Polarization is no longer an adequate word for what is happening in America these days. Try words like splintering, fragmentation, disintegration: these tell the story a little better. This nation is more broken in its relationships, more shattered in spirit, than at any time since the Civil War. All our institutional glue has come unstuck. Government is aimless, law has lost authority, political parties are in decay, our cities are groping in fear and filth, our economy is in the absurd clutches of an inflationary recession, higher education has its back to the ivied walls, religious loyalty and organization is in rapid dissolution.

The measure of either religious pertinence or political relevance must now lie in the capacity to deal with this brokenness among our people. For if we do not soon find the cement of common justice, of human solidarity and of peace, we shall find ourselves plunged back into the barbaric state of man which Thomas Hobbes called "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

There is no short-circuiting the imperative of creating a new and more humane nationalism in America. Nor can our nation’s wounds be hound up by pretending that nations don’t count for anything anymore in our global village. In many parts of the world today, the struggle for nationhood—for self-respect, self-determination, and a new coherence of culture and institutions—largely defines the struggle for humanization. Why should we pretend that the United States is exempt from the requirements of that struggle?

I do not apologize for saying that we must get about the business of our own nationhood. Pulling this nation together now calls for resources of mind and soul which no church, no university, no political party or movement, no court chaplains in the White House can trifle over if they are to touch the depths of our brokenness.

We are wrong to assume that there ever was a time when national unity could be taken for granted in the U.S. Except in times of world war, or frenzied international exploits, we have usually seemed like a great aggregation of petty principalities in which local patriotisms, sectional, economic, and racial interests have really been more important to us than national identity. No people have ever damned their own national government more regularly than we have, and that usually with a burst of phony patriotic rhetoric. Our nationhood is not so much a fact of our past as it is a moral achievement yet to be realized in the future.

We have been broken from the very beginning because some of our founding fathers tried to build a civilization on the cruel quicksands of Negro slavery. And, to this latest generation, we are tormented, black and white alike, by our inability to re-establish ourselves on the solid common ground.
of the human equality which is professed so elo­
quently in our own Declaration of Independence.

Too often—because we do not really take his­
tory very seriously—we settle for the cheapest
myths as to what our national pilgrimage really
means, and what it really promises. We become
the living proof that T. H. Huxley's funny defini­
tion may be serious after all: "A nation is a people
united by a common error as to its origins and a
common aversion to its neighbors."

A truly free people is open to every possibility
that its dissenters may own a better definition of
nationhood than its officialdom. There is a very
precious term in the British political vocabulary:
the "Loyal Opposition." How quick we are to as­
sume, in American public debate, that opposition
is disloyal. And how often we have been obliged
to recognize, in retrospect, that dissenters may
have had a much more majestic and humane sense
of national loyalty than those who called them
"traitors."

In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., in spite
of all the suffering of his people and in the face
of the death he knew awaited him, he could yet
say: "I still have a dream. It is a dream that is
deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a
dream that one day this nation will rise up, live
out the true meaning of its creed: . . . that all men
are created equal."

Having been so unresponsive to a black apostle
of non-violence who identified so profoundly
with the symbols of the American heritage, white
America can now hardly be surprised, and cer­
tainly not self-righteous, if some of their black
fellow-citizens are doubtful about the philosophy
of non-violence and offended by appeals to patri­
otism. For some blacks and some young whites,
the alienation from any meaningful sense of be­
longing to America is almost complete. No patri­
otic exercises or exhortations will recall them.
Justice and peace might bring them back.

Whatever the tasks of politics and the arts in
the reconstruction of freedom in America, the
churches are surely called to share the burdens of
nationhood. It ought to be possible to imagine the
churches—of all institutions—serving the people
at the very places where communities are most
shattered, where personal relationships are most
estranged, where men and women do not know
yet that creativity is a God-given necessity of their
being, where justice is denied, where children
are robbed, where healing is desperately needed.

Where churches do these things, we need not
worry too much about their evangelical power to
attract the younger generation. But this genera­
tion has become a plumbline for the testing of
authenticity in the Christian faith. Where churches
continue to fly the Christian and the American
flags side-by-side in their sanctuaries, but do not
share the burdens of our broken and unfulfilled
nationhood, the future of those churches is very
bleak—as it should be.

Above all, the churches must cease to hold to
such a cramped view of what it means to be "spirit­
ual" in a society which must forever struggle to
be truly free.

Alan Geyer

EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

A great philosopher in another age proclaimed
that survival was a race between education and
destruction. Yet to restate this leaves unanswered
the question, "education for what?" The Germans
under Hitler were a highly cultured people yet
wreaked destruction on the world; our own con­
scences are uneasy after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The question turns in part on the meaning and
purposes of education. From the standpoint of a
democracy, we have linked education to the open
society and to open minds on whom it depends.
The educated man, we say, is sensitive to alterna­
tives and aware of consequences. He is an agent
of change and an instrument of progress. This
notion of education for responsibility presupposes
both process and purpose, for openness is based
on some form of commitment, whether to science,
progress, or truth. We can afford to be open be­
cause there are moorings and benchmarks. With
William James we can say: "It is not thinking with
its primitive ingenuity of childhood that is most
difficult but to think with tradition, with all its
acquired force. . . ."

This answer to the timeless question, "education
for what?" has been "sufficient to the day." It has
accorded more or less with the trends of the time
and the spirit of the people. Now we find our­
selves in a world rent by social and biological revo­
lutions, sweeping alterations in interpersonal and
national moods. We have less time to ponder and
less willingness to forgive or forget or to prac­
tice restraint. Life styles for many have visibly
changed, and for many more there are far-reaching
questionings and doubts about who we are and
where we are going. This growing movement
presents us with questions that outnumber an­
swers. We cannot be clear which aspects are trans­