

## CAN WISDOM BE TAUGHT?

[This article (in the form of a letter) is by a man who informs us that he is twenty-five years old, a sometime teacher, artist, and rock and roller. He has been reading MANAS, off and on, for about seven years. Some comment by the editors has been added at the end.]

RECENTLY, I was struck by the opinion of another youthful reader ("Children," Feb. 7) that you seem "somewhat out of touch with the experience of young people in the schools today." While I would agree with him, I would extend his complaint (not really meaning it as a criticism) to include not only students, but the experiences of the typical American—a consumer living vicariously somewhere in suburbia.

What follows is an attempt to formalize my views in a letter which cites the public's inability to "discriminate" as the real villain needing some heroic attention—from publications like yourself.

Senator McGovern's recent report on a Senate sub-committee investigation into the nutritive value of so-called "fast food" touched upon more than whether or not a "big mac" is good for you. While the fact that the Senators were convinced of fast food's positive food value was not surprising, McGovern did reveal some startling information about the pervasiveness of the McDonald protagonist, Ronald McDonald. Apparently, something like 95 or 96 per cent of the school-age children surveyed were able to identify the king clown of hamburgers—an accomplishment which, McGovern adds, would be an enviable achievement for any politician.

The motives for the latter two "achievements" notwithstanding, at least two things are painfully clear:

1. That the American public loves the familiar (be it burgers or burgomasters), and

2. That the system in this country for disseminating information can be, given the right carrot, incredibly effective regardless of age or class.

While I'm not sure how many MANAS readers jump at the chance for a meal at McDonald's, it is true that (according to *Time* magazine) 10 per cent of the nation's beef goes through their grinders. This, for me, is an indictment of both the general level/quality of taste/lifestyle in this country (I shouldn't forget that I found McDonald's in Munich and Paris), and the nearly medieval tone MANAS takes on occasion regarding just what is needed for *change*.

A case in point is the lead story in the Dec. 6, 1978, issue, entitled "Intangible Requirements." We're all aware that a problem exists—and I'm sure we MANAS readers appreciate a few examples of individuals who beat (or ignored) the system—Thoreau and Borsodi come to mind from recent issues; *but*, the truly massive shifts in attitudes—which many believe will have to come if spaceship earth is to survive—are not forthcoming *as a result* of these exceptions. Perhaps the "enormous—really immeasurable—impetus to change" provided by Schumacher and cited in the lead article has had its effect, a positive effect. But when *Small Is Beautiful* is weighed against the enormous amounts of drivel kids and adults ingest daily, the hours upon hours (literally years) of slyly constructed sales pitches—sandwiched between the mindless repetition of the TV sit-com or cartoon—the promise of a Ronald McDonald or, God forbid, a Howard Jarvis, the incredible stupidity of much of urban and "strip" architecture, the monotony of a disco beat—on and on—this reader is afraid that the scale of human dignity is feeling the adverse effects of a powerful thumb which will not yield to

the well-intentioned few. If Schumacher were swallowed with one per cent of the regularity of a big mac—or even an Egg MacMuffin—the changes would be far more visible, rapid, and non-superficial. I don't mean to be flippant, only practical. Contemporary history shouldn't be remembered for chronic bad taste, judgment, and a widespread affinity for pop icons . . . or should it?

I don't think that the answer to the lack of interest the public has for what I'll call "our concerns" is to put a John Holt in Ronald McDonald's clown suit, but I do think we should take into consideration (at least on occasion) the popular mentality, however shallow it appears from the sanctimonious heights we love to frequent. I find it helpful to get out of myself every now and then and engage in the commerce of the real world (yes, I own up, I've eaten my share of big macs). The reality can be frightening and depressing, but ultimately enlightening. The public, as I perceive it, is a blank slate pretty much at the mercy of appealing voices and seductive symbols. (I'd take issue with the correspondent who suggested in the Dec. 20 issue that massive shifts "simply take place." While the man in the street may be bewildered, and the *causes* for this or that shift may be complex and multiple, it is possible to sort things out, in retrospect, and understand what catalyzed shifts in public feeling. Our biggest clue is usually ourselves).

People don't want to regress from the "gracious living" Joe Krutch talks of—they want to *progress*, but toward what they can't say. They can't see beyond the plaster puti and painted images on the cathedral ceiling. Religion and war no longer serve as catalysts for national unity—not, at least, in this country. About the only thing people can get together on, en masse, is lower taxes. They want more for less.

An attitude is missing which some will call religious, others, political, and still others, Eesthetic. I'll simply call it "discriminating." The two things which allow a human being to

discriminate between the RIGHT and the OTHER are education and experience. These two, while they shouldn't be mutually exclusive, do, more often than not, appear to be at odds with one another in the *way* people learn. The academics are about as "inexperienced" a subgroup as one is likely to find, while those experienced in the mechanics of living too often wouldn't set foot in an institution of "learning," or at least go back there (unless invited). Sure, I'm generalizing, and the exceptions are delightful, but the fact remains that we are overly specialized, and, as a result, suspicious of concerns other than the familiar. This makes a great number of us easy prey for any campaign promising "the good life" for peanuts, be it a fast burger or a platform promising lower taxes. The immediate returns are relatively high, the consequences unfortunate.

Hopefully, through *both* education and a wealth of experiences one can learn to discriminate. Such an attitude speaks of balance, a juggling of alternatives and options, *and presupposes that one knows what the alternatives are!*

It's unfair to lay this burden of exposing alternatives to students on our shaky educational structure—if for no other reason than that institutionalized education has been emasculated by trying to appeal simultaneously to antipodal definitions of what it means "to educate." Two quotations from recent issues of MANAS do a nice job of showing how differently the role of the schools is perceived:

1. Thorndike is quoted (à la Wundt) in the Feb. 7 issue as defining teaching as "the art of giving and withholding stimuli with the result of producing or preventing certain responses."

2. In "Notes on Compulsion" (Dec. 6, 1978), the writer gives what he calls the first principle of education: "In social terms, the purpose of education is the reduction, and finally the elimination, of compulsion."

Of course, an infinite range of quotations would be needed to satisfy everyone—these were fresh. The question is: How can one learn to first become aware of alternatives, then effectively weigh these alternatives when, as a student, one is usually shown but one facet of a beautiful, many-sided stone?

I'm at the point where I don't care what the *result* is as long as it's not one-dimensional and the *methods* for obtaining the result don't betray us. I don't believe I could say this if I felt that human beings were some sort of Lorenzian caricature of the apes—or prophets wise enough to juggle with genetics. Individuals consistently reach levels of excellence (and occasionally beyond). The community of humankind will do the same only when the marketplace of ideas (and experiences) is *generally* patronized by a thoughtful, *discriminating* consumer.

One must agree that there is not a simple answer regarding methods for change, yet it is clear to me that we must assert what we believe in a language accessible to larger numbers of people. The problem remains difficult to define, let alone explain, but its effects are visible in too many of the people I meet. The survivors are few and far between and need encouragement. MANAS helps sustain this survivor (and I thank you), but how do we reach those suffering from chronic "big mac attacks" and too much "gracious living"?

How do we educate for experience?

Telluride, Colo.

DAN COLLINS

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MANAS began publication thirty-one years ago, taking for its editorial models Socrates and Thomas Paine. Both these men were great educators. Both had in mind the goals this writer proposes—the development of discrimination. Socrates spoke to any Athenian who wanted to listen to him. Paine addressed the people of an unborn nation.

The aim of Socrates was general, Paine's, particular. Socrates wanted his countrymen to

learn how to distinguish good from evil on fundamental rather than customary grounds. He wanted them to learn how to *think*. If, he (or Plato) said, you learn what is good in principle, you can tell the difference between authentic good and pretentious or plausible frauds. Our correspondent wants people to learn to be discriminating. Socrates wanted them to learn to be wise. There is not enough difference between wisdom and discrimination to be worth talking about. Wisdom discriminates. In all directions.

In *The Three Worlds of Man* (University of Missouri Press, 1963), Stringfellow Barr gives an account of how Socrates went about his work, as illustrated in the *Republic*:

As the dialogue proceeds, Socrates weaves a magic skein of luminous analogies between the various types of unjust men and the various types of unjust state. But since, both in the individual soul and in organized society, a just ordering of the organic parts will all hang on the quality of the wisdom that directs them, we are back again at the Socratic point that virtue depends in a special way on wisdom, a wisdom capable of transcending mere opinion and achieving knowledge. We cannot learn to be brave or temperate or just without this higher wisdom, for it is this wisdom that tells us which of our physical desires to follow and which we may not follow; it is this that brings to our souls the internal ordering in which Socrates saw justice. In short, all genuine moral choices are guided by the high wisdom that knows principles, as well as by prudence about cases. That is why a brave act is wisdom acting with respect to danger; and a temperate act is wisdom acting again, this time with respect to pleasure; and a just act is wisdom acting with respect to the rights of other men about us. If this be true, then it is easy to see why Socrates in so many of the dialogues seems to suspect that all virtues are really species of theoretical wisdom as much as of prudence. Or, more baldly, that virtue is knowledge.

Well, did Plato (or his hero, Socrates) succeed? Was he really influential? Shall we say that because the Western world is now in bad shape, Plato was a failure? The question is too big, too unmanageable. What can be said, however, has been well put by Alfred Edward Taylor in his *Platonism and its Influence* (1924):

To few men does the world owe a heavier debt than to Plato. . . . All worthy civilization is fed by these ideas, and whenever, after a time of confusion and forgetfulness, our Western world has recaptured the sense of noble living it has sought them afresh in the Platonic writings. Plato has been called, with some truth, the father of all heresies in religion and science; he has been, in the same degree, a fountain of all that is most living in its orthodoxies. . . . Plato is never weary of hinting that he is the spiritual heir of two earlier great men, Socrates and Pythagoras. But neither of these great men wrote anything, it is chiefly through Plato that they have influenced all later ages and are a living force in the thought of today.

All this may be granted, but it will still be pointed out that Plato is read mainly by the scholarly, that neither in his time nor in ours have philosophers become kings, and that today's democratic masses need the guidance spoken of by our correspondent. They do indeed.

What then of Tom Paine? In his time Paine got through to the masses. In a paper titled "The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution," Gordon S. Wood says:

Part of the remarkable effect created by Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* . . . resulted from its obvious deepening of the layers of audience to whom it was directed. To be sure, it was a vigorously written pamphlet, filled with colorful vivid language and possessing a fierce, passionate tone that no other American writer could match. And it said things about monarchical government that had not been said before; it broke through the presuppositions of politics and offered a new way of conceiving of government. But some of the awe and consternation the pamphlet aroused came from its deliberate elimination of the usual elitist apparatus of persuasion and its acknowledged appeal to a wider reading public. . . . Paine scorned "words of sound" that only "amuse the ear" and relied on a simple and direct idiom; he used concrete, even coarse and vulgar imagery drawn from the commonplace world that could be understood even by the unlearned, and he counted on his audience being familiar with only one literary source, the Bible—all of which worked to heighten the pamphlet's potency and to broaden its readership, pointing the way toward a new kind of public literature.

Paine met the arguments against independence one by one. "Everything that is right or reasonable," he declared, "pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, TIS TIME TO PART. There could be no return to the British fold for Americans. "Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. . . . As well can a lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress as the continent forgive the murders of Britain." Bernard Bailyn shows how Paine went behind the assumptions of the Americans and turned their feelings around:

For beneath all the explicit arguments and conclusions against independence, there were underlying, unspoken, even unconceptualized presuppositions, attitudes, and habits of thought that made it extremely difficult for the colonists to break with England and find in the prospect of an independent future the security and freedom they sought. The special intellectual quality of *Common Sense*, which goes a long way toward explaining its impact on contemporary readers, derives from its reversal of these underlying presuppositions and its shifting of the established perspectives to the point where the whole received paradigm within which the Anglo-American controversy had until then proceeded came into question.

Paine could lash and excoriate to great effect, but he could also inspire:

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. . . . 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time by the proceedings now. Now is the seed-time of continental union, faith, and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.

He also said:

This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from *every part* of Europe. . . . we claim brotherhood with every European Christian, and triumph in the generosity of the sentiment. . . . Not one third of the inhabitants even of this province [Pennsylvania] are of English descent. Wherefore I reprobate the phrase

of parent or mother country applied to England only, as being false, selfish, narrow, and ungenerous.

The other half of Paine's visionary endeavors was embodied in *The Age of Reason*, as articulate an appeal for freedom of mind and self-government in religion as *Common Sense* was in the political realm.

How did Paine get his audience? This is really the question raised by Dan Collins when he says: "we must assert what we believe in a language accessible to larger numbers of people." Well, the answer is evident enough. Paine got his audience through the collaboration of history. The colonists were hurting. The English were squeezing their purses and damaging their pride. Paine entered an ongoing controversy and went to its roots deep in human feeling. Gandhi did something similar during India's struggle for independence over long years.

Plato spoke to man's hunger to know. Paine spoke to this hunger also, but made the anger and indignant wondering of the colonists the motive for a new way of looking at man's estate. Thus wonder and pain are probably the two chief reasons for seeking understanding. What, in psychological terms, did Socrates hope for in his audience? He was trying to get his hearers to raise their sights. He wanted them to ask themselves very tough and embarrassing questions. So he backed them into corners with his interrogations. A lot of them went away, but some stayed. Plato was one who stayed.

The trouble with Paine's notable success—he did more than any other one man for the cause of American independence, Washington said—was that the moral vision in his appeal hardly survived the years of the war. When the historical provocation for listening to Paine was gone, the resolve of the "lovers of freedom" subsided. No freedom for blacks, they said. Etc. Yet it didn't subside in all who read Paine. His great ideas are reborn again and again in the few who are fired by his thinking.

So it goes. If you want to get noticeable results, you have to collaborate with history. If you do, the results will go up and down with the turnings of history, although with a little net gain, perhaps, after each upturning. Can anyone measure such things? What is the "normal" rate of human progress?

Called for is a brief note on McDonald's as a model for the distribution of good ideas. "If Schumacher were swallowed with one per cent of the regularity of a big mac—or even an Egg MacMuffin—the changes would be far more visible," our correspondent says. Well, would they? You can't just swallow Schumacher. You have to chew. The point about Schumacher is that "accepting" him counts for little; you have to become a self-starter to do his kind of thing. Conditioning techniques don't work for human growth.

## REVIEW

### LADIES AND A MAN

IN *Masculine/Feminine* (1970), Theodore Roszak declares: "*There are no masculine and feminine virtues. There are only human virtues.*" This "heart of the matter" for the liberation of both women and men was vaguely recognized by John Stuart Mill, who in 1833 wrote to Carlyle: "the women, of all I have known, who possessed the highest measure of what are considered feminine qualities, have combined with them more of the higher masculine qualities than I have ever seen in any but one or two men, and those one or two men were also in many respects almost women." Musingly, Mill adds: "I suspect it is the second-rate people of the two sexes that are unlike—the first-rate are alike in both—except—no, I do not think I can except anything—but then, in this respect, my position has been, and is, what you say every human being's is in many respects, 'a peculiar one'."

This idea by Mill comes at the end of the Afterword of *Courage Knows No Sex* (Christopher Publishing House, 1978, \$8.95), by Elaine Crovitz and Elizabeth Buford, a book which gives the essentials of the lives of six distinguished women: Teresa of Avila, Mercy Otis Warren, Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Blackwell, Jane Addams, and Marie Curie. Why these women and not others of equal fame? Because these six showed exemplary courage throughout their lives. The authors are intent upon demonstrating that courage, sometimes regarded as a distinctively male quality, is equally natural for women. Their six subjects were, as Mill might suggest, essentially *balanced* individuals. Their sex, while not irrelevant, did not produce their courage. Their humanness produced it. This book, therefore, helps to free us of, in Roszak's words, "the treacherous nonsense of believing that the human personality must be forced into masculine and feminine molds." After reading about these women one realizes that they had something in common which came before

courage. All were imbued with a deep sense of *purpose*. That, working first as single individuals, they were able to accomplish *so much* seems a lasting message of this book.

The reforms sought by workers for women's liberation are twofold. Obviously, they want to abolish the confinements and injustices to women embodied in custom and law. This takes time, since prejudice and human ignorance are formidable obstacles. It soon becomes evident from reading about these women that if there were more human beings of their level of intelligence and sense of purpose, the external barriers would soon be swept away. This suggests that custom and vulgar opinion are little more than offprints of the way people think about themselves. So it is this thinking, also, which must change, if reforms in custom are to be enduring. The astonishing historical influence of these women was due to *their* thinking about themselves and their work. As the Afterword says:

Characteristic of these women was that they each attained self-actualization in their lives. They brought to fruition their talents and resources and individualized themselves so that they could make creative and original contributions. Each woman was able to transcend the pressures of drives, social needs, and societal influences, while still gratifying some individual needs and social values which no one can safely ignore. Their investment of themselves was sufficiently clear and authentic that a communication of their mission and its value could stimulate and involve others in a serious and incisive way.

While similar in personal strength and an inability to be satisfied with one success, they were dissimilar with respect to the values they defended. Each spent her energies and time on values as different as knowledge, social justice, religious faith, and political liberty. Teresa of Avila defended her faith by purifying it of corrupt influences; Mercy Otis Warren dedicated herself to gaining political liberties which she believed were the natural rights of citizens. Social justice was the overriding concern of Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Jane Addams. The reverence for knowledge guided Marie Curie in her indefatigable efforts in unlocking the secrets of the universe. While Mercy Otis Warren promoted a war as a means of gaining liberty and justice, Jane

Addams fought against war as a solution to human conflicts. Teresa's religious faith was pure and unquestionable, as she both believed in and experienced divine revelation, in contrast to Marie Curie's agnosticism, which prompted her to turn to empirical questioning as the most valid way of obtaining truth.

The diversity in these women's lives and values indicates that to achieve moral courage does not require one personality type or one value system. As women they focused their lives on transcendent goals and in doing so made themselves larger than life.

One cannot, it is true, go about telling other people (other women) to adopt "transcendent goals." Exhortation requires genius to be at all successful. Tolstoy, perhaps, could get away with it because his exhortation was the foam of a personal effort rather than pretentious moralizing. Hence the great value of biography, as in this book. The best way to advocate a transcendent goal is to illustrate it in the life of a human being. One soon recognizes the futility of ordinary prediction in trying to see what will inspire others. Seeing a bullfight in Madrid, for example, seems to have been the trigger that started Jane Addams thinking seriously about what to do with her life.

Of their six subjects, the writers say:

None of these women regarded herself as masculine or wanted to be men. Even the women most conscious of pioneering in "a man's world," as Elizabeth Blackwell and Marie Curie, seemed never to have regretted being born female. While others may have seen these women as "masculine" because of their assertion and daring, they themselves accepted their gender. What they rejected were the limitations and prohibitions imposed on women in their eras. They experienced fully their strengths and talents and were not frightened into denying the existence of these characteristics. Rather, these women accepted themselves and chose to live by making moral choices and distinctions in accordance with a personal set of values rather than the social norms of the age in which they lived. With this choice they became women of courage.

What they worked and fought for, it seems evident, was not so much "rights," which doubtless belong to all humans, but the freedom to do what they had determined and were able to do.

Reginald Horace Blyth, who died in 1964, was a cultivated Englishman living in Japan, studying Zen, when World War II broke out. He was imprisoned as an enemy alien but continued his study, and writing his five-volume classic, *Zen and Zen Classics*, which was completed in the 1960s. (His first book, *Zen in English Literature*, finished in 1941 while in an internment camp, published in Japan in 1942, and reprinted by Dutton in paperback in 1960, is treasured by all who know it as a source of unpredictable delights.) Now Frederick Franck, long an admirer of Blyth, has issued a book of selections from *Zen and Zen Classics* (Vintage paperback, 1978, \$4.95), adding drawings which supply a visual dimension wholly in keeping with Blyth's inimitable prose. Dr. Franck (author of *The Zen of Seeing* and *My Eye Is in Love*), says of Blyth:

He admired Japanese culture without ever becoming obsequious to it. He was a free spirit, and the rich humor that pervades all of his writings made him poke gentle fun at Japanese idiosyncrasies, and direct rather less gentle ridicule at those esthetic and folkloristic *Japonaiseries* to which Westerners who have only recently discovered Zen all too easily become addicted. His awareness and sensitivity kept him from mistaking such froth for the substance of Zen. He was exceptionally endowed with poetic sensibility, and he saw all artistic and spiritual humbug as being antithetical to both the poetic spirit and the radical authenticity that Zen demands.

Neither the expression of Zen thinking nor Blyth's comment and interpretation can be dealt with by generalization. In the section "Zen and Music" he says:

The opera, which more or less begins with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, 1607, has not a spark of Zen in it, even when Mozart writes it. The operatic element in *The Messiah* makes it odious, and it even spoils the *Matthew Passion*. Music is not emotion. Music is Zen. A certain amount of emotion and thought may be added to music, as we put salt in cakes to bring out the sweetness, but salt and sugar are different things.

Bach is Zen itself. Like Zen he absorbed everything he wrote himself. The only way to describe this naturalness, the self-full selflessness of Bach's music is to quote from *A Week on the Concord* concerning literature: "As naturally as the oak bears

an acorn and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem, either spoken or done. . . . Homer's song is a vital function like breathing, and an integral result like weight. . . . He is as serene as nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard." Bach is more full of contradictions than Hamlet. Classic and romantic, abstract and pictorial, traditional and original, ancient and modern, introspective and personal, calm and poignant, he is like Shakespeare in that every work is a self-portrait, yet he remains an enigma; others abide our question.

The Zen of Bach, however, does not lie in these paradoxes or in the mystery of his character. It consists in the fact that everything he wrote is faultless. He has the ear that never sleeps, the hand that never slackens; he is never weary in well-doing.

We found this passage just by opening the book. Any other page would have served as well.



## **COMMENTARY**

### **CAN WE DO WITHOUT THEM?**

THE problem set in this week's lead by Dan Collins recalled a letter from a reader to the WRL/West *Newsletter* back in 1974 (reprinted in MANAS for March 20 of that year). It said:

I was one who purchased your Kit on nonviolent education, but it does not meet any of my needs, and I doubt if it met the needs of most who bought it. I believe an understanding of Gandhi is unnecessary (if not outdated) for peace education. As long as children are conditioned in our culture to "aggression pays off," then our way of Gandhian philosophy is irrelevant. . . . The average Joe is convinced that violence, competition, and hostility are necessary for him. . . . If my premise is wrong, I'm open to correction, but I don't see us doing anything to help the seven to twelve-year-old people to solve their conflicts unless they resort to violence (actual or theatrical). The youngster's daily life reinforces violence and his family constantly praises him only if he wins.

How can you teach nonviolence in a language whose grammar is shaped by violence, competition, and hostility? It seems obvious another language must be used, and it turns out that this language is understood by only the few.

Martin Buber put the same problem in an essay on the education of character. Describing essentially the same state of mind in some Israeli youth, Buber asked, "How in this situation can there be any education of character?" He went on:

We are justified in regarding this disposition as a sickness of the human race. But we must not deceive ourselves by believing that the disease can be cured by formulæ which assert that nothing is really as the sick person imagines. It is an idle undertaking to call out, to a mankind that has grown blind to eternity: "Look! the eternal values!"

Did Buber have any suggestions? He had one.

One must begin by pointing to that sphere where man himself, in the hours of utter solitude, occasionally becomes aware of the disease through sudden pain: by pointing to the relation of the individual to his own self. . . . To keep the pain

awake, to waken the desire—that is the task of everyone who regrets the obscuring of eternity. It is also the first task of the genuine educator in our time.

Buber is talking about the awakening of Conscience—a most unpredictable and non-mechanistic event. How does one become friendly host to such events? How do you help without becoming tiresomely didactic? How do you preach without moralizing? Is it possible to do this without losing the common touch? The outline of an answer was given by Tolstoy:

*If you wish to educate the student by science, love your science and know it, and the students will love both you and the science, and you will educate; but if you yourself do not love it, the science will have no educational influence, no matter how much you compel them to learn it.* Here again there is the one measure, the one salvation, the same freedom for students to listen and not to listen. . . .

Could this, one wonders, be put in a more encouraging way? Should that be attempted?

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### LAST SUMMER IN SAN FRANCISCO

WE have a book by Ron Jones called *There Is No School on the Sixth Floor*, available (\$4.00) from the author at 1901 Stanyan Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94117. Jones is the San Francisco teacher who wrote *Your City Has Been Kidnapped* and *The Acorn People* and other good things that have been quoted here. The School that wasn't there (on the sixth floor) was there on paper but not in fact. On Friday before the Monday when classes were supposed to begin, Ron Jones, who had been hired as teacher-director for a summer-school term, went to see the Director of the Fisher Hospital where the school was said to exist.

The man behind the desk stood up and the room fell silent.

"Tell me about the program," he said. I described the project, with its expectation of allowing patients to interact with teenagers from the regular city schools, and my plans to provide a classroom setting with a curriculum based on problem solving, word building, and survival. As I spoke each sentence seemed to lasso the people in the room. They became rigid and tight. I raced to conclude, "I'm very excited about the start of the school on Monday."

The man behind the desk threw up both hands as if to surrender. His words didn't match the gesture. "What school? I didn't know anything about a school." I started back-stepping out of the room. His words stopped me, "Where is this school?" I answered, "On the sixth floor."

The men in tiger suits [well-dressed assistants] jumped in. "This is what we've been talking about—the mayor's office has this money—they want to initiate a project with us that will hire outside kids and allow us to . . ." The desk man was now on his feet firing questions. "Budget—who's got the money? How come no one told me about this school thing?"

Mrs. Plummer tried to plug the dike. "This project is on its way to your desk. The psychiatry department has approved it. It came a little fast, so we had to act." Her argument drew steam from the man next to her. "That's what we wanted your O.K.

on—they need a place to work on Monday and we wanted . . ." In mid-sentence, the director of the hospital was halfway across the room. "I can't give approval to something I know nothing about and, wait—there can't be a school on the sixth floor, that area is scheduled for reconstruction as an OB unit. Isn't that right?" There was no answer to this last question.

Well, bright and early, two weeks later—two weeks from Monday—the school that wasn't there opened and Ron Jones and a colleague, Loren White, went to work. As he tells it in summary:

Last summer I found myself unexpectedly teaching school. My classroom was a hallway on a deserted floor of a mental hospital. The students were five adolescents hospitalized for psychiatric treatment and eight "street kids" paid to attend school. The school program was part of an unusual experiment to prepare psychiatric patients for the real world.

The inner-city street kids were hired by the mayor's office [well, actually, Ron Jones and Loren White hired them] as part of a summer employment program for disadvantaged youths. It was hoped that they might serve as therapeutic models for a peer group of severely disturbed young adults. . . . It was an adventuresome idea.

Jones, who had at least a movie-goer's knowledge of psychiatry—he had seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*—thought he would learn from this experience. He did. In a conclusion not printed in the book about the adventure he said:

The story doesn't have a happy ending. Ghetto kids don't make good. Patients don't get well. What happens in the mental ward school is not different from what's going on all around us. People disappear without notice. Drugs get dispensed by doctors. Insurance kills.

He exaggerates, of course. There are wonderful exceptions. But he means to exaggerate because so many people are hard of hearing. And what he says is after all what the same people call bottom-line truth.

How, for example, does insurance kill? Well, you could say that insurance benefits can work backward. Ron Jones tells what was going on last summer at Fisher Hospital:

The psychiatrists faced perhaps the greatest problem with the flood of discharges. Their patients were being ripped from their care to save state insurance money. Patients whom they knew were not well and would be brutalized by the move were being discharged by administrative edict. How to prepare patients for discharge and at the same time frantically seek ways to avoid financial dismissal became a major issue on the ward.

Insurance kills in the sense that people rely on it for keeping things going, instead of giving something of themselves. Then—

The state insurance program that financially supported many patients was suddenly terminated. This meant the immediate discharge of all patients not on private insurance programs. Specifically it meant that Danny, Leona, Bonnie, and Lynell would be institutionalized in what are called "warehouse" facilities. These warehouse facilities are homes of last resort. They provide food and shelter but no schooling or hope of release. For Danny, Leona, Bonnie, and Lynell it meant a life of suspended animation. A life of looking out windows.

Leona, who was a ward of the court, was a sort of exception, but not really. She could choose, and her decision would have legal support. But she didn't know what to do. "She liked the hospital. She hated it."

Leona's life had been in a constant state of resettlement. Her parents rejected her, resulting in a series of foster homes. She was taken from her last foster home after being told that she was going to a hospital for a check-up. Upon arrival she was admitted to a high security mental ward for an indefinite stay. She fought back and was sheeted. That's a term for being tied spread eagle to your bed—arms to the head posts, feet to the feet posts. From that hospital she was released to this ward. Now she faced the trial of moving again. Only this time she would have a voice in determining her home. She had a lawyer who would fight for her. The tragedy is that she had no place to fight for. The foster parents didn't want her back. The state hospital wasn't accepting patients. She was scheduled to be discharged from our care and she had nowhere to go.

But the true quality of this story is in its moment-to-moment account of these young people and how well they did for one another and themselves. Ron Jones says: "If I had to compare

the treatment provided patients by their street peers with treatment provided by \$240-per-day psychiatric work, I would score Street Wisdom 6, Freud 0.

What were some of the other patients like?

Lynell was the most physically marked as a mental patient, yet she seemed to enjoy school in her own way. Lynell was frail and hollow-eyed. Your inclination upon meeting Lynell was to lift her into the air. She walked in a bent-over shuffle that you expect to see in an aging person. . . . The dominant trait of Lynell was her ritualization of every movement. To get out of a chair, she would stand up and sit down and then stand again, only to sit once more and then finally stand. Every physical movement was traced over and over. In walking, she would proceed a few steps then pivot and return a step before turning again and continuing. To hit a volleyball, Lynell would swing her arm up to hit the ball, then retract her arm and repeat the swing perhaps a dozen times.

I think of all the inside kids, Lynell enjoyed the company of outsiders more than anyone. A soft smile crossed her face whenever Cathy or someone else would gently herd her down the street. I often caught Lynell walking hand in hand with J. T. or Juan or sometimes with Vicki. . . .

And if there was one barometer to our success, it was Lynell's volleyball serve. In the first week, she couldn't hit the ball. Her arm would lever forward, but just as it was about to hit the ball it would trigger back. Everyone began to root for Lynell to hit the goddam ball. We often waited for ten or twenty minutes in the middle of a game for Lynell to serve. But she finally did.

The extraordinary thing about this book is how the author turns what seems a black and hopeless situation into the source of so much delight.

## *FRONTIERS*

### **At the Heart of the Country**

IN *Stepping Stones* (Schocken, \$7.95) Karl Hess tells the story of a neighborhood that fought to save itself. He begins:

Adams-Morgan is a small country afloat in a great city. It is a 70-block neighborhood in the center—almost the exact center—of Washington, D.C. The population is 58 per cent black, 18 per cent white, 22 per cent Latin, with the remainder mostly Middle Eastern. It is a neighborhood in transition; as a small country, it is in decline.

For a while, during a rash and wonderful tilt at making itself a true community, Adams-Morgan was a fascinating culture in which to live.

What happened? A guess is that some hippies, tired of being only hippies, decided to do something about the disorder and malfunction of practically everything:

By the end of the sixties, there were probably 60 to 75 functioning communes in the neighborhood, and a burst of energy emanated from them. A worker-managed grocery store opened and thrived as a place to find good prices and good-natured advice about nutrition. Then a second one opened. A local newspaper popped up, reporting neighborhood news. Then a second one. A record store. Several bookstores. Crafts people, from potters to auto mechanics, began hawking their wares from community billboards, tree posters, street corners. Musicians rented a storefront and began nightly sessions of jazz, rock, country, classical. Several graphic arts shops opened. A community credit union was started. A community government proclaimed itself, called a meeting and actually got off the ground.

The question was, what could they do themselves?

The thing was called AMO (Adams-Morgan Organization). At its first meeting, someone argued that the streets were dirty. Someone else suggested a clean-up day. The meeting agreed. Signs were mimeographed on a church duplicator, paper was donated by a man working in a print shop. The neighborhood was saturated with the information that AMO members (then only about 300) were going to sweep down the main street over the weekend. About

200 people actually got out and swept. Nearly all the neighborhood's 40,000 residents heard about it. People began to perceive AMO as an organization more interested in doing than talking. By the time we [Hess and Therese Machotka] left, the membership exceeded 3,000.

Hess and his colleague, Therese Machotka (who had a paying job), were active in the transformation that began:

Food, it seemed to us, was the place to start. What could be more basic? Also, the idea of developing food production in a ghetto neighborhood seemed as stern a test of our general propositions as could be imagined. There's no land for growing food in a city. If there's any open space it's too much trouble. Yet the land problem was easily solved. Food grows, not in an abstraction called land, but in a reality called someplace-nutritious-to-put-down-roots. Space for this reality need be only that—space. We located a lot of it.

First, the rooftops. . . . Nearly all the roofs are flat. On very strong roofs, organic soil can be spread, or boxed, for growing vegetables. Therese and I grew such a garden. Less sturdy roofs accommodated the lighter demands of hydroponic growing the cultivation of plants in tanks of liquid nutrients or in nutrient-soaked sand. Friends who began a companion enterprise called the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, still a prospering activity, operated a hydroponic garden with storybook success and wildly bountiful crops. They also managed to fill virtually the entire neighborhood's demand for bean sprouts from a single basement facility.

More traditionally, we worked with kids in the neighborhood to establish regular gardens in vacant lots and in any backyard space that people wanted to make available. The entire back lot of our warehouse [Hess's rent-free headquarters] was covered with dirt that we begged from local excavators and converted into a community garden. Also, using the vegetable wastes from several local grocery stores, leaves from suburban lawns, and horse manure from a park police stable, we maintained about 90 feet of compost pits behind the warehouse.

For protein they learned how to grow fish. Hess, who is among other things a welder, worked on intermediate technology devices for practical use in the neighborhood, but could get no help from government:

Government programs aim at giving money to poor people. Our hope was that knowledge would, in the long run, be more useful, even provide more money, and eventually strike at the systemic causes of poverty. Government believes that poverty is actually a lack of money. We felt, and continue to feel, that poverty is actually a lack of both skill and the self-esteem that comes from being able to take charge of one's life and work.

Naturally enough, in a neighborhood populated by so many misused people, the government way of thinking eventually won out.

At Assembly meetings, reports of our work were always greeted with applause and great enthusiasm. We were a showcase bunch of wizards doing wonderful, far-out things. Our appeals to neighbors to join us in the work, to help improve the fish farm, to move the gardens along, to experiment with new ways of growing, to start stores and even factories based on our skills and tools, got choruses of right on—and no participants.

Instead, the Assembly began to emphasize direct appeals to government agencies and foundations for grants. More and more people wanted to make complaints about landlord abuses, not make plans to buy them out.

They could have done it, Hess says. The money could have been raised. There were other things they could have done; and a few people did them and are still doing them. But the momentum is gone or turning in the other direction.

When the Assembly focused on local problem-solving, rather than conventional constituency politics, it was greatly effective. Shy people spoke out. Seemingly hopeless people sparked to new life. Now all this is fading as the old idea of representation begins to recover the ground lost to the experiment in community participation. The Assembly has become more a bandstand for aspiring politicians than a forum for people.

Crime—nighttime street crime—drove Hess and Therese to West Virginia where they are working on other but similar things. Hess explains how both the rise and fall of Adams-Morgan worked. The fall is unimportant by comparison with the rise, which shows what can actually be done by people, for themselves and for community. And the people who did it, whatever

their present disappointments, are sure that it was the right thing to do.