

OPEN MINDS

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[Assignment: On October 24, 1952, Federal Court Judge Learned Hand delivered a speech, often quoted since then, entitled "A Plea For the Open Mind and Free Discussion." Read the text of that speech, and write a 2-3 page essay discussing the relevance to your education in the decade of the 90's.]

(1) When Judge Learned Hand stressed the importance of an open mind in 1952, McCarthyism was sweeping across America and many saw in Hand's stirring words the answer to narrow-mindedness. If people had been more open-minded, they might not have been so quick to believe in McCarthy and his long lists of so-called Communists. If people had been more open-minded during the Salem witch trials, those so-called witches might not have been executed. Trust and confidence in our democratic system, our freedoms, and one another is based on having open minds, said Learned Hand in urging a concept still relevant and fitting 38 years later.

(2) To me, being open-minded in the 1990's means listening to everything, but using a well-sharpened mind to discern what ideas should be believed, expressed, and preserved.

(3) In this age of high technology and rapidly advancing science, we are bombarded by information. It is difficult to know what to accept and what to discredit. Yet, if we have open minds, we can correctly and confidently make decisions. Having an open mind doesn't necessarily mean accepting everything. An open mind does not have to be like light from a porch lamp which has no control over what kinds of bugs it attracts. But rather an open mind could be compared to a sponge, absorbing everything, but squeezing out that which is not wanted.

(4) In America, we have the freedom to choose what to believe. Therefore, it is important that we make intelligent choices. An open mind is needed for the voting process. Our freedoms are preserved by voters. Decisions are based on individual consciences and beliefs, and informed choices cannot be made by narrow and closed minds. Open minds are needed, as Learned Hand wrote, "to prepare citizens for their political duties." People must be able to understand and weigh differing views to make sure and confident choices, and to discard the wrong or untrue. The more experiences or events to which we are exposed, the better equipped we are to understand what is in the hearts of others. The health of our society depends upon relationships among people. If we are truly aware of each other, we can work together to prepare for the future.

(5) An open mind in the 1990's is important to me because I have chosen to pursue a career in law. My success as a lawyer will partly depend upon my being open to new and challenging ideas, opinions, and methods. However, this does not mean that I readily accept and believe each new concept. I am going to school to learn how to reason, examine, and analyze in order to determine what is important. I can't discredit an idea simply because it is revolutionary. I agree with Learned Hand's advice that studying the humanities aids development of open minds. Courses in logic, philosophy, and creative writing are examples of humanistic studies that encourage critical thinking. Students are taught to listen to ideas before making choices. This is what Learned Hand meant when he said, "blame not before thou hast examined; understand first, and then rebuke." An education in the humanities provides preparation for doing this. Not just pre-law majors, but all students should take courses in the humanities as preparation for good citizenship in the global community.

(6) Open minds are the security upon which our nation rests. When we begin to believe and act without considering all facets of an issue, we begin to move toward the dangerous and destructive attitudes of the people in the Salem and McCarthy eras. History could repeat itself if people are not open-minded about the world around them. With so many means of receiving information and ideas, we need some basis to distinguish the true from the false. We should not feel pressured to make decisions because the majority has decided what is right. This is where the freedom of choice is important. If we understand and respect, but not necessarily believe, another's ideas and convictions, then our freedom of choice in the 1990's will remain intact. An open mind will be able to preserve this freedom of choice by expressing and upholding those ideas necessary for our freedoms.