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SOME REDEFINITIONS

HUMAN BEINGS, we say, reach beyond themselves, as if this were no more than a weakness of mind. It is true enough. It is true in the sense that what we call "failure" is usually the result of the attempt of someone, or some group or association, to accomplish more than it is possible to do. Obvious follies apart, failures come about from having objectives which confuse the attainable with the unattainable, or from a mix of the two without recognition of how much of one or the other enters in. Conceivably, there are leaders or inspirers who are well aware of the difference between the attainable and the unattainable, yet sense that the attainable cannot be gained except through persistent pursuit of the unattainable, and so remain silent concerning such metaphysical distinctions. For them, getting people going is the thing.

During the early years of the Civil Rights movement, Bayard Rustin, then a close associate of Martin Luther King, explained this to some religious leaders assembled by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Speaking in March, 1965, he said:

> In times of confusion we have got to face the fact that that which is practical—realpolitik—has never worked, and that it is precisely in these periods where the historical concomitants are building up so rapidly that that which appears to be utopian is in fact *the* way out. The essential political fact of our time is the oneness of man; and any practical realpolitik method of defending oneself which violates that is the most unreal thing on earth. . . . The great contribution of the Negro people in this country—and I am not fooled—I know that most of them are in nonviolence for reasons far removed from why King and I are in it—is that they are in it because they see this as the only practicable way; it is strategic nonviolence. Nevertheless, even here the moral impact is magnificent.
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> But every project we have ever set up to reveal truth [has been] not to win minor victories but to know, as Dr. King must know today, that a funeral procession goes on even though the state police are standing by with the objective of making if they can a riot out of the situation. Knowing one may lose, one must still proceed, and the reason one must proceed, even though one has to set up a strategy which may be "no win," is precisely that no other possibility exists except to develop tactics of nonviolence. But they must be associated with and dedicated to concrete and specific efforts to bring justice, because peace proceeds not from a vacuum, or not merely from prayer or not merely from the attitudes of humans wanting to be decent people, but from the reflections of these attitudes built firmly into institutions which eternally broaden not the cycle of revenge but the area of justice.

Well, in Boston, today, according to Jonathan Kozol, there are some schools where the education offered is meant to be so good that students of all races come there voluntarily. Even if these schools do not come up to expectations, they represent an ideal that Bayard Rustin called for (in the July 1964 *Fellowship*), saying that "the only way you can ever get white and Negro students into the same schools is to make schools which are so vastly superior to schools as we know them, that the question of bussing will not be a question."

How, then, do you measure success? Success may be invisible, failure on the surface and obvious; there are men who have learned what they needed most to know by managing businesses into bankruptcy. Gandhi once declared, looking back on his long career, "My Himalayan failure was to have given civil disobedience more emphasis than constructive work." But was Gandhi really a failure on any count at all? Do you call a man a failure because he fails to attain the unattainable?

Back in the late 1960s, Bill Moyers went around the country, talking to people about their lives and what they thought about them. A

Seattle man—he sounds like a Boeing engineer—asked:

> "Where is this country going? Where is each one of us going? I think this is what is bothering the young, although I don't think they have the practical experience to know what to do about it. I feel that I have betrayed myself. I've done a lot of looking at myself. What in the hell, I've asked myself, have you done with all those things you were thinking about in college? I know this sounds schmaltzy, but truthfully I haven't done very much. . . .
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> "A month ago my own daughter just disappeared. She left—no note, no word, nothing. Just disappeared. I've been lying awake nights. Where did I go wrong? What happened? How come she didn't come in and say, 'I've got to go Daddy. I'm going to pull out.' . . . She called last Friday night. She wouldn't leave a phone number or an address. She just said she was in New York, working as a typist for $100 a week. When her mother got on the phone she said, 'It's okay, mother, I'm being a good girl.' I guess she thinks we are more concerned about her chastity than we are about her as a person. Maybe that's the problem. She's a sensitive child. We thought she had a suitcase full of clothes but it turned out to be full of books—Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, introspective writers. . . . I wanted a phone number, an address, some way to get in touch with her if anything happened. But she said not to worry and wouldn't give them to me. What happened? . . ."

This man also told Moyers:

> "I think rushing into that fantastic progress caused more heartache and suffering than it was worth. The people were saying, 'More, more, more,' so the airlines said, 'More, more, more,' and Boeing said, 'More, more, more.' We scrounged and grabbed and fought for dominance, and when we got it, we lost it. All this running and shoving to build a structure that suddenly we don't need. And look at all the people who got hurt. Business has got to change. I think it will be because the children of so many businessmen are becoming hippies."

Was it "progress" for this man to think that way? In a musing essay on the character of the American people, the distinguished historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, wrote (in the January 1943 *American Historical Review*):

> "The American," wrote a New Yorker in 1857, "enters into festivity as if it were a serious business." . . . And a serious business it has continued to be ever since. Into it goes all the fierce energy that once felled the forests and broke the prairies. We play games not for their own sake but in order to win them. We attend social gatherings grimly determined to have a "good time." Maxim Gorky said of Coney Island, "What an unhappy people it must be that turns for happiness here."

By the twentieth century, Schlesinger added, "The pursuit of happiness was transformed into the happiness of pursuit." And, as Viktor Frankl said in a recent book (*The Unheard Cry for Meaning, 1978*), "It is the very 'pursuit of happiness' that obviates happiness. The more we make it a target, the more widely we miss." As a way, perhaps, of convincing his readers of this, Dr. Frankl wrote at some length on the subject of happiness:

> At an American university, 60 students who had attempted suicide were screened afterward, and 85 per cent said the reason had been that "life seemed meaningless." Most important, however, 93 per cent of these students suffering from the apparent meaninglessness of life "were actively engaged socially, were performing well academically, and were on good terms with their family groups." What we have here, I would say, is an unheard cry for meaning, and it is certainly not limited to only one university. Consider the staggering suicide rates among American college students, second only to traffic accidents as the most frequent cause of death. Suicide *attempts* might be fifteen times more frequent.

Such facts and comments find us helpless to make anything out of them. The cause-effect sequence is obscure— not one to one. We have a constitutional, politically and acquisitively defined approach to the good life. People write books and articles about things they are able to speak of in objective terms. A good home in a pleasant community which has opportunity for recreation, sufficient creature comforts, access to schools, in all a healthful environment, appropriate for bringing up children—this, we say, is an essential element of the American Dream, and who could disagree? If someone decides that all this is comparatively irrelevant, what will he write

about? He will have little to say, except for some obscure parables, and who will read him?

But Frankl finds things to say:

> Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for. On the other hand, we see people being happy under adverse, even dire, conditions. Let me quote from a letter I received from Cleve W., who wrote it when he was number 049246 in an American state prison: "Here in prison . . . there are more and more blissful opportunities to serve and grow. I'm really happier now than I've ever been."

What can you do with an insight like that? Send your son or daughter to prison instead of the university? The idea is not wholly without precedent. In the eighteenth century English reformers and some Pennsylvania Quakers thought that prisons would be a better solution for crime than execution (there were then more than two hundred capital crimes) and they argued that imprisonment in isolation would lead to penitence and self-reform—hence the term penitentiary. We know how that has worked, but it seemed a good idea at the time. Yet the exceptions are notable, as in the case of Frankl's correspondent. Why doesn't it work that way for all the other convicts, and make the Quaker theory come out right?

The point we are getting to, and may as well make here—since piling up evidence would take more space than is available—is that the usual arguments about human good and how to achieve it are practically all statistical and historical (collectivist), depending upon *social* conditions—social conditions, after all, can be somewhat affected by political action—while our lives are individual, personal, and our emotional experience is highly idiosyncratic. In short, one man's meat is another man's poison, in about every sense you can think of except the literal meaning.

How, then, will you write about happiness and its attainment, and still have hope of getting published somewhere? Fortunately, a few writers have been able to get good ideas on the subject into print, if only because of their impact on society in other ways. One might note, in introducing one of them, the totally nonpolitical character of these ideas. They are ideas which have application only before or after political behavior. The following are brief passages taken from Arthur Morgan's book, *Observations* (Antioch Press, 1968), an anthology of his reflections over many years, compiled by an admirer. In the section headed "On Philosophy" he said:

> An elimination of all industrial and social ills would not necessarily make life worthwhile. It must be the burden of earnest men to give life dignity and value by arousing and holding men's interest in fine purposes and accomplishments. . . . The worth of life is the product of its intensity and its soundness. . . . The highest wisdom lies in keeping the best balance between rightness and intensity.

Now the melancholy fact is that such statements make little impression on those who have not already felt the truth in them. The same applies to what Morgan has to say about happiness as a goal:

> Without a feeling of certainty in the matter, I think I observe a state which might be called a general sense of wellbeing. This is not the response to any specific action bringing pleasure or happiness, but is awareness of general fitness for life and living. . . . It seems not to fade as do specific experiences of pleasure or happiness. If such a state is possible, then it would best be arrived at, not primarily by seeking the pleasures or happiness of particular experiences but by pursuit of overall fitness and effectiveness for the total course of life. It requires that we ruthlessly free ourselves from tyranny both to biological conditioning and to traditional dogmas and patterns; that we be complete and not limited heretics.

Well, if Morgan is right—and we should note that he claims no certainty—then we must first recognize that he is right in spite of the fact that he will get rather few people to agree with him, since most people define happiness in specific terms and seek it in the form of particular goals. This is the historical mode of thinking. First you get to A, then go to B, then C, and you keep talking about D while at C, since C no longer seems so desirable because you are there. In the moral treatises of the past this state of mind is

called avarice, since there's no satisfying it. Or as Bertrand de Juvenel put it, the civilization of *tourjours plus*—always more. Another way of saying it is "growth economy."

Well, we Americans are people with a touch of avarice— or more than a touch—but we also have intuitions of the sort which may come in depressed moments, as in the case of the Seattle man. In such moments the reassurances and guidance of the historical way of thinking fall away. They seem to have failed us and we muse for a while as moral individuals who make reference to inward or timeless standards, and ask ourselves, What are we doing and what *should* we—I—be doing?

The "values" we long for, we discover, are not stored in some historical bin of achievable goodies. They can blow away in a real wind, like the engineer's daughter when she went to New York. Or they can come in through the barred window of a prison, as they did for Frankl's friend. What then do you go by, when deciding what to do next? The historical way of thinking has "logic" on its side. That is, reason works in its support, after reason's fashion.

Yet reason is not absent from Arthur Morgan's way of thinking. He makes a great deal of sense, but only at a certain level where values and not things are the governing principle. What, then, have we here? We have, it must be admitted, an unambiguously aristocratic conception of human good. Like Maslow's self-actualizing individual, we have an idea of excellence or achievement which seems possible for only comparatively few. Maslow saw this and it made him quite uncomfortable, for if there was ever a man who cared about his human fellows—all of them—it was Abraham Maslow. This may be the reason why, in his last years, he often spoke of the Buddhist conception of the *Bodhisattva*, the man who gives up the final perfection or reward of Nirvana to place his energies at the service of his fellows still struggling through their evolutionary journey out in the world.

One might argue from this conclusion that the only way one can democratize the realities of human development—changing from the historical or acquisitive way of thinking to the timeless, noncontingent stance proposed by Morgan—is by adopting some theory of immortality, probably reincarnation, as a means of being able to say that the values achieved by humans in their individual lives will grow and survive and enter history—that they are not wiped off the slate at death, but come into expression again and again, increasing by supplement and amplification. This is an idea which lends itself to reasoned appeal. As Macneile Dixon exclaimed:

> Rational? What could be less rational than that his pen and paper should be more enduring than the saint, that we should have Shakespeare's handwriting but not himself? Raphael's pictures but not the mind that conceived them?

Should we then join with Descartes and abandon history, although for a reason quite different from his? Well, there are other reasons for the study of history than the one we usually give—that it tells us how people have gotten ahead in the past, and how to avoid the mistakes of our ancestors. Again we turn to Arthur Morgan. In *Observations*, in the chapter on "Education," he counsels: "Education should protect the individual from the limitations of the group mind. The group mind tends to the uncritical acceptance of whatever is dominantly presented." But how *do* you protect people from the group mind? Morgan makes this answer:

> A person without history or knowledge of the past must see the world as commonplace because, except at extreme times, he is going to live among the commonplace people who have come to that conclusion. . . . The only way to get the sum and substance of human experience is to reach out beyond the years we have into the years of the past, into the significant experiences of the human race. . . .
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> That is the problem of growing up—to see how one can get the advantage of years. . . . This is the substance of education, trying so to organize the experience of others, and so to make it available to ourselves that at twenty-five, say, we have more

> power of judgment—a better basis for arriving at conclusions.—than a person at a hundred without correction or order.

Unlike Hegel, Morgan apparently believed that the storehouse of wisdom is in humans, not states, that the ranking of achievement lies in biography and not in national chronicles. Our everyday experience keeps on instructing us to this effect, but our rational processes have been devoted to thinking historically for so long that we find it exceedingly difficult to respond to the lessons of experience.

What do those lessons teach? The matter is arguable, but one way of answering this question would be to say that from experience and history we learn that social formations—the life of people in tribes, villages, communities, nations, and nation-states (if some lesson requires these overgrown and overfed monsters)—is like going through grades in school: the *students* carry forward the increment of knowledge, not the instruments of learning, not the grades. A society, then, in all its complex arrangements, is a school, and no more than a school.

This is not of course a new idea. The Greeks tried to embody it in their civilization, as Werner Jaeger shows in his *Paideia,* and before them the ancient Hindus regarded their castes as vehicles arranged in behalf of the learning process. Both these old civilizations made almost complete messes of their educational attempt and reference to their histories as sources of knowledge for us is often contemptuously put aside. But meanwhile we seem to be making a worse mess out of our own once so proud arrangements. As we said at the beginning, humans have a way of over-reaching themselves. Admitting this, of both ourselves and the past, we might still learn something from our ancestors, and not only from their mistakes.

REVIEW
NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORIAN

JACOB BURCKHARDT was the Swiss scholar and historian whose life (1818-1897) spanned the nineteenth century, achieving lasting fame by writing *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). After one more book (*The History of the Renaissance,* 1867), he wrote no more. His notes for his lectures at the University of Basel, where he was professor of history and of the history of art, were organized by his nephew and revised and expanded after his death by his successor in the chair of history, and published as *Reflections on History*.

This is the book we have for review, in an edition by Liberty Classics (hardcover, $9.00, soft, $4.00) of a translation made in England in the 1940s. It consists of a long introduction to the study of history, a discussion of the "three powers"—the State, Religion, and Culture—and of the interaction of these three, a chapter on great men, and one on fortune and misfortune in history. Burckhardt didn't want these lectures to be published, maintaining that lectures, turned into a book, would be like "the underside of a carpet," but he agreed to their appearance on his deathbed.

Burckhardt lived in a time when it was still possible for a scholar to be a universal man. He writes as an extremely thoughtful and good human being, one who had absorbed during his lifetime an incredible number of facts, shaping them by reflection into meanings which make them useful to the reader. He rejected impressive theories of history—he was no Hegelian—giving as reason: "The philosophy of history is a centaur, a contradiction in terms, for history coordinates, and hence is unphilosophical, while philosophy subordinates, and hence is unhistorical." Yet if moral judgments can be called "philosophical," Burckhardt is full of them. He reaches conclusions about historical patterns and declares them throughout his book. Like Lord Acton, he finds power to be intrinsically evil and he parts again with Hegel in his strong disapproval of the state. It becomes evident that he cared mainly for the development of the individual—in whom lies all authentic value—and regarded history as the great and varied web of circumstances and events in which individual development takes place.

Yet historical designs emerge from his study, bringing a practical if not a metaphysical wisdom to his work. In his introduction to this edition of *Reflections on History,* Gottfried Dietze quotes an appreciation of Burckhardt from Reinhold Niebuhr, who said:

> No one predicted the modern totalitarian state more accurately. . . . He believed that modern tyrants would use methods which even the most terrible despots of the past would not have had the heart to use. . . . Burckhardt even predicted fairly accurately to what degree a liberal culture in totalitarian countries would capitulate to tyranny through failure to understand the foe.

Something of the temper which Burckhardt brought to his work is conveyed by a passage in his introductory section:

> A historical power, supremely justified in its own time, comes into being; all possible forms of earthly life, political organizations, privileged classes, a religion closely knit together with secular life, great possessions, a complete code of manners, a definite conception of law, are developed out of it or associated with it, and in time come to regard themselves as the props of that power, or even as the sole possible exponents of the moral forces of the epoch. But the spirit works in the depths. Such forms of life may resist change but the breach comes, whether by revolution or gradual decay, bringing with it the breakdown of moral systems and religions, the apparent downfall of that power, or even the end of the world. But all the time the spirit is building a new house whose outward casing will, in time, suffer the same fate.
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> Faced with historical forces of such a kind, the contemporary individual feels helpless; as a rule he falls into the bondage either of the aggressor or the defender. Few are the contemporaries who can attain an Archimedean point outside events, and are able to "overcome in the spirit." Nor is the satisfaction of those who do so, perhaps, very great. They can hardly restrain a rueful feeling as they look back on

all the rest, whom they have had to leave in bondage. Not until much later can the mind soar in perfect freedom over such a past.

What issues from this main phenomenon is historical life, rolling on in a thousand forms complex, in all manner of disguises, bond and free, speaking now through the masses, now through individuals, now in hopeful, now in hopeless mood, setting up and destroying states, religions, civilizations, now a dark enigma to itself, moved by inchoate feelings born of imagination rather than thought, or again filled with isolated premonitions of what is fulfilled long afterward. While as men of a definite epoch, we must inevitably pay our passive tribute to historical life, we must at the same time approach it in a *spirit of contemplation.*

To be comfortable with this book by Burckhardt, the reader will need to get used to long passages at this level of generalization. As his title declares, he is offering not history but reflections on history, and the end of reflection is comprehensive generalization. Since he is not systematic as either thinker or writer, the value of the book is in its succession of insights. The common denominator of his writing is a refined ardor as a decent human being. His goal is the achievement of a contemplative stance. As he says:

If history is ever to help us to solve even an infinitesimal part of the great and grievous riddle of life, we must quit the regions of personal and temporal foreboding for a sphere in which our view is not forthwith dimmed by self. It may be that a calmer consideration from a greater distance may yield a first hint of the true nature of life on earth, and fortunately for us, ancient history has preserved a few records in which we can closely follow growth, bloom, and decay in outstanding historical events and in intellectual, political, and economic conditions in every direction. The best example is Athens.

Intentions, however, are particularly prone to make their appearance in the guise of patriotism, so that true knowledge finds its chief rival in our preoccupation with the history of our own country.

There are certainly things in which the history of a man's own country will always take precedence, and it is our bounder duty to occupy ourselves with it. . . .

The truest study of our national history will be that which considers our own country in parallels and in relation to world history and its laws, as part of a great whole, illumined by the same heavenly bodies as have shone upon other times and other peoples, threatened with the same pitfalls and one day to be engulfed in the same eternal night and perpetuated in the same great universal tradition.

Ultimately, our pursuit of true knowledge will make it necessary for us to eliminate the notions of fortune and misfortune in history.

Burckhardt's own reflections on national fortune and misfortune give ample reason for this final counsel. He points out that we are hardly qualified to decide what is really misfortune, since so often hard times require a discipline in life which later leads to great heights. He notes that for most people, *security* is felt to be the fortunate condition. We feel better in times that seem secure. He inspects the result:

According to this judgment, the prime condition of any happiness is the subordination of private purposes to a police-protected law, the treatment of all questions of property by an impartial legal code and the most far-reaching safeguarding of profits and commerce. The whole morality of our day is to a large extent oriented toward this security, that is, the individual is relieved of the most vital decisions in the defense of house and home, in the majority of cases at any rate. And what goes beyond the power of the state is taken over by insurance, that is, the forestalling of definite kinds of misfortune by a corresponding annual sacrifice. As soon as a livelihood or its revenues have become sufficiently valuable, the neglect to insure it is considered culpable.

Now this security was grievously lacking at many times which otherwise shine with an immortal radiance and till the end of time will hold a high place in the history of man.

It is sometimes hard to believe that Burckhardt set down these ideas in the middle of the nineteenth century so well does he anticipate some of present-day thinking. The real point of reading him is in order to be upset by him. One may call him a conservative—most reviewers do—but the force of his ideas is not reduced by classification. He makes a clear distinction

between the state and society—by society he means culture as the *voluntary* activity of minds—and he sees the rise of state power as an undiluted evil. He has a long section on the state, of which these passages are examples:

> Literature and even philosophy became servile in their glorification of the state, and art monumentally servile; they created only what was acceptable at Court. Intellect put itself out to board in every direction and cringed before convention.
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> With creative activity in this venal condition, freedom of expression was only to be found among exiles, and probably among entertainers of the common people. . . .
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> . . . men are no longer willing to leave the most vital matters to society, because they want the impossible and imagine that it can only be secured under compulsion from the state. Not only is everything of the nature of an "institution" or a "foundation" promptly noised abroad by the literary and journalistic intercourse of the day, so that there is a general demand for it, but absolutely everything that people know or feel that society will not undertake is simply heaped onto the daily growing burden of the state. At every turn, needs grow, bearing their theories with them, and not only needs, but debt, the chief, miserable folly of the nineteenth century. This habit of flinging away the fortune of future generations is of itself enough to show that a heartless pride is the peculiar characteristic of our time.

And of ours.

COMMENTARY
MOURNFUL VERDICT

A RECENT paper issued by the Indian Institute of World Culture (Post Box 402, Bangalore 560 004, India) gives background on the decline of Indian fine arts and folk tradition as the result of Westernization. The writer, Dr. Prabhakar Machwe, presents diverse evidence confirming what Ananda K. Coomaraswami declared as long ago as 1910:

> The creative power of the craftsman has long been destroyed by commercialism in the West, it remained alive with us till yesterday, and even today some part of it survives. Indian design is an inexhaustible treasure-house of fine invention. But have you ever reflected that all this invention belongs to the past, that modern India, anglicized India has produced no beauty and romance which are our heritage from the past. . . . Try to believe in the regeneration of India through art and not by politics or economics alone. A purely material idea will never give to us the lacking strength to build up a great enduring nation. (*Art and Swadeshi.*)

Art, needless to say, is not enough, but the arts of a culture are indeed symptoms of what is happening among the people. Dr. Machwe finds the oral literature of Central India reflecting the feelings of the exploited. Here is a current folk-tale:

> A peasant made a loan from a money-lender. Slowly the money-lender acquired the peasant's field, cattle, house, utensils, food-grains, and even his clothes, as interest. Only a piece of loincloth was left. The peasant, fearing the money lender's intentions, ran for his life to a temple and hid behind the god's image. He touched its backside and realized that there was not even a remnant of cloth left on the Lord. The peasant whispered into the idol's ear: "O God! Have you also had a loan from the money lender?"

Of the present government of India, the writer says: "Our masters do not know their own minds. They talk of folk traditions and westernization in the same breath." In his conclusion, he summarizes the threats in Westernization to Indian folk traditions and art:

> (1) The danger of extinction. . . . (2) The danger of its mutation into a travesty or a complete caricature of the original. . . . (3) The danger of its becoming merely a lifeless ritual. Cut off from the context . . . it may appear as mere decoration. . . . (4) The danger of its being commercialized. The vulgar or undesirable parts of the tradition may be revived with the ulterior motive of earning a fast buck. (5) The danger of its being interpreted in a different context and overburdened with intellectual super-interpretations never dreamed of by the original folk.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
ILLITERACY IN THE U.S.

IN *Prisoners of Silence* (Continuum, 1980, $8.95), a book on Americans who can't read or write, and how they might be taught to read and write, Jonathan Kozol says:

> In any serious struggle to confront the problem of adult illiteracy in the United States, it is important to encourage literacy workers to believe that what they do *can* make a difference in and of itself, even if this difference only leads us and our pupils to recognize a number of other challenges which will immediately appear to be essential too. It is a logical assumption, from the start, that nothing done in any one area will prevail for long without a subsequent transformation in a dozen other areas as well. Nonetheless, it seems important (in order to overcome the sense of impotence that media and academia will otherwise impose) that we develop the will, and sometimes the bravado, to take a stand and fight the battle at whatever spot along the total spectrum we may be.
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> If we were doctors, we might begin by speaking about health care. If we were lawyers, we might begin our struggles in the state and federal courts. If we were social workers, we might begin by working to dismantle the entire welfare system. We are not doctors, however. We are not lawyers. We are not social workers. We are either teachers or else those who would, for a particular period of their lives, fulfill the role of teachers in a very specific, limited and concrete way.
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> Whoever we are, wherever we stand, it is our obligation to engage in struggle to guarantee that we are not defrauded of our sense of leverage and our sense of power—the power it takes to start the work of transformation in an unjust and imperfect world.

As you read this book you begin to realize that the author means business. Some of its readers may decide that Kozol is not interested in leading what people call a "normal life." A Harvard graduate and a Rhodes scholar, since writing *Death at an Early Age*, a report on Boston's public schools in the 1960s, he has lived in a racially mixed neighborhood in Boston and has worked to improve the education and lives of the city's under-privileged minorities. The question that a book like *Prisoners of Silence* raises is: What if Kozol's life, given what he has experienced and observed, is what ought to be considered as normal? Not that all human beings should follow in his path, but that his regard for his fellows, however expressed, is actually the normal response of a human being, and that the much more common indifference that we see all about is the basic reason why we have a society which should be profoundly ashamed of itself. Whatever the answer to this question, Kozol is determined that the misery and humiliation of a large segment of the population of this country shall be less of a secret. He is also resolved to describe and undertake activities that will make this suffering less.

How much illiteracy is there in the United States? Available estimates are not in close agreement, but the figures provided all exceed twenty million. Kozol decided to rely on a 1975 study of "Adult Performance Level" which sought to establish how many people lack the skills to "manage" and "survive." What does this mean?

> The Adult Performance Level report included a number of examples: Fourteen per cent, when asked to fill out a check in a business transaction, made an error so serious that it was unlikely that the check would clear the bank. Thirteen per cent did not address an envelope well enough to guarantee that it would reach its destination. Twenty-four per cent did not place a return address on the same envelope. Twenty-eight per cent of the sample population could not calculate the amount of change that they ought to get back after paying for a purchase with a twenty-dollar bill.
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> On the basis of the Adult Performance Level, one government analyst in the Office of Education came to the conclusion that fifty-seven million Americans were unequipped to carry out most basic tasks. This figure is over thirty-five per cent of the entire population.

To show that this analysis may not be exaggerated, Kozol quotes a 1978 speech by Senator George McGovern:

> "An astounding thirty per cent of naval recruits . . . are a danger to themselves and to costly naval equipment because they lack basic educational skills. One illiterate recruit recently caused two hundred fifty thousand dollars in damage because he could not

> read a repair manual. . . . He tried [but] failed to follow the illustrations."

Kozol notes that according to a United Nations estimate, the proportion of adult illiterates in the United States is three times more than that in the Soviet Union. Breaking down the Adult Performance Level figures, he says that of the fifty-seven million Americans unable to perform basic tasks, "twenty-three million lacked the skills to function at all within the context of the nation at the time the test was given." He adopts the round number of twenty-five million people as those who most urgently need help. How can it be given?

Required, he says, are five million volunteers, and he thinks that high school and college students are the most likely candidates for this work. They could bring the learners to basic literacy within six months, he thinks. What was accomplished in Cuba—despite great differences in conditions—is one illustration of how rapidly the foundations of literacy can be laid, and there are others. Kozol asks:

> Is this estimate of a six-month program, with five months of actual teaching, a romantic daydream, or is it justified by precedent, by actual examples? I have taught adolescents to read and write, in nonschool settings, . . . in considerably shorter periods of time: approximately sixty days. My pupils ranged from twelve to seventeen. Other teachers I know have managed to do this in even shorter periods of time. In Brazil, literacy was taught in less than sixty days to hundreds of thousands of poor people in the early 1960s under Paulo Freire's guidance. Freire's approach was similar, in many ways, to that which was employed in Cuba, with the significant difference that the Cuban government wholly backed the Cuban program and made certain of an energetic follow-up.

The Cuban drive for literacy is now historic. A hundred thousand young people, close to half under fifteen, joined by one hundred fifty thousand adults, all volunteered to teach, in response to a government appeal. They instructed illiterate families, and when the last member of a family was able to pass the final test, "a flag was flown from the doorway of the house: 'This house is declared territory free from illiteracy'."

> The campaign was brought to an end at a massive rally in Havana on December 22 [1961]. Cuba itself, a nation dotted by now with several hundred thousand paper flags of literate men and women, was declared by Fidel Castro to be "Territory Free from Illiteracy." In reality, the figure for adult illiterates had been reduced from twenty per cent to less than five per cent within less than one year. Today, after nearly two decades of follow-up work, the figure is reported to be two per cent. UNESCO calls the Cuban undertaking "a success story that has no end."

Of course, the United States is not like Cuba. In Cuba the population is homogeneous and the people were uplifted by the spirit of the Cuban Revolution, responsive in ardent good faith to the appeal of Castro's government. Commenting, Kozol says that "the Cuban struggle might logically serve not as a model, but as a kind of spur and challenge to our own imagination." It is his idea that a drive for literacy, in this country, will need to duplicate in some way the quality of determination and cooperation achieved in Cuba, if it is to be successful.

> This is not to say that we must copy mindlessly the Cuban model, especially that part which stipulated that each literacy worker ought to live within the learner's home. In striving to make progress with an illiterate pupil, whether within a crowded tenement or in a two-room country shack, many organizers I have met suggest that literacy workers would probably do best to establish a collective "Literacy House" in an independent building, situated on the block or in the neighborhood in which they plan to work and live.

Kozol has worked out in detail the plan for teaching literacy, as one way but not the only way—of dealing with the problem. The teachers will need to become in some sense "part of the neighborhood," teaching "with," not "to," the learners. He seems to have anticipated and met various possible objections, both academic and practical, and his own experience is enough to make him confident that, if an atmosphere of friendly cooperation among equals can be generated, the plan will work. Admirers of Paulo Freire will doubtless agree.

FRONTIERS

The Scientific Conscience

THE January 1981 issue of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* should have a place in the library of all those who try to understand the part played by scientists in the making and unmaking of our civilization. This journal came into being in December, 1945, to give expression to the aroused conscience and serious thinking of the scientific community in relation to the destruction that had been made possible—and demonstrated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—in August of that year. The scientists directly involved—mostly physicists—accepted responsibility for what they had done. They had made available a kind of destructive power the world had never known. Stunned and aghast at the consequences of its use, they joined together to work toward control of future applications of this world-threatening weapon. They did not—perhaps could not—succeed, but their efforts, chronicled in this issue of the *Bulletin*, over a period of more than thirty-five years, deserve attention and respect.

The *Bulletin* itself was started with the help of Robert M. Hutchins, who gave the newly formed association of atomic scientists ten thousand dollars for this purpose. Eugene Rabinowitch and Hyman Goldsmith were the first editors. Hutchins, who understood their concern and shared it, also arranged access to Henry Luce, who provided them with two pages in *Life* (Oct. 29, 1945) to have their say. In an article recalling this period, John A. Simpson, first chairman of the Atomic Scientists (of Chicago), remarks in his conclusion:

> We are now deeply into the arms race, applying the same old political formulas and false concepts we sought to overcome at the end of 1945. Clearly, not only the superpowers but also the smaller nations of the world face a common danger that a nuclear war will destroy society as we know it and that such a war is highly likely in the next 20 to 30 years if present trends continue.

This issue of the *Bulletin* looks in retrospect at past efforts to put the making of nuclear weapons under effective international control, drawing for contributions on scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project; and looks forward to what may be expected to happen in the future. The writer of a prize essay, Michael Shuman, a student at Stanford University Law School, remarks:

> Superpower citizens must recognize that the nuclear deterrence game offers security only in the psychotic fantasies of some of their military planners. There is no rationality in a mutual hostage relationship that offers execution to the loser and suicide to the winner. The only long-term security that makes sense is to put nuclear arsenals under international supervision and to eliminate forever the Damoclean overhang of nuclear catastrophe.

E. P. Thompson, British historian and founder of the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament, says in an article on the political forces which make the nuclear arms race:

> The cast has now become larger: it takes in public opinion, the media, the military, the politicians. In sum: the weapons systems—and their "laboratory" technicians, lobbyists and public relations operators—attract a large concentration of resources and scientific skills of the host society and are then transformed into huge inertial forces within that society, whether bureaucratic or private in expression. . . . And behind the politicians is the pressure of those hundreds of thousands of electors who "are making their livings doing things which were promoted years before by their political predecessors. It is the past which imbues the arms race with its inner momentum."

When national decisions are weighted by such means, what hope is there of *political* control, whether national or international? Prof. Thompson continues:

> It is supposed that the very same political forces which have made these insane structures will suddenly unmake them; the weapons systems and their political and security support will de-weaponize themselves.
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> This will not happen. And what this analysis should indicate is that it is precisely at the top of both

> opposed societies that agreement to de-escalate is most impossible. . . . It is here that the advice of scientists and even of traditional military minds is jammed by a concatenation of competing interests and bureaucracies. It is here that the maintenance of cold war becomes an actual interest, and an instrument of policy in the subjection and control of client states, the legitimation of other kinds of adventure, and the suppression of dissent. It is here that the futile exercise of "balance," of contests for "face," of "posture," of endlessly protracted negotiations about minutiae, and of worst case hypotheses, govern every encounter.

It is necessary, this writer says, to go above, below, and around the structures of governments. Rationality has access only outside the familiar avenues to power. "We can," he says, "destabilize the weapons systems only from below."

About the only common-sense ground for optimism we were able to find in the sixty-four pages of the January *Bulletin* was in a closing passage by the Soviet scientist, Peter Kapitza, of the Institute for Physical Problems near Moscow. He says at the end of his paper:

> A characteristic aspect of expenditure for armament is the consumption of vast amounts of energy by the fleet, aviation and armored forces. Military technology consumes enormous amounts of precious materials but contributes nothing to the well-being of mankind. In the manufacture and utilization of arms it is impossible to organize a "recycling" process, as economic equilibrium requires.
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> When a shortage of energy and raw materials emerges on a global scale and begins to exert an adverse effect on the living standards of mankind, there is no choice but to disarm, because the risk of death from aggression becomes less real than the danger associated with a shortage of material resources. And since the solution of global problems requires an atmosphere of close international cooperation all people will feel themselves as neighbors facing a common enemy— the impending global crisis, which makes them forget all quarrels and join forces for a common struggle.

One other *Bulletin* writer recalls the Russell-Einstein Manifesto of twenty-five years ago, which gave expression to the idea that "the scientific community should be actively concerned about the dangers to humanity, which arose largely through the work of scientists." This concern is manifest in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, especially in the January 1981 issue.