “an interest in adult education, continuing education if you will.” He said that in addition to the foreign and domestic

policies which the members discussed, Bonaro added a dimension of personalization and it was amazing “to see the freshness of those ideas, and the verve of expression; the sense of sharing one’s own views while listening very hard to those of others.” Sussman added that not many of us do both well, but Bonaro did.⁴¹

Margaret Chase Smith, who served for many years as a U. S. Senator from Maine and who served with Bonaro on the Freedom House Board of Trustees, wrote that she had known Bonaro “well in our membership on the Freedom House Board,” and had “never seen a more intelligent, articulate, perceptive and accurate person. She spoke as well as she wrote – and that is really saying something!” Senator Smith was complimentary of the effectiveness of Bonaro’s “infallible and penetrating observations” and concluded that Bonaro had inspired her in the example she projected.⁴²

Marshall Green, former State Department official and once Ambassador to Indonesia and Australia and Consul General in Hong Kong, was of the opinion that the Overstreets’ most significant contributions were in “sparking interest in the limitless horizons of the world about us and in combining humanism with realism.” He added that Bonaro “as much as anyone else I have known in the past two decades, delights in discussing ideas, concepts and philosophies as they related to the human condition.”⁴³

Richard Kimball, Colonel, U. S. Army (Ret.) and former official of NATO, who became acquainted with the Overstreets on their overseas trips, believed that their major contribution was in “teaching awareness and understanding of selves in relation to local surroundings and then expanding to a mature look at national and international affairs.”⁴⁴

Edward P. Morgan, the well-known radio and television news analyst and commentator wrote of “their important works on communism and political extremism” and reminisced:

They came into my life, literally, after I had read The Mature Mind and was working with Ed Murrow producing thumbnail philosophies for radio, -- a program called, “This I Believe.” We spent a whole afternoon at Town Meeting offices in Manhattan, after which they each submitted superb scripts. We have been fast friends ever since. Harry is gone, but his spirit lives.

Morgan also mentioned the “warm, human approach both the Overstreets took to peoples’ problems.”⁴⁵

George P. Brockway, a former Chairman of the Board of W. W. Norton and Company book publishers and a noted economist in his own right commented that “as a team they could show how civilized people resolve differences and reach a fuller understanding of the subject.” Thus they were not merely telling but were also showing which was “one of the things that made them so effective.” He added that the word he associated most with Harry and Bonaro was “sweetness.” Brockway said he did not mean “cloying” but he did mean “enriching.” He felt their power as a pair was personal and that they showed “how decent people behave and thus helped people on the road to decency.”⁴⁶ And Mary E. Ryan, a member of the W. W. Norton staff, added that the Overstreets’ co-authorship produced books “that offered common sense direction to the reader in the pursuit of knowledge and the practical application of that knowledge to the shaping of a personal philosophy of life.”⁴⁷

As noted earlier, Edward R. Murrow, perhaps the most distinguished and respected radio and television news analyst of his time, selected the Overstreets to be among the first to participate on his program giving the personal philosophies of eminent role models. His admiration for Harry was evident when he wrote in 1952 to “Professor Harry A. Overstreet, in whose debt I stand.”⁴⁸

Norman Cousins corresponded with them often. He wrote to Bonaro on October 24, 1961 that “few persons have influenced me more deeply in life than you and Harry. Your values, your creative spirit, the texture of your thought – all these have been as much a part of my education as any single influence I can think of.”⁴⁹ When Cousins was an adjunct professor at the University of California at Los Angeles he wrote that Harry was a superb communicator, both in print and on the platform. Cousins said that Harry had addressed himself essentially to the development of human potentiality and in so doing had enabled people to come to terms with themselves and others by thinking more clearly about their purposes and their role in life. He said that Bonaro complemented Harry beautifully and added that her own insights into human thought and behavior “were informed not solely by her professional knowledge but by her poetic skills and her understanding of human motivation.” As a team, he said “they functioned synergistically. They were pioneers in many respects. The extension of their work into politics. . . reflected their keenness of intellect and their gift of expression.”⁵⁰

In the preceding chapters of this study there has been ample evidence that the Overstreets were held in high regard by other colleagues in adult education and related fields, including such well known adult educators as James Harvey Robinson, Lyman Bryson, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Eduard Lindeman, Alvin Johnson, Morse Cartwright, Will Durant, Morris Cohen, Father Jimmy Tompkins, and Malcolm Knowles. The Overstreet Personal Files and those in the Lilly Library of the University of Indiana contain many exchanges of letters with individuals who valued the Overstreets' work, opinions, consultations, and friendship. Correspondence with respected leaders and intellectuals such as John Dewey, Albert Einstein, Sidney Hook, Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, Karl and William Menninger, Abraham Maslow, Gordon Allport, Paul Douglas, Warren Burger, Walter Mondale, Marshall Green, Leo Cherne and others reveal expressions of thanks, words of praise, plans for visits, discussions of issues, and feelings of close friendship. There is ample evidence of the respect and high regard in which the Overstreets were held for their intellectual ability, their talent for expression, and their dedication to furthering the interest in and appreciation of the field of adult education. Their lecture and workshops in large cities and small towns were covered by the local press. Every newspaper account referred to the Overstreets as adult educators who represented the vitality and importance of the growing movement. In interviews the Overstreets urged the local communities to broaden their adult education efforts and often championed the establishment of adult education councils. Many localities took up the challenge. Throughout the country the Overstreets were calling attention to the opportunities and values to be found in adult education.

.Yet perhaps even more important was their influence on the adult teachers and the group leaders on the firing line who worked with adult learners of every description. Through their writings, lectures, workshops, and especially through the example of their own lives, Harry Allen Overstreet and Bonaro Wilkinson Overstreet reinforced for those who worked in adult education the important value of helping every human being in the continual progress toward maturity and the realization of **his or her full potential. This, they believed, was essential to the continued growth and survival of American democracy.**

The Overstreets' Critics From The Left and The Right

The Overstreets, of course, had a number of vociferous critics. Their overwhelming popularity made them the targets of those who thought the Overstreets were shallow. From a

philosophical viewpoint, Harry Overstreet had a kind of feud ongoing with Mortimer Adler because Harry did not appreciate Adler's attacks on John Dewey's educational philosophy. Actually, by about 1980, Adler had changed his viewpoint to mean that he agreed with Dewey, but felt that Dewey's disciples did not understand Dewey.⁵¹

When What We Must Know About Communism was published the Overstreets were attacked by William Z. Foster, the head of the American Communist Party. According to Foster, the book was "an extensive collection of prejudices, distortions, and so-called arguments." He stated that the Overstreets "make the usual bourgeois idealization of capitalist society . . . a sort of God-given system beyond the reach of criticism." Among his charges was the claim that they maliciously attacked the U.S.S.R. when they had denied it was either democratic or peace loving.⁵² E. Arab Ogly in The World Marxist Review also criticized the book and the Overstreets by charging that they did not understand capitalism, they distorted facts and they falsely described Communism as conspiratorial.⁵³

Other attacks on the Overstreets came from the far right. The Strange Tactics of Extremism was attacked with negative reviews in the National Review by M. Stanton Evans and in the American Opinion by Revilo Oliver. Evans stressed that the book should have been about the left, not the right. Both reviewers questioned the use of the word "extremism." Evans stated that the Overstreets "assume that anything to the starboard of William Scranton may be with perfect justice classified as equivalent to the Communists."⁵⁴ Oliver remarked that the term extremist "as applied to Americans is obviously a nonsense word coined by Communists for the use of Communist-Fronters not bright enough to invent it for themselves." He also attacked the Overstreets for having criticized Martin Dies and Joseph McCarthy.⁵⁵ Edward Janisch, writing for American Opinion, stated sarcastically that if one "agreed with the Overstreets' radical beliefs you are 'mature' but if you are one of those *backward souls* who believes in God, love of country, free enterprise, investigations of Communism . . . then you are 'immature' and quite possibly, according to Professor Overstreet, you are on the road to mental illness."⁵⁶ Robert Welch of the Birch Society who had been organizing protests and attacks on the Overstreets for years announced that "we certainly are not going to be drawn into even reading and much less answering" the Overstreets' book.⁵⁷

The Overstreets had defenders from these attacks. Reason, a publication which reviewed political issues pointed out that the far left, like the far right, used quotations out of context. In it Julian Foster refuted claim after claim made by the Communist leader about the Overstreet writings and even found it “a touch of comedy” that the communist writers so often substituted different words for those used by Harry and Bonaro. He stated that this might be a case of a misprint “except that they do it again and again.”⁵⁸ Another writer, Charles P. Greening, stated that “with a careful blend of historical documentation and narrative,” the Overstreets gave “a clear treatment of the history, the personalities, and the tactics of the Communist Party.”⁵⁹

The Overstreets: Models of Lifelong Commitment to Adult Education

This study has been an attempt to examine and assess the extensive activities and contributions of Harry and Bonaro Overstreet in the field of adult education. Their lives and work covered a large part of the twentieth century. The research and assessment of the data has shown that it was the special talent of the Overstreets to reach a wider audience in this country and abroad than any other adult educators of the period. Their thirty-one books written over a period of forty-five years were purchased and read by many millions of readers. The Mature Mind, “an achievement of considerable importance in adult education”⁶⁰ was widely popular in many languages. No other book on the subject of adult education (except for those by the Overstreets themselves) even remotely approached this kind of public reception.

At the same time that Harry and Bonaro were writing and publishing books and articles, they were also lecturing and leading workshops and seminars in every corner of the nation. This included every major metropolis and an extraordinary number of small towns, hamlets and country crossroads. The Overstreets were superb lecturers and teachers, and in more than sixty years on the platform delivered thousands of talks to an appreciative audience of many hundreds of thousands. This included teachers, students, factory workers, management executives, training officers, P.T.A.'s, mental health groups and every conceivable kind of forum. No other adult education speakers even remotely reached this wide a public audience from the platform. Considering the great numbers, it is remarkable how often their talks were not of a general nature but involved the problems of the specific community. They focused on the needs and characteristics of a particular community which enabled them to maintain an intense involvement with the audience. In addition, Harry is credited with creating and developing the panel method of

discussion and together they developed the colloquy – specialized platform techniques which added considerably to the interest of the audience.

What is even more remarkable is that in the case of Harry Overstreet, much of this happened after he had achieved national prestige as a professor of philosophy and psychology at the University of California and at City College of New York. He was established as a distinguished and honored academician. For the rest of his long life, Harry remained the scholar, but he and Bonaro became scholars who could write and speak in a popular vein. As Norman Cousins who was for many years the editor of the Saturday Review expressed it:

Harry Overstreet belonged to a small company of American thinkers and philosophers – Irwin Edman would be an example – whose reputation was equally high with the academic community and the public.⁶¹

By and large the Overstreets were representative of the liberal tradition in American thought during this period and this paper has attempted to put their activities in an appropriate historical context. Together the Overstreets' lives were devoted to championing the major reform movements of the twentieth century, defending civil liberties and academic freedom and opposing anti-Semitic and anti-black actions wherever they occurred. The Overstreets were firm believers in democratic values. This meant that all opinions with regard to an issue should be openly and factually discussed. Although they were calm and poised and did not raise their voices either in conversations or in lectures, they detested injustice and never shied away from a fight when the cause was meaningful or when they could help to defend those who were defenseless. When democratic ideals were involved or bigotry and prejudice were apparent, the Overstreets were as tough as they had to be. They attempted to be models of mature citizens in a democracy. Underpinning all of this was their firm belief that the education of adults was essential to the perpetuation of a democracy and to the emotional health of its citizens.

The Overstreets' definition of adult education did not know limitations. It was not only an academic discipline for the development of adult education leaders and practitioners. For them it included the dissemination of knowledge on any subject that helped adults to continue to grow toward greater maturity and civic responsibility. Thus for them it included writing books such as Leaders for Adult Education which was primarily about the adult education field and books of civic education such as What We Must Know About Communism which provided information that was necessary for a meaningful national debate on a major issue.

Harry and Bonaro Overstreet were optimistic that when all was said and done, “right” would prevail. Their optimism, or “cheerful realism” as Bonaro described it, was bolstered by their belief in democracy, the common sense and basic intelligence of the American people, and the important future role to be played by adult education. The Overstreets’ contributions in the field of adult education through the knowledge and information they disseminated were certainly valuable, but perhaps even more important was this example of an optimistic, realistic belief in democracy and the important role which adult education plays in ensuring it for ourselves and future generations.

Following the lives and works of these two “eagles” of adult education was an absorbing and rewarding project . During the investigation, however, other areas of research became apparent to the writer. There should be research done in the prominent roles many distinguished women have played in the history of the adult education movement. Letters and articles in the Overstreet files attested to the vitality and creativity these “forgotten” women brought to their adult education efforts. Another area worthy of additional study is that of the important role adult education has played and is continuing to play in the crucial area of civic education. It is the writer’s hope that these areas will be extensively studied by researchers in the future.

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