

## CRITICISM—PIOUS AND IMPIOUS

ONE tires of the pieties of environmental preaching and is worn down by the rhetoric of ecological ardor. Why is it that the best writers never have this effect? Why is it that the best of the women writers never complain about "sexist" language but gain the respect of readers through the wisdom and beauty of their prose? If the language needs changing, it will come naturally through its use by talented people, without anyone noticing, the way a dancer's body grows graceful and beautiful, and not by the fuss of critics who have no idea how constructive changes take place. As Theodore Roszak put it years ago, the virtues have no sex.

Yet it is quite possible to write criticism without pieties. Under the heading of "Worship," for example, Emerson said:

We live in a transition period, when the old faiths which comforted nations, and not only so, but made nations, seem to have spent their force. I do not find the religions of men at this moment very creditable to them, but either childish and insignificant, or unhumanly or effeminating. The fatal trait is the divorce between religion and morality. . . . In our large cities, the population is godless, materialized,—no bond, no fellow-feeling, no enthusiasm. These are not men, but hungers, thirsts, fevers, and appetites walking. How is it people manage to live on,—so aimless as they are? . . . it seems as if the lime in their bones alone held them together, and not any worthy purpose. There is no faith in the intellectual, none in the moral universe. There is faith in chemistry, in meat, and wine, in wealth, in machinery, in the steam-engine, galvanic battery, turbine-wheels, sewing machines, and in public opinion, but not in divine causes.

We say, the old forms of religion decay, and that a skepticism devastates the community. I do not think it can be cured or stayed by any modification of theologic creeds, much less by theologic discipline. The cure for false theology is mother-wit. . . .

The moral must be the measure of health. If your eye is on the eternal, your intellect will grow,

and your opinions and actions will have a beauty which no learning or combined advantages of other men can rival. . . .

Of immortality, the soul, when well employed, is incurious. It is so well, that it is sure it will be well. It asks no questions of the Supreme Power. The son of Antiochus asked his father, when he would join the battle? "Dost thou fear," replied the King, "that thou only in all the army wilt not hear the trumpet?" 'Tis a higher thing to confide, that, if it is best we should live, we shall live,—'tis higher to have this conviction, than to have the lease of indefinite centuries and milleniums and aeons. Higher than the question of our duration is the question of our deserving. Immortality will come to such as are fit for it. . . .

The religion which is to guide and fulfil the present and coming ages, whatever else it be, must be intellectual. . . . "There are two things," said Mahomet, "which I abhor, the learned in his infidelities, and the fool in his devotions.'

We began with a complaint about the pieties of environmentalism. This has to do with speech or language. Avoiding the pieties means writing as Emerson would write or speak—Emerson or Thoreau. Fortunately Emerson addressed himself to the subject of language:

A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so to utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth, and his desire to communicate it without loss. The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires, the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise,—and duplicity and falsehood take place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time, the fraud is manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections. Hundreds of writers may be found in every long-civilized nation, who for a short time

believe, and make others believe, that they see and utter truths, who do not of themselves clothe one thought in its natural garment, but who feed unconsciously on the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily on nature.

But wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God. The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts, and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made.

Emerson had a mind incapable of ordinary pieties. See what he said about Intellect:

Intellect and intellection signify to the common ear consideration of abstract truth. The considerations of time and place, of you and me, of profit and hurt, tyrannize over most men's minds. Intellect separates the fact considered from *you*, from all local and personal references, and discerns it as if it existed for its own sake. . . .

If we consider what persons have stimulated and profited us, we shall perceive the superiority of the spontaneous or intuitive principle over the arithmetical or logical. The first contains the second; but virtual and latent. We want, in every man, a long logic; we cannot pardon the absence of it, but it must not be spoken. Logic is the procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition; but its virtue is as silent method; the moment it would appear as propositions, and have a separate value, it is worthless. . . .

What is the hardest task in the world? To think. I would put myself in the attitude to look in the eye an abstract truth, and I cannot.

It is time to quote someone else—in this case Thoreau. We have chosen his essay, "Life

without Principle," as containing the substance of how Thoreau thinks. He says:

Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives.

This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. I cannot easily buy a blank-book to write thoughts in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me making a minute in the fields took it for granted that I was calculating my wages. If a man was tossed out of the window when an infant, and so made a cripple for life, or scared out of his wits by Indians, it is regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for—business! I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.

There is a coarse and boisterous money-making fellow in the outskirts of our town, who is going to build a bank-wall under the hill along the edge of his meadow. The powers have put this into his head to keep him out of mischief, and he wishes me to spend three weeks digging there with him. The result will be that he will perhaps get some more money to hoard, and leave for his heirs to spend foolishly. If I do this most will commend me as an industrious and hard-working man; but if I choose to devote myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though but little money, they may be inclined to look on me as an idler. Nevertheless, as I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me, and do not see anything absolutely praiseworthy in this fellow's undertaking, any more than in many an enterprise of our own or foreign governments, however amusing it may be to him or them, I prefer to finish my education in a different school.

If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer, but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!

Most men would feel insulted, if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now. For instance: just after

sunrise, one summer morning, I noticed one of my neighbors walking beside his team, which was slowly drawing a heavy hewn stone swung under the axle, surrounded by an atmosphere of industry,—his day's work begun,—his brow commenced to sweat,—a reproach to all sluggards and idlers,—pausing abreast the shoulders of his oxen, and half turning round with the flourish of his merciful whip, while they gained their length on him. . . . In my opinion, the sun was made to light worthier toil than this. I may add, that his employer has since run off, in debt to a good part of the town, and, after passing through Chancery, has settled somewhere else, there to become once more a patron of the arts.

The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. . . .

The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise enough money to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding *his own* business. An efficient and valuable man does what he can, whether the community pay him for it or not. The inefficient offer their inefficiency to the highest bidder, and are forever expecting to be put into office. One would suppose that they were rarely disappointed.

Little by little we begin to get the idea of what Thoreau is writing about, or where he sets the level of his contentions. He does not bother with the weaknesses and pretensions of pieties. He knows better than that; or rather, comment on the pieties does not even occur to him. He focuses on the fundamental motivations in life. Why, he asks in effect, do people waste their time and their lives on undertakings that lead to nothing worth having?

The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get "a good job," but to perform well a certain work; and, even in a pecuniary sense, it would be economy for a town to pay its laborers so well that they would not feel that they were working for low ends, as for a livelihood merely, but for scientific, or even moral ends. Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it . . . All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings

it makes. You must get your living by loving. But as it is said of the merchants that ninety-seven in a hundred fail, so the life of men generally, tried by this standard, is a failure, and bankruptcy may be surely prophesied.

Merely to come into the world the heir of a fortune is not to be born, but to be still-born, rather. To be supported by the charity of friends, or a government-pension,—provided you continue to breathe—by whatever fine synonyms you describe these relations, is to go into the almshouse. On Sundays the poor debtor goes to church to take account of stock, and finds, of course, that his outgoes have been greater than his income. In the Catholic Church, especially, they go into Chancery, make a clean confession, give up all, and think to start again. Thus men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up.

Thoreau had little use for what we commonly talk about. Those who would follow his example or his advice would need no reproaches from the environmentalists. He says:

When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is, that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence has not heard from himself this long while. . . .

I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality. Our very intellect shall be macadamized, as it were,—its foundation broken into fragments for the wheels of travel to roll over; and if you would know what will make the most durable pavement surpassing rolled stones, spruce blocks, and asphaltum, you have only to look into some of our minds which have been subjected to this treatment so long. . . . We should treat our minds, that is, ourselves, as innocent and ingenious children whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention. Read not the Times, Read the Eternities.

What did Thoreau think about political matters? He answers this question with another.

Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice? What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast? We are a nation of politicians concerned about the outmost defences only of freedom. It is our children's children who may perchance be really free.

...

What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all. The newspapers, I perceive, devote some of their columns specially to politics or government without charge; and this, one would say, is all that saves it; but, as I love literature, and, to some extent, the truth also, I never read those columns at any rate. I do not wish to blunt my sense of right so much. I have not got to answer for having read a single President's Message. A strange age of the world this, when empires, kingdoms, and republics come a-begging to a private man's door, and utter their complaints at his elbow! . . .

Those things which now most engage the attention of men, as politics and the daily routine, are, it is true, vital functions of human society, but should be unconsciously performed, like the corresponding functions of the physical body. They are *infra-human*, a kind of vegetation. I sometimes awake to a half-consciousness of them going on about me, as a man may become conscious of some of the processes of digestion in a morbid state, and so have the dyspepsia as it is called. . . . Thus our life is not altogether a forgetting, but also, alas! to a great extent, a remembering, of that we should never have been conscious of, certainly not in our waking hours.

Oh for a Thoreauvian world—a world in which we do not waste each others' time with useless concerns! A world without newspapers, or very few of them, and those which exist devoted only to matters that matter. Must we wait for thousands of years before such utopian times can come about?

## *REVIEW*

### A CITY REBUILDS ITSELF

WE have a copy of a page in the *Progressive* for last June bearing an article by Holly Metz on a subject that is seldom written about—the Urban Homesteading Program in New York City, which *is* said to have started off illegally. The brute facts are that—

There are 5,000 vacant buildings in New York City, abandoned by private owners, then claimed and boarded up by the city. Advocates for the homeless estimate that 60,000 New Yorkers are without permanent shelter, and 200,000 families are waiting for public housing.

A while ago, according to Holly Metz, a young man of twenty-three, Matthew Lee, involved in a reconstruction project, took possession of the basement of an abandoned Lower East Side building, and with a donated mimeograph machine began the *Inner City Press*. The friends who sent us the Holly Metz story also sent us a copy of his paper, or some pages from it. The first issue was "twenty-two pages of political commentary, poems, and housing advice in Spanish and English for the city's poor and homeless."

In each issue Lee describes how to turn an empty city-owned building into a home—starting off illegally and working toward entry into the city's Urban Homesteading Program. Under this program, the city provides technical assistance and up to \$13,000 per unit for electrical and plumbing systems. But homesteaders complain that the poorest-people are effectively denied participation in the program, because city policy doesn't allow renovators to live in a building while they're working on it.

"The only low-income homesteads in New York City that worked were illegal first," says Lee. "You just have to begin. Once people are working, it makes more trouble to stop you."

Lee learned about city policy while working on a legal homestead organized by RAIN Community Land Trust, a homesteading group that now represents eleven Lower East Side buildings in various stages of rehabilitation. . . .

But the Urban Homesteading Program, which seems a realistic alternative, is often a source of frustration to would-be homesteaders. In eight years,

only nineteen buildings have been sold to homesteaders in all five boroughs. . . .

Anyone who tries to circumvent bureaucratic procedures and seizes a building to renovate is considered an illegal squatter, subject to police ouster. But Lee notes that "the police do very little about squatters. They'll do something if they're ordered by the city. They don't know what's legal and what's not. If you're working, and not doing drugs, you're okay."

Lee's paper has gained a wide street readership.

Volunteers delivered 10,000 copies to shelters, health clinics, check cashiers, and public libraries. Tucked into the first issue was a voter-registration form with the heading KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AND FIGHT FOR THEM! Across the cover, the *Inner City Press* proclaimed its purpose: To inspire, to give pride, to Move us Forward.

The story goes on:

*Inner City Press* gives precise advice on how to find out who owns an abandoned building and recommends homesteading in one that's city-owned. The paper also advises its readers on how to claim the building, obtain technical assistance from an architecture and planning school, and garner support from local community groups and churches.

Lee has now moved to the Bronx and taken the paper with him. He says that he actively encourages unapproved homesteading, since it creates housing and puts people "more in control of their lives." Holly Metz says:

An article about "new housing that the lower-income community itself will control" has brought almost a dozen Bronx residents together to homestead a city-owned building. Every Saturday and Sunday, Lee and about ten other homesteaders—mostly newly-arrived female Puerto Rican immigrants—work all day clearing debris out of a sixty-year-old four-story tenement on a street commonly used by car thieves to strip cars.

Many of the women are single mothers, some of them on public assistance, so they don't want to be identified. But they willingly tell their stories. One woman talks about living doubled-up with her relatives—fifteen people in a one-bedroom apartment. . . .

According to Lee, activists in the East New York section of Brooklyn persisted in squatting in city-owned buildings until the city agreed to negotiate. The activists "renounced squatting" and the city "kicked in renovation funds" in return.

If the *Inner City Press* homesteaders succeed, they will make sixteen new apartments available to Bronx families. The paper notes there is always the possibility of starting another building.

This seems a good place to put an extract from the issue of *Inner City Press* (for June 5, 1988) that was sent to us. The story is headed "UPDATE":

THE INNER CITY PRESS HITS THE STREETS, HITS THE STREETS A LITTLE BIT LATE THIS ISSUE . . . 'Cause we've been grappling, scrapping in the Apple, doing the right thing with our heads held high, but trying to be practical when we run into problems. . . .

Let me explain: the first building we set up is going well, all the demolition is done, the building is cleaned out; we have started replacing the first few floor joists that were water-damaged after somebody stole the drainpipe while the building was abandoned. We are putting together the "paper work," an estimation of the cost of the rehabilitation and letters of support, to make our application to the city and state for money and the building to help lower income people make their OWN housing in unused buildings.

The building was going so well that several months ago we opened a *second* building, so that people who called in, interested, "needing housing and Wng ready to work and fight for it" would have somewhere to work. Also, we opened a second building to begin spreading the ideas, to show a positive step and spark other action in the community. We opened the second building down by the HUB, by 149 St. and Third Ave.; a lot of people had been calling us from around there, and also, still, in the ruins of those side streets, a community exists, people fixing their cars in the streets, knowing all the people in their buildings, helping watch over each others' children.

So we opened a building down by the HUB, started clearing it out; a lot of people on the block got involved, watching the building for us in the week, said they were happy we had started fixing it up, for people who need it; they would help, beautiful, it was and is . . .

This might be the time to explain—we of the Inner City Press advocate and *initiate* the homesteading of abandoned city-owned buildings by lower-income people—we put groups together to just *begin* work, and *then* to apply to the city, once they have gained their strength, have formed the group and gotten the support of the surrounding community. Many buildings have been done this way, fifteen on the lower East Side of Manhattan alone. The City, of course, can say that it is ILLEGAL to just begin work—but their process of applying is a long and bureaucratic one, meant to discourage people, to limit the spread of the movement. Also, the only way to *form* a homesteading group is to

begin homesteading, and see who comes to work every weekend, who is committed to it. Also, *enough* of little programs "administered" by paternalistic community groups verging on poverty pimping—in this process of homesteading, the people *themselves* start doing the right thing, put pressure on the City that is supposed to represent *them*, and get something done . . . TO DEVELOP COMMUNITY HOPE, AND COMMUNITY POWER, THROUGH ACTION, that's the idea. . . . Participation in democracy, from the grassroots up. Because who, after all, IS the "City of New York"—except the people in it?

We are in the middle of a housing crisis beyond belief in this city, even the rich have to agree, with 100,000 homeless now, and a million more on the edge, no affordable housing being built, most of it being *lost* to abandonment, co-op conversion, escalating rents . . . *so, extraordinary times demand extraordinary actions.*

So we were in the middle of our "extraordinary action" and it was going well, *when*—the building next door, also abandoned, burned down. The Fire Dept. cut our chain to use our stairs to put out the fire from the roof, and the people on the block said the firemen said, "what a good idea, the community fixing up this building . . ." After the fire our concern became that the City might rip *both* buildings down, as they sometimes do. . . . A man from the "Community Board," #1 of the Bronx, came and saw our building, the work we have done, and said, what a good idea, that he supported us. But when the contractors came, they were ordered to *rip our door down*, and put up a City door. The Community Board man thought we would get the key, but no.

It has gotten more complex. The City now says it has had the idea for years to put the two buildings into a program where they *give* them to a developer, give him *money*, subsidies, to build middle income housing. That no one in the neighborhood could afford. . . . And' then call that a solution to the housing crisis.

OUR STRUGGLE must now be to gather formally the support we already have in the community, to work with the other community groups, explain to the people in the neighborhood what is going on, the two different ways the building could be fixed up, and *who* it would be fixed up for, under each plan. . . . And then pressure the City to respond to the opinion of the community, to take that building off their slow-moving "pipe-line," and GIVE THE PEOPLE A CHANCE.

## COMMENTARY

### A GREAT BUT PUZZLING WRITER

DON'T work for money, says Thoreau. DO something because it needs to be done. Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it." One reads Thoreau, for the most part, because he seems like a sane lunatic, for where will you find a man who will work for the reason that he loves what he is doing?

Yet the fact of the matter is that good men, if they have determination, always manage to do the work they believe needs doing, because otherwise they would feel that they are wasting their time. Read biography, and you find that this is the case. All that Thoreau has done is put it in very simple language. "You must get your living by loving."

"The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man." Yet the world is filled with men who have been bribed into doing what bores or even disgusts them, on the ground that they must, in order to stay alive.

Can you imagine a nation of Thoreaus? There are various reasons why it would be impossible, but the chief of them is that a man like Thoreau would have nothing to do with the institutional demands of a nation. He, or a number of men like him, would have no need of the functions of the state. They would neither use nor be influenced by the coercive power of the state. How would the rest of the world respond? We hardly know, but it seems likely that the rest of the world would soon learn from them. The rest of the world would never have reason to fear such men, and can you think of any state of mind more likely to result in lasting peace?

A nation of Thoreaus is unimaginable because the loyalties of such human beings would be to the various regions of the earth, not to its artificial political divisions. Note what he says about political activity. It should, he declares, be unconsciously performed, like digestion. What needs to be done will be so apparent that the

people will feel no need to think about it at all, but will simply do the sensible thing without any argument.

How will they develop such intelligence? Consider how Thoreau decided to complete his education. And how he thought we should treat our minds. The mind, he maintained, should be protected against trivial intruders. What objects and subjects do we allow the mind to be preoccupied with? "Read not the Times, Read the Eternities."

Since he had little admiration for the newspapers, where did he find the "eternities"? One place he found them was in the woods, where he walked for the love of them half of each day, and that people accordingly regarded him as a "loafer" affected him not at all. Thoreau seems to have been totally indifferent to other people's opinions about him, except for a little amusement, now and then. He seems to have been born to a depth of conviction about what to do with his life and went about doing it for as long as he lived.

How shall we understand a man like Thoreau—a sane lunatic? We are able to differ from him but we cannot quarrel with him. His arguments have too much leverage. He did some of the conventional things, like going to Harvard, and he proved himself capable of doing other conventional things, like operating a business successfully, but he soon lost interest in that. What *did* interest him? Only the meaning of his life. Activities which did not throw light on this became meaningless to him, not worth undertaking. His writing seemed mainly concerned with explaining this to his readers, with great economy of speech, and somewhat at the expense of the people of Concord and others of his time.

Since so few others developed in the way that he did, we are bound to wonder why he turned out as Henry David Thoreau. Was he born with the qualities that became evident, so admirable . . . and so irritating? It is as though he had lived many more lives than the rest of us, learned their

lessons, and then became a teacher, vastly puzzling, to all the world. After reading him, one becomes possessed with the idea that one who knows or learns what Thoreau knew or learned, will need little else.

One can easily understand why Thoreau and Emerson were such good friends, although they didn't get on together *perfectly*.

One can also pick at Thoreau while being in some sense obliged to agree with him. But one must admit that Thoreau was marvelously content with life—his life. We do not remember him ever making any complaints. Our trouble with him is that *we* would probably have made complaints in his situation, and finding that he doesn't becomes irritating. But still we enjoy reading him, learning from him.

Finally, we must admit that Thoreau was a wholly self-reliant man. We sense this about him and wonder how he did it. His writings, we might say, are the best he could do to explain it.

Emerson, too, has leverage in his writing. Read again what he says in what is quoted in the first page of this issue. You are compelled to *think*. All good writing compels thinking, which is one of the reasons it is not always recognized. Emerson writes in imagery. He thinks in imagery. For example:

In our large cities, the population is godless, materialized,—no bond, no fellow-feeling, no enthusiasm. These are not men, but hungers, thirsts, fevers, and appetites walking. How is it people manage to live on,—so aimless as they are? It seems as if the lime in their bones alone held them together, and not any worthy purpose. There is no faith in the intellectual, none in the moral universe. There is faith in chemistry, in meat, and wine, in wealth, machinery in the steam-engine, galvanic battery, turbine wheels, sewing machines, and in public opinion, but not in divine causes. . . .

The cure for false theology is mother-wit.

The same cure applies to many other ills.

In some of his most memorable words, in "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau wrote:

. . . this government never of itself furnished any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India-rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effect of their action and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once, no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.



# CHILDREN

## . . . and Ourselves

### ON TEXTBOOKS AND OTHER MATTERS

AN article which first appeared in the *Hartford Courant*, then in an Alaska paper, and finally in the *Alaska Home Learners Gazette*, on school textbooks, is reprinted once again in *Growing Without Schooling* No. 63. We begin by quoting the last paragraph, and then the first:

Few school books are written by professional writers. Many of the writers are former teachers, moonlighting teachers or publishing house editorial employees. . . .

Researchers say clumsy, unclear writing in schoolbooks is prevalent from all major schoolbook publishers in all subjects for all grades, and the bottom line is few children are motivated to read them, a published report said. Schoolbooks are crucial to the education of American children [*GWS* note: Really?] but there is evidence that they are seriously flawed. The average child will read about one hundred schoolbooks, which cost a total of about \$2,000, by the end of the twelfth grade.

The report goes on:

P. Kenneth Komoski, executive director of the Education Products Information Exchange Institute, a schoolbook consulting company, calls schoolbooks "mediocre products incapable of contributing very much to the achievement of excellence in education." Arthur Woodward, a schoolbook expert at the University of Rochester, says most schoolbooks are so flawed that "I don't see how children can learn anything from them."

Some executives in the \$1.4 billion-a-year schoolbook publishing business do not vigorously defend their books and a few agree with some of the criticism. Interviews with researchers and publishers indicate four major reasons why the schoolbook marketplace encourages poor writing and deters good writing. These are:

Publishers and textbook writers prepare their books according to "readability formulas." These formulas are mathematical equations based on a variety of things including vocabulary and sentence length, and are supposed to make books easier for children to understand. But researchers say reliance

on the formulas make schoolbook writing artless and more difficult to read.

Schoolbooks are often quickly written or rewritten to obtain new copyright dates which school officials demand. The schools look at new copyright dates as proof that books are up to date, but this timeliness puts publishers under a pressure that often leads to sloppy writing.

Many schoolbooks are assembled by editors from bits and pieces written by teams of 20-200 people, rather than written by authors.

A father in British Columbia says in a letter to *Growing Without Schooling*:

Katherine McAlpine writes, "I think there's more pressure on boys to conform to stereotype, and more pressure on the parents of boys to promote that conformity." I agree. I think that the masculine stereotype is more difficult to instill than the feminine, and there's thus more fear that the masculine won't in fact, be instilled.

I don't mean to imply that traditional womanhood isn't difficult (long hours of housework and child care with little outside support) or unnatural (the alienation of half the population, for reasons of gender, from the workings of the outside world). It seems to me, though, that traditional manhood is more difficult and more unnatural, and that traditional men are worse off for it than their female counterparts. Well, I have to own up to my own prejudice. I'm a man who has felt himself the victim of the male stereotype—specifically, the expectation that what men do in the world must involve the exchange of goods or services or skills or ideas for money. Others may see the female stereotype as dust as difficult.

When I look at Helen, our two year old, I see the same phenomenon that the writers in *GWS* No. 61 see in their children: Helen's interests often appear sex-stereotyped, but *Helen* isn't. She likes reading and drawing and talking and playing with dolls and toy animals. She shows little interest or ability in gross motor skills on the playground, like climbing ladders and using big swings. She says she wants to be a mommy (although the only other career she's really familiar with is that of a daddy, and she knows that little girls don't grow up to be daddies).

On the other ("masculine") hand, Helen's quite vocal about her likes and dislikes, and not the least bit shy about expressing anger toward us. (Helen gives us many opportunities to help her learn to express

anger appropriately. Dealing with a healthy, lively two year old is a lot like batting practice: Every day, Helen tosses out about four and a half dozen opportunities—which we can hit, swing at but miss, or ignore—having to do with the appropriate expression of anger, the limits of her power, the limits of our power, etc.) She's hearteningly stubborn, likes dirt and bugs and rocks, and doesn't give a damn what her hair looks like. But she's also shy around strangers, loves the comfort of Mommy and Daddy's arms, and is usually quite gentle.

It's a pleasure to have finally gotten around to writing to *GWS*. *GWS* has more of a sense of community than any other publication I've seen.

Another British Columbia resident, a mother, comments on the uses of part-time school.

I couldn't agree more that school shouldn't be used as a babysitting service, but in view of the fact that that is exactly the purpose it serves for most schooling families, isn't it better that school be used for part-time rather than full-time baby-sitting? That is, I wonder if there might be certain circumstances in which (or certain children for whom) part-time school babysitting might serve a useful purpose, other than simply taking a specific course or two.

For instance, it might help a child who wants to homeschool but feels reluctant to make a sudden, total change. Part-time school could offer such a child a current basis of comparison (rather than having to compare present experiences of homeschooling to past memories of schooling), and it might help the rest of the family to make the change more gradually with regard to their schedules, their work arrangements, their information and attitudes, and so on.

Suppose a single mother has shifted from full-time to part-time work to do part-time homeschooling. Wouldn't that be a change in the right direction, and shouldn't that be rewarded by allowing part-time homeschooling, rather than insisting that the child remain in school full-time until the mother is ready to homeschool full-time? . . .

Why should we think of school as an all-or-nothing institution? Part-time school could be one way a family could move toward homeschooling.

Bureaucrats are in a position to make problems for parents out of practically nothing. A mother in Ohio writes:

We are happily homeschooling our five children, ages 11, 8, 6, 4 and 1. Usually I am very positive and happy about it. But this week, I had to deal with our local school system again, and I am very angry.

I want to have legal approval and so have gone through the necessary steps. We have had legal approval for each of the three years we have been homeschooling so far. The problem is that we homeschoolers are forced to go to the very system we are rebelling against (or disagree with), and ask for permission to go against it. We don't want to have to ask them, and they don't want to have to deal with us. When issues of testing, methodology, expectations and philosophy start to come up, underlying hostility can begin to surface. We're dealing with two clashing philosophies of how children learn.

The school system applies its methods of evaluating success to our system and ends up concluding that we are unsuccessful. But we are the ones who can best judge our success. When I shared our successes with our school district, they used my written reports against me. They used them to prove my failure. They looked at everything from a completely different point of view. What had proven to be a successful method of assessment in our previous district has proven to be a disastrous method here. . . .

How do we "get permission" from those who don't understand us? Because of my frustration with working with the school system here, I feel compelled to search for another way to get approval or to legally homeschool. I'd love to hear from other *GWS* readers about this.

## *FRONTIERS* Care of the Land

IN the Land Stewardship Letter for the spring of 1988, Ron Kroese, director of the Land Stewardship Project, points out the inconsistencies and ironies of land policies in America. He says:

We have made it illegal to carry a can of soda pop into Minnesota's wondrous Boundary Waters Canoe Area lest it sully that pristine beauty. At the same time, we allow, indeed encourage through our agricultural policies, the application of two *billion* pounds of chemical fertilizer each spring to Iowa's soil alone. While we permit only foot travel in vast areas of our national parks, we allow giant tractors to crush and compact agricultural soil. While we vigorously protect the wildlife that remains in our forest and prairie preserves, each year we permit 1.1 *billion* pounds of pesticides to poison the life in the land and injure thousands of farm workers. While we guard the purity and beauty of our wilderness lakes and streams, we drain the aquifers beneath our farmlands and pollute with wastes and chemicals the streams and rivers that flow through and below our farms.

We should, of course, protect what remains of our wild lands. As we humans control and alter the natural world, we need secret groves where nature operates unfettered and untouched by our hands and machines. Those areas serve as reminders and rejuvenators and healers.

Ron Kroese now turns to a writer who has addressed himself to these problems.

Wendell Berry points out in *The Unsettling of America* that we need wilderness because "our biological roots as well as our cultural roots are in nature. . . . If we are to be properly humble in our use of the world, we need places we do not use at all. We need the experience of leaving something alone. We need places that we forbear to change, or influence by our presence, or impose on even by our understanding, places that we accept as influences upon us, not the other way around. . . . We need wilderness as a standard of civilization and as a cultural model. Only by preserving areas where nature's processes are undisturbed can we preserve an accurate sense of the impact of civilization upon its natural resources. Only if we know how the land was can we tell how it is."

The trouble is, of course, that we practice a double standard. We try to take proper care, through legislation, of aspects of the land that we decide to honor, yet at the same time usurp and ruin areas that are genuinely useful.

The ultimate tragedy of this dualistic approach is that it can't last. If we use up the lands we deem useful, and we certainly will, one day we will be forced to use those areas we've set aside. Moreover—since as ecology teaches us, everything is connected to everything else—the areas we've preserved will inevitably be damaged along with the lent we knowingly abuse, try as we may to prevent it.

As to what we can do about this, Kroese returns to Wendell Berry.

Of the articles and books I have read that attempt to get to the root, . . . none surpasses *The Unsettling of America*. . . . Berry sees the ecological crisis that imperils the earth as a "crisis of character." That is, environmental problems are the inevitable manifestation of the flawed and contradictory values in our cultural character. He points out that the crisis faced by U.S. agriculture today is at its heart an ecological crisis. Further, the crisis in agriculture represents nothing less than a crisis of culture as a whole. He is convinced that "it is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth," and he warns:

"An agriculture cannot survive long at the expense of the natural systems that support it and provide it with models. A culture cannot survive long at the expense of either its agriculture or natural resources. To live at the expense of the source of life is obviously suicidal."

Next he turns to *Soil and Survival: Land Stewardship and the Future of American Agriculture* by Joe and Nancy Paddock and Carol Bly.

In his enlightening chapter entitled "The Land Organism," Joe Paddock links the degrading state of the earth's agricultural resources to the human condition:

"All environmental insights can and must be applied to the human condition. Farmland, for instance, should be seen as primary human habitat, a *sine qua non* for our existence. It is through farmland that the energy of the universe, of creation, flows into and through us, our lives and our works. This land,

however, so important to our well-being, is now rapidly diminishing, both in quantity and quality. Ecological wisdom would have us look hard at and reflect on this developing condition. When a creature takes from its system without returning it is a parasite. Should that creature continue to take and expand to the point where it destroys its surrounding environment, it has become a disease, . . .

Joe Paddock points out that part of the problem facing American farmland might be due to the fact that we've been blessed with so much of it. He notes that only 11 per cent of the earth's surface is high quality farmland and at least an eighth of it exists within our borders. At present, U.S. citizens comprise about five per cent of the earth's population, yet we have more than 12 per cent of its best food-growing land. No other nation approaches that ratio of people to good land.

That advantage, however, has now diminished. Ron Kroese says:

Abundance has allowed us—or at least has *appeared* to have allowed us—to carry on an almost slash and burn approach to farmland. Historically, a farm family who had worn out a farm could pack up, head west and find virgin land to till. There was always more for the taking, since the rights of Native Americans were consistently ignored. As the supply of fresh land dwindled, industrial technology provided the new frontier. Damage to the land could be masked by purchased "inputs" of commercial fertilizers, hybrid seeds and new tillage methods. . . .

In this viewpoint, agriculture has become "agribusiness" and is viewed as just another sector within the industrial economy. National leaders talk of U.S. "agripower," international "competitiveness," and "food as a weapon." In such a climate, it is both unfair and naive to expect the majority of American farmers to value conservation and stewardship. In fact, it is remarkable that so many farmers continue to sacrifice for conservation when overwhelming forces and government policies push production at all costs.

It is appropriate here to say a word or two about the *Land Stewardship Letter*. It is twenty pages, comes out four times a year, and is published at 512 West Elm, Stillwater, Minnesota 55082. Nancy Paddock is the editor. In the issue we have been quoting Nancy Paddock said in an editorial statement:

When farmers voice the claims of eroded land against giant corporations, they have become what the Land Stewardship Project calls "voices for the land." When local residents band together to reclaim a damaged lake ecosystem, they are exercising what could be called "ecological democracy." Grass roots democracy.