experiential education at antioch: the forties revisited

BY ALEINE AUSTIN

After Pearl Harbor, I yearned to take part in the world beyond the sheltering walls of academe. I ached to comprehend it. It was then I decided to transfer from Barnard College to Antioch. Through its work-study program, I hoped to accomplish both objectives. I could not know in 1942 that Antiochians' quest for comprehension through experience would become the basis of a major theory of pedagogy. Since then I have reflected as an educator upon my own developmental experiences at Antioch and have concluded that they demonstrate the soundness of the theory of "experiential education."

My first co-op job began in the fall of '42, at the Walter Midde war plant outside of Newark, New Jersey. I appeared at the Personnel Office at the dot of 7:00 a.m. Mr. Seamly, the head of the department, welcomed me to Walter Midde & Company and proceeded to walk me to my assigned station. On the way, he told me with pride, "This company made the raft that saved Commander Eddie Rickenbacker's life." He said he hoped I would be as proud of working for Walter Midde as he was, and told me of its importance in the war effort. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, management had converted its safety-equipment factory into a war plant that manufactured life rafts for war planes and Navy vessels. As we reached the inspection wing of the

plant, he commented, "I don't know what you expect to learn in this department. This is unskilled work, you know.... Our most ignorant people work here. You would have been better off sticking with your Antioch classmates in the Time-Study Department—"

"They're studying to be industrial engineers; I'm not."

"What are you studying?"

"Industrial *life*!" I answered eagerly.

"I see," he replied, not seeing at all. When he sent his evaluation of me to Antioch, he wrote: "Not suited to this kind of work."

He must have noticed that I lost interest in his Rickenbacker story when we entered the bowels of the plant. Thousands of people were bending over machines—buzzing, grinding, roaring machines. I squinted as I shifted gears, trying to accustom my eyes to the windowless light, to the tar black floor, to the vastness of this enclosed, kinetic space. It was as if I had entered some netherworld.

When we reached the Inspection Section, I was assigned a seat on a high stool in front of a long table. On either side of me sat a row of workers, mostly women.

Harry, the foreman, gave me a bag of little pieces of rubber that looked like tiny apple seeds. Holding one up, with difficulty, between his thumb and forefinger, he explained, "This here is part of a valve plug—understand? It has four little tabs—see?" He pointed to four tiny projections. "You gotta check and see that all four tabs are there. That's all there is to it—except to feel if the plug's smooth. If they are any dents—or if any of them little tabs are missing—put the plug in this here discard bag. Got it? That's all there is to it!"

And that was *all* there was to the job. Boring...boring...boring! I couldn't keep my mind on it—I couldn't give it my undivided attention. Soon I became acquainted with my neighbors on the workbench. To my right was Mary. She was in her late twenties and quite pretty.

It wasn't until the end of the workday, when she got off her stool, that I realized that one of her legs was about a foot shorter than the other. Her body suddenly became painfully misshapen as she bent from one side to the other and hobbled to the locker room.

After we became better acquainted, she told me this job was heaven compared to her last. "Heaven? Where in hell did you work before?"

"A bakery," Mary replied.

"Why would a bakery be worse than this? The heat?"

"No, the heat wasn't so terrible. I didn't work near the oven. My

job was making the dough. But I had to stand up all day while I was doing it. By the end of the day the pain in my runt leg almost killed me. It was all I could do to keep from screaming."

"Why didn't you sit down while you worked?"

"I wanted to—but the boss wouldn't let me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Maybe he thought it would slow me down—maybe he didn't want to buy a chair—who knows?"

"Didn't you ask?"

"I was afraid he'd fire me if I made a fuss. So I just shut up."

"God—how long did you stay on that job?"

"Eight years—but the last three were much better."

"How come?"

"Well, we joined the union, and they finally got me a chair. That's why I love unions. I'd do anything for the union."

I learned lots about unions while at Walter Midde, but Mary's story taught me my most basic lessons. My college professors could lecture to their hearts' content about how unions violated the free market—how they constituted a "combination in restraint of trade." I knew from Mary's story that workers had to combine. She joined a union because alone she was powerless. She needed the union to enable her to win a concession from her boss. The union put workers like Mary in a position where they could express their grievances without fear of getting fired and replaced. By combining, workers attained a bargaining position that began to approximate the more powerful position of the plant owners.

I had a minor brush with the foreman that further strengthened my awareness of how helpless an individual worker can be. During a recent rainstorm I had caught a bad cold. Just my luck, it was during that time that Harry asked me to change my seat. The new seat was in front of a machine that blew out cold air.

I said, "Have a heart, Harry—I've got a bad cold. I could get pneumonia sitting in front of that cold air all day."

"Yeah, well, everybody could have a bad cold. No one wants to sit in front of this here machine, but somebody's got to, and it might as well be you."

I was boiling mad, but I didn't dare refuse. Luckily, Mary overheard the conversation. She suggested I report the incident to Lilly, the shop steward of our section. Lilly took my part with Harry, and in two

minutes she won. I didn't have to sit in front of the machine blowing cold air. Neither did anyone else.

I was impressed; I decided to get to know Lilly better. I expected her to be a tough, "class-conscious" unionist. She was class-conscious—but she was no Marxist or socialist—or any other kind of -ist except maybe a capitalist (in ideology, that is). Politically she was a Republican. I couldn't believe it. "How can you be a Republican? They represent Big Business."

"I've got nothing against Big Business," she answered. "Take Walter Midde. They can make all the money they want...I don't ask them to share their profits with me...all I ask is: treat me fairly."

I was learning another labor lesson: workers think like the rest of Americans. Why not? They read the same newspapers, listen to the same radio stations. Yet Lilly, like Mary, was a staunch unionist. She handed out leaflets, defended the grievances of her rank-and-file members, and tried to get them to "turn out" for union meetings. When she asked me to attend, I was not only willing—I was eager. I envisioned an enthusiastic gathering of members, full of ideas about bettering their lives.

Together, Mary, Lilly, and I went to the union hall in downtown Newark. We were the only ones there from the Inspection Department! There were a sprinkling from each of the other departments. Maybe a total of 50 people—out of a local of 5,000.

I was crestfallen. Suddenly, the Local's president appeared on the platform. I took heart, although his appearance was far from inspiring. He wore a gray, threadbare suit, was middle-aged, and looked tired. When he started to speak, I realized he hailed from somewhere in Middle Europe.

"All my life I geev to the labor movement," he exploded. "And what do you do? You dun't come to mittings!"

"Who, me? But I *am* at your damn meeting. Yell at the others!" I thought to myself.

Of course, that wouldn't solve the problem either. What is the reason so few attended, I wondered. Obviously Steve, the Local's president, wasn't a charismatic leader—no matter how much of his life he had given to the labor movement. But there had to be other explanations of the lack of interest in the union. I began asking around.

"The union's just a racket!" said Joe. "They're run by Commu-

nists," said someone else. Another pointed to the dues deduction from her paycheck: "See that! They get rich from our wages. And what do they do for us? Nothing."

These attitudes expressed a broad consensus. Many of the people in the plant were new to factory work and to unions. Unlike Mary, they hadn't gone through any struggle to form a union that bettered their condition. What they knew about unions came from sources hostile to organized labor. All they knew from personal experience was that the unions were getting part of their paycheck. I wondered if the unions hadn't made a mistake in bargaining for the "check-off" of union dues. Although it enabled the union to obtain members' dues in a fast, painless way, it didn't bring convinced members into its fold. If a union shop steward like Lilly went around to collect the union's dues, she'd have to convince a cynic like Joe of the union's value. This would be one way of educating the new members. Some kind of education was necessary—that much was apparent.

I thought a lot about questions like these. After all, that was why I came to work in a factory. One of the people with whom I had the best discussions was Joe Bronstein. Often he walked me to my rooming house after work.

Joe was no Don Juan. In fact he was tall, fat, and awkward. He was also sensitive and intelligent, attributes that didn't help win him popularity contests at the plant. His figure made him the butt of jokes among his coworkers. Obviously, Joe was a loner. I think that's why he put up with my constant conversations about labor's problems. At least I was someone who was willing to spend time with him. Actually, he seemed to enjoy talking about his experiences and having someone value his opinions.

One day after work he came over to me with a small package in his hand. "Here, this is for you," he said, extending his hand.

"But Joe, why should you give me a present?"

"Because, Aleine. A girl like you is poetry to a boy like me."

It was the loveliest thing any man has ever said to me.

When I opened the wrapping, a copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* was inside. With all my fancy education, I had never read it. But Joe had. Later, when teaching workers, this kind of thing happened to me time and again. A seemingly tough seaman once gave me Aristotle's *Politics*. It was his favorite book—"makes everything clear in today's world," he said. Yet I hadn't read it because it was never "assigned" to me. I'm not suggesting that all, or even most, of the workers I met

were thoughtful and well read. I also ran into a lot of ignorance. One morning I noticed an unusual amount of stirring and whispering. "What's going on?" I asked Lilly.

"Didn't you see the coons in the cage?" she replied with agitation.

"Coons? Do you mean raccoons? Did somebody bring in raccoons in a cage?"

"No, dummy, not raccoons—coons! Can't you see them? Look!" She pointed to the Final Inspection Cage in the center of the floor. I looked, but couldn't see anything unusual. Confused, I turned to Joe. "What's going on?"

"They just hired two colored girls to work in there."

Lilly was beside herself. "That's your Mrs. Roosevelt for you!"

So Lilly, the union representative, was a Republican, riddled with race prejudice! How was she going to help forge a "brave new world"? Even my "middle-class" family was less prejudiced than she. Lots to think about! I didn't figure out answers at Walter Midde that year, but I recognized some clues. When Lilly was passing out flyers about the next union meeting, I saw one of the new black women come up to her in the locker room. The two of them talked for quite a few minutes. "What did you two talk about?" I asked Lilly later. "The union...she wants to join...said her father is a member of the Pullman Porters Union. I guess she's not so bad."

This kind of attitude change was beginning to take place wherever wartime guidelines forced blacks and whites to associate together. The most glaring contradiction to our democratic posture in the world was our domestic discrimination against blacks. The Nazis actually attempted to lure the black soldiers into the German Army, insisting that there they would receive better treatment. But the black soldiers didn't need the Germans to point out the injustices of their unequal treatment. They, and their families throughout the country, were more restive about segregation during World War II than ever before; often they vociferously expressed a new determination to achieve immediate equality within their own country.

I became aware of this militancy in the spring of 1943 when I returned to the Antioch campus, full of questions. Probably because I made known my concerns about the dehumanization I had witnessed in the war plant, I was elected president of a new organization formed by Antioch students and faculty to press for social changes in the postwar world. The organization was called the Committee of Correspondence in an effort to revitalize the radical tradition of the nation's

founders, who spread their movement to achieve self-government through colonial committees of correspondence. Similarly, students during World War II felt a need to organize and communicate with one another about their postwar goals and demands. Word of COC's formation spread fast to other campuses.

One day, I received a call from a student at nearby Wilberforce College. Could some of his classmates meet with the COC to discuss an urgent matter with us? I agreed. Wilberforce was an all-black college; integration had made hardly any inroads into colleges at the time. The Wilberforce students were interested in obtaining equal access to public facilities and asked us if we'd join them in an action in the nearby town of Xenia. In particular, they wanted to end the system of segregation in the movie house, which allowed blacks to sit only in the balcony. Without hesitation, COC agreed.

The plan presented to us by the Wilberforce students was quite clever. They knew that as blacks alone, they could never be admitted to the white section of the theater. However, if a black couple came to the movies with a white couple, then the likelihood that the black couple would be allowed to accompany their white friends increased. The plan was this: match a white couple with a black couple; assign these mixed foursomes to arrive at the theater at least ten minutes apart. Within two hours, twenty-four blacks would be sitting in the white section and Jim Crow would be dead in Xenia's only movie house.

As president of the COC, it was my job to be dispatcher. Before the appointed night, I drew up a time schedule of departures and names of the people who were to constitute each foursome. On the appointed evening, all of the COC participants were to gather in a meeting room at Antioch and depart together for Wilberforce.

During the afternoon of the planned action, I received a call from the college president's secretary. She informed me that President Henderson would like to meet with our COC group that evening. I had no choice; I agreed, but with grave misgivings. Obviously, the word was out. The campus vibrated with excitement. And now the president was going to try to stop us. "Well, let him try!" I thought to myself. I wondered if he'd threaten to expel us. I didn't think he'd succeed in dissuading most of those who had volunteered for this engagement, but I was apprehensive.

Just before it was time to depart, President Algo Henderson arrived at our meeting. "I want you to know that what you are planning

to do tonight," he said with great deliberation, "is in complete accord with the philosophy of Antioch College. I wish you Godspeed!" With that, Algo Henderson turned and walked out the door. Our outburst of applause must have rung in his ears the rest of that night. What a college that Antioch was! What a true educator was Algo Henderson!

Strengthened and calmed, our band of twelve arrived at Wilberforce a half-hour before the first foursome was scheduled to depart. When we entered the allotted room, there must have been at least fifty Wilberforce students restlessly waiting for us. Flabbergasted, I asked John, the head of the Wilberforce group, "What are all these people doing here? The plan called for twelve from each college."

"Word got around. We couldn't keep them out. Everyone here wants to be part of it."

"But they can't. It will spoil our whole plan."

"You tell them. I wish you luck!" I needed it. I stood in front of the classroom and repeatedly called out: "May I have your attention, please!" The rumble continued. I knocked a book against the desk, against the blackboard. "We cannot proceed with our plan unless the meeting comes to order," I insisted uselessly. Finally, I just stood there.

John started passing the word: "Quiet down!" A "Sh-h-h-sh!" went through the room. Finally I was able to make myself heard: "It's good to see you all. I'd like to explain our plan. It calls for only twenty-four people—but maybe we can add more couples later if you'll all be patient." I tried to explain that patience and calmness were the key to our success that night. I said that each foursome was to leave at intervals of ten minutes. If less time elapsed between arrivals, our plan would become apparent.

"Well, let's get going," someone called out. "Who's first?"

It was very close to the scheduled time; so I called out the names of the first foursome. After they left, you could have cut the air with a knife, the tension was so thick. "Who's next?" someone called out. "It isn't ten minutes!" I insisted. "Tell us anyway!" "I'll write the names on the board—and the *exact* departure time." I could feel the restlessness as I wrote slowly, stalling for time. When I completed each name, the student dashed up to the classroom door and the rest of the group applauded. I managed to hold the second contingent off for ten minutes—but I didn't know how long I could hold off the rest. I was in a sweat. The pressure kept mounting. "Who's next? Who's next? Let's go!"

I started writing the names of the third foursome on the board. First I pleaded, "Let's keep this orderly!" I was down to the third name when I heard someone shout "Let's go!" "Please wait your turn!" I pleaded. But in a flash they were all gone. Only John and I were left.

"It's failed...I've failed!" I blurted out, almost in tears.

"Not yet!" John insisted. "Come on, let's go to Xenia and see what's happening."

When we finally reached the theater, there was a huge crowd in front of it, including many of our fellow students.

"What's happened?" I asked Stan Baum, one of the Antiochians.

"They've closed the theater!"

"You see, I told you, John. We've failed."

"Did any of the couples get in?" John asked, completely ignoring my defeatist self-centeredness.

"Yes, the first two," Stan answered affirmatively; "I was in the second foursome. They didn't give us any trouble. But a few minutes later the screen went blank and the manager announced, 'This theater is closed!' That's when we knew the jig was up."

As Stan was filling us in, the restless crowd of students was standing outside the theater, not wanting to go home and not knowing what to do. My study of labor unions came in handy at that point. I suggested to John, "Let's form a picket line—let's march around the block—and then in front of the theater!" The idea caught on. "Let's sing something," John called out as we formed our foursomes and paraded around the block. Anything that came into our heads we sang: "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "All That Mary Got Was Oysters," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "The Four Rivers," the Airmen's song—"As We Go Flying, Flying Home," "I Gave My Love a Cherry," and "When the Saints Come Marching In." After about an hour, the excitement died down. People started drifting towards their cars. We didn't know what, if anything, had been accomplished. All we knew was something had "happened" in Xenia—and inside each one of us.

The next day John called to say that the Wilberforce students were still picketing. "We're going to keep up the pressure until they finally break down! Are you with us?"

"I'm with you. I can't speak for the others. I'll bring whomever I can get."

Only a few Antiochians joined the picket line that day and the days that followed. The leadership and the persistent vigil came from Wilberforce. The theater did not reopen the second night...nor the

third...fourth...fifth...nor sixth night. Finally, on the Saturday night following our initial action, the box office opened. Apparently the theater couldn't afford to lose another night's business, especially on a Saturday. The Wilberforce students purchased the first tickets. Boldly, they walked into the downstairs "white section" of the theater. Nobody stopped them. Nobody has ever stopped them since that night. In 1943, they put an end to Jim Crow in Xenia, Ohio.

Sixteen years later I read about a boycott beginning in Montgomery, Alabama, to abolish segregated seating on the local buses. Immediately, I thought of our action in Xenia and saw connections. I decided to go to Montgomery to see for myself if the spirit and determination of the boycotters resembled what I had witnessed at Wilberforce. There were great similarities, but this action was much more disciplined, more widespread throughout the black community, and it was based upon a philosophic foundation. I sensed in the Montgomery bus boycott the beginning of a social movement that would spread throughout the South. My reasoning, which led to this prediction, appeared in an article published by *Monthly Review* in September 1956.

Without my Antioch experiences, I would not have been sensitized to the tensions over segregation smoldering throughout the American black community during World War II. My "intuitive" conclusions could have come only from experience. As Pasteur once said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." His words give us insight into the essence of experiential education: it prepares the mind for comprehension.