

NOT A VOLUNTARY SYSTEM

They have to prove I'm wrong or act with us,
because if they don't
they're a bunch of hypocrites.

Eric Mann

Eric Mann is active in the student movement in the U.S., particularly in New England and a former member of the national executive of the Students for a Democratic Society. This is an edited version of a speech given by him during Orientation at the University of Windsor in 1968.

I'm very happy to be here, but also in some ways very nervous.

I'm nervous because I'm looking at a lot of you and thinking back to when I was a freshman. And I'm thinking that a lot of the things I would like to say would be platitudes.

I would say things like "welcome" or "I'm sure you'll have four happy years at the University of Windsor", "that these are going to be the four happiest years of your life", and a lot of other things people say when you come in as a freshman.

One of the reasons I won't say it of course, is because I don't believe it. And another reason I won't say it is because it was said to me and it wasn't true.

And so I start out with a certain amount of trepidation. There is another reason why I'm worried about speaking tonight. This is because I have very mixed feelings about speaking to a group of mixed people, many of whom won't agree with a word I say. Now in one way I guess that's a little o.k. because some of you probably won't agree with anything anyone tells you in the next four years, and you'll have about as little choice as you do this evening.

They told me that if I went to college that that would be a place where I would really meet people who are getting together in quest of knowledge, people who are interested in knowledge for its own sake, a place where I would really broaden myself, where I would learn a lot about the world, where I would make the kind of friendships that I could not make in high school, where, though I didn't like the work in high school, I would find college different, you're really going to like your work in college.

But many problems started to develop. One of the problems was that six or eight weeks into the school year, I found out something; something that took me four years to acknowledge. What I found out was that I didn't like to read and write too much.

Now, for those of you coming here, I hope you like to read a lot, and I hope you like to write a lot, because that's what college is. Stripped of all the rhetoric. You get your

books, you read a lot, you listen and you write. You get some more books, you read them and you write.

Once in a while you're not even allowed to talk. But the main thing is that you'd better like books a lot.

You'd better be committed to the idea that reality is found in books, because the whole university system revolves around that concept.

Now to start with, I think a lot of us wouldn't want to be here, if that was the definition of four years of our life. If you went up to the average person on the street and said "Hey, I've got something really good for you. Wanna come to a place where you spend 4 or 5 hours a day reading and writing?" How many people would spontaneously say "Wow. That's exactly what I've been looking forward to doing for four years. How do I join?" "Oh, you don't join, you have to pay." "Oh, that sounds good. I pay to read and write for 5 or 6 hours a day."

Clearly the university was not based on a voluntary system. We weren't there because we found it rewarding. We were there for a whole series of different reasons. But very few of those reasons came from inside ourselves.

Joining a fraternity protected you from the job of being a person. Instead of saying "Who's Eric Mann?" and hearing "Well, I'm a lot of different things. I'm a rather complicated person. You'll have to get to know me." By joining I could say "Tah Delta Fi". You can identify yourself in many ways. But the main point is that these labels allow people to avoid having to be somebody. And in a certain way this makes it easier, because we don't have to worry about each other. And so we see how certain things begin to be built in: about how we look at people, how we look at ourselves.

I remember going to some professor who would say to me stuff like, "Look, you're doing good work. You just showed up for two straight classes, why don't you start coming more often?" "I mean like it's not too late. You still have five weeks left in the semester. I'd really like to help you. Why don't you do your work. I mean if you'd start doing your work, I think you could come out with good grades. And if you pulled good grades I think you could get into a good graduate school."

And I remember on one of those rare instances when I was talked to by a faculty person feeling fantastically exhilarated, running home - I mean running - back to the fraternity, picking up a book,

saying "Man, I'm really gonna do it this time", and I would read.

Well, after a couple of these false starts it became clear that the same basic theme was developing that I couldn't face... I don't like school.

Now, I had a sociology professor who was, by some people's terms, a radical, but who was a radical in a very interesting way.

His course was about alienation. And the basic theme of the course was that people who work basically don't like their work; that people in industrial society are doing jobs that are kind of meaningless; they don't have any sense of being a whole person.

I said, "What a beautiful guy to say things like that. He really understands what's wrong with this country. He's gonna teach me a lot."

Except for one problem. He didn't believe that alienation extended to his course. He didn't believe that his course was work. He couldn't believe that for me, reading his 19 books on alienation was very alienating. As a result, he thought the rest of society was terrible except for his course.

You could rebel against the factories because they were evil. You could rebel about the schools because they were evil. You could rebel all you wanted about politics because it was evil.

But if you rebelled against his course, you were ungrateful.

So what I found out was that many radicals, or people who call themselves radicals, can't be judged radicals until you see what they do with their own lives, unless you see what they do when they have real power. Are they willing to relinquish the power? If they're not, then they're no different than anybody else.

So not only was I unhappy, but slowly I came to feel that I wasn't really very smart after all - that there were people in college who were better than me.

Now what I want to talk about is college as an extension of the kind of life that it's preparing us for. College in many ways is a very bad place. But it's a very logical place. And it's always bad things that make sense.

I remember being told by a teacher once, "You're doing very good work, keep it up, keep it up."

Keep what up? Sitting at that desk for three hours - you know, sitting in a system of reward and punishment. Of course there's the sympathetic principal who comes home to your parents and says, "Joan is a very promising student. But she just can't seem to apply herself. She just has no span of attention. Why don't you work with her?"

And so having been given that reinforcement, the parent begins to say, "Joan, why are you such a discipline problem? Why can't you be a good girl like all the other girls?" So Joan begins to feel that there is a priority being placed on being a good girl. And we see how the definition of a good girl is set up.

Well let me speak to about half the people in this room right now. I'm speaking to women.

Any aspirations you have about a career under the present system, will be very, very sad hopes because they will be crushed. Now let me talk about why those things will be crushed.

One reason why they will be crushed is that we have a system in our country that says that it's your job to have children. Now I don't mean for 9 months. I mean for your life. You see, men don't like children too much. He has more important things to do with his life. He has to go out and win the bread and butter.

Now you may ask, "I have a college degree. I can win the bread and butter." But what is going to sit home and take care of a baby with a B.A.? And yet you're expected to do it.

Women are going to face a lot of these problems.

There's a new magazine called "Careers". You ought to look at it because it's geared to the young market. Careers is a psychedelic oppression. What it says is turn on, tune in, and do what we say. What it says is, work for the big companies and we'll give you everything you want.

This guy comes up to me and says, "Hey, I'm working for this great company. You can do anything you want. They let me wear sideburns." Oh, that's really great, what do you do? "Well, I do what they tell me."

Then what do you mean you do what you want? "Well, that's a great step. A lot of companies won't let you wear sideburns."

If I'm right about how the system treats people then it means that we have to overthrow it and put in its place a society which centres around people not property.

And if I'm right about what I said then what it means is that you don't just say to the people who run the big companies, "Well see, I listened to this guy from SDS and he explained to me that the profit system dehumanizes people and I decided that he is right, so I think that you should get rid of the profit system."

What you find out is that if we organize to get rid of the profit system, it will be clear that certain people like the profit system.

Who the hell wants to devote their lives to struggling against the institutions we're in - seeing those institutions as institutions that aren't built for us - when with a little twisting around it's easier to believe in a friendly dean of students who going to say, "He had some very good points, but he was exaggerated and we're working in that direction. No one wants those changes more than I, as Johnson says, 'no one wants peace more than me', but you can't have everything at once. You know Rome wasn't built in a day."

That's true, except for one thing. I'm already 25, and people are playing around with my life, and I take my life very seriously. If people admit that problems are what we say they are, then they have a hell of a nerve being so reasonable about it.

They have to either prove I'm wrong or act with us. Because if they don't they're a bunch of hypocrites.

What people are doing is pretending the establishment are their friends. Basically what they're saying under all that is "I would like to help you but like my job. And the price helping you is joining you in rebellion that I don't want to participate in."

I've been rebelling for four years now and sometimes it's very scary. Sometimes it's very lonely. Sometimes you begin to think that it's very worthless, and you're not going to accomplish anything.

Sometimes I just want to give up and say "I'm tired. I'm tired of criticizing. I would like to believe that killing people in Viet-Nam is a good thing, would like to believe that meaningless work is meaningful. I would like to believe that unhappiness is happiness."

But when I believe that, I got 1984.

Mck

The r
the Stu
under t
managem
He was
when G
a salary
made fu
the pos
been dis
duties a
have be
Director
(who is
from 5 t
is respon
Board o
In a
Bruns,
aims "to
all possi
facti
harmon

Dr.
UNB
spent a
as lea
Student
Society
It is
along w
of CS
activiti
concer
workin
feels t
much
do the
that C
there:
who "

In
the su
Shoe
their
Altho
partic
of the
workin
what
from
radica

La
much
of t
Frede
Office
curfe
police
youth
these
CSDS
assist
as to
demo
woul
more
the
p a s
demo
a gr
was,
curfe
p.m.
said
we
scho
do
stud

D