

A NURTURING ACTIVITY

SOME people live in the future, others in the past. Those who live in the present are either sub-human or sages. For most of us, living in the future, with due awareness that it will grow out of the present, may be the best plan. Living in the past now seems an invitation to almost continuous pain, for the present is a time of rapid change, when both the circumstances and the modes of action in the past are on the way out. Admirers of the past—of, say, those golden years between the Spanish-American war and the outbreak of World War I, for those able to remember them—think of the simplicities of that time, its decencies and high expectations, with nostalgic longing. It wasn't until after Hiroshima that those memories finally died away, leaving a great sense of loss in older people throughout the country. And today, with all our extraordinary ability to produce and consume, we are virtually a bankrupt country, living for the most part on the verge of collapse. Those who, in the past, saw only the good side of American ingenuity, brilliance, and capacity for work, now feel betrayed. Thoreau and Whitman knew better, of course, but who listens to poets and dreamers? And in the present, Wendell Berry sagely remarked that what America needs is a catastrophe that isn't altogether devastating, from which to learn.

The change in feeling is recorded in the writings of the utopians. The world of tomorrow, they seem to think, will be a world of people—those who are left—engaged in picking up the pieces of their lives and starting again after an epoch of monumental failure. Yet Tolstoy saw this from afar during the first years of this century, and there were some others who saw it, too. And now the sense of ruin is upon us, whatever the trivial optimisms we read in the daily press.

We were of course warned of this by moral intelligence. Whitman told America. Ruskin told

the English, and Karl Liebknecht told the Germans. Heinrich Heine foresaw, a century ago, the kind of Europe Europeans were making for themselves. That strange Swiss, Amiel, had similar things to say about American democracy. Then, in the *New Statesman and Nation* (July 17, 1948), R.H.S. Crossman, reviewing books on the second world war by Major-General J. F. C. Fuller and B. H. Liddell Hart, writes of what happened to the best of soldiers in that war:

The fact is that total war cannot be conducted by the old type of professional soldier of which Rundsted—Liddell Hart's favorite German—and Fuller are examples. Precisely because it is total it offends his artistic sense and his code of honor. Instead of expressing his personality in a battle of wits against an enemy trained in the same tradition, he finds himself the servant of a senseless juggernaut, controlled by the politician, the scientist and the planner. Like the professional diplomat, he belongs to a dying civilization. That is why during the Second World War the professional soldier on both sides tended to become a "pacifist," skeptical of the crusade which politicians preached. . . . The German Generals were nearly as defeatist as the French—until Hitler proved them wrong! . . . In Russia most of the Generals were liquidated before the war started, because they, too, were unreliable. This is not mere accident. Today the code of honour of the professional soldier is in conflict with the crusading spirit of total war, which reached its Fascist climax in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and its democratic in the radioactive ruins of Hiroshima.

Is it a moral universe that we live in, or only a physical system indifferent to the qualities of beings who, knowing right from wrong, still act according to what they know of the laws of physics? How we think about the future surely depends upon matters of this sort. Does the determination to do justice, a Socratic regard for telling the truth, an Arjuna-like concern for a world in which nobility and integrity may triumph, play an ultimate part in the shaping of events, or

are these but airy nothings in the scheme of actual causation? Are the great world myths any help? Will a *Götterdämmerung* erase from the earth the last of the Gods, and then the earth itself—until, finally, from the wreckage of the world a new world rises, with Baldur reborn, the sons of Odin and the sons of Thor ruling over a future race of men, children of the few that had escaped death?

There are those, men and women of our present generation, who live in such states of feeling, taking part at its birth in the planning and way of another sort of life, thinking in terms of a future they help to construct, bringing forth the rules and ordinances of another sort of science, quietly practicing a religion of human fellowship, embodying a faith that the universe and the very earth which harbors us is moral at the core. We know their work, the Schumachers and the Rachel Carsons, the Emersons and Thoreaus, and many others unnamed whose lives are with us today, yet who live in the future, whatever the storms and strife that tear the world apart.

The levels of intellectuality go on changing, but our sense of reality is made by states of feeling, where we really live. As the "age of abundance" (for the industrial nations of the West) comes to a close, we begin to recognize that the nervous drive for "always more" is a kind of sickness rather than a sign of prosperity. As Warren Johnson says in his most recent book, *The Future Is Not What It Used To Be* (Dodd, Mead, 1985, \$16.95):

If affluence is inexorably eroded by higher prices for resources, capital shortages, budget deficits, and decline in world trade, we will experience the darker side of modern ways—the unemployment, the feelings of powerlessness, of being trapped in a monolithic economic system without the old supports of extended family, community, comforting beliefs, and roots in a familiar place

As we slowly come to realize that our economic problems are not a temporary setback but are part of a long-term deterioration in the once favorable conditions of industrial society, people will begin to search for more satisfying ways to live than by the values of the marketplace—of strident individualism,

competitiveness, accumulation, and personal autonomy. Under conditions of scarcity these values will turn into a source of conflict and personal isolation, of fighting more tenaciously for the ever smaller amount of wealth and power available, rather than a source of progress and individual achievement as they did under conditions of abundance.

We make discovery after discovery, realizing, as this author says, "that there has been a major deterioration in the quality of life in this country, that there has been a loss of many cherished ways, of much that is beautiful and healthful, and that just getting by is getting increasingly difficult and unpleasant, even dangerous." Speaking of the past, this writer says:

To restrain the freedom to get what we want and replace it with obligations toward others, came to be seen as contrived by the old order who would benefit from it. We found all sorts of reasons for rejecting these obligations—for justifying our self-centeredness.

Yet it remains disturbing that our self-seeking behavior rarely brought the satisfactions we expected, especially compared to selfless action. Why does it feel so good, for example, to be able to help other people? Why should the spoiled child be so unhappy compared to the child who carries a full share of the family tasks? There is something here that is missed in our rational assessment of where the good life is, something that lies deep in the human psyche. *The theme of selfishness appears time and time again in the wisdom of the past, and it is a source of happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment rather than the oppression we make of it. Selflessness, the subjective theme of this book, could make restraints functional in terms of personal human satisfaction as well as public well-being.*

The mood of this book bespeaks a change in outlook. It represents a kind of maturity, a feeling of balance which comes to people when, looking back, they decide that they have made a lot of crucial mistakes. The same sort of maturity is becoming evident in the assessment of what the "advanced nations" have done, ostensibly in behalf of the third world. In all too many cases, we have not reduced the poverty and want in the undeveloped parts of the world, but increased the suffering of the people. Our theories are also

turning out to be wrong in some respects. In their book, *In the Name of Progress—The Underside of Foreign Aid* (Doubleday Canada, 1985), Patricia Adams and Lawrence Solomon point out that fear of the "population bomb" may have been largely unwarranted. They say:

Population growth rates were at a peak in past decades but world food production surpassed them nevertheless, rising by 75 per cent from 1960 to 1980 while population rose by 48 per cent. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, the remaining potential in the decades ahead is great: only one half of the world's savannas, grasslands, and other potentially arable land is under cultivation today. "Many African and Latin countries still have relatively ample land resources," it says, while in Asia "great scope exists for increased production through irrigation and multicropping."

Using current Western farming methods, the FAO believes the world could produce enough food for up to 33 billion people, seven times the present population. Using less sophisticated farming methods, 15 billion could be fed and even if the whole world relied on traditional farming methods, using no fertilizers or pesticides, no soil conservation methods and traditional seeds, the present world population could still be comfortably fed. In Africa, some desert countries, like Ethiopia, Niger, and Mauritania, may be short of land to feed their people but in others, including Angola, the Ivory Coast, Zaire, and Zambia, the people could, using current methods, feed five times their number if they wanted to maximize the food they produced. The Congo could feed 20 times its population, Gabon 100 times. Overall, Africa could, with traditional methods, feed 2.7 times its current population.

The certainty of global resource shortages caused by population explosions no longer seems so certain.

Gene Logsdon, an Ohio farmer, the old-fashioned kind, says in a paper in *Meeting the Expectations of the Land* (North Point Press, 1984), edited by Berry, Jackson and Colman:

Traditional farms have several characteristics by which they are known, but above them all hovers a general characteristic in which all traditional practices find their rationale. The traditional farm can survive crisis. The urban populations of the Scandinavian countries would have starved to death

in World War I and again in World War II were it not for the fabric of Scandinavian rural life: small farms that could go on producing at least sufficient food for the populace even during war. That is why the Scandinavians heavily subsidize their small self-subsistent farms and actually use economic sanctions to penalize their large factory farms. . . .

Traditional farmers keep their eggs out of one basket starting with the way they finance the purchase of land. I once made a study of first- and second-generation farmers in various midwestern communities, using old county biographical histories. In nearly every case, beginning farmers had to generate cash from some occupation other than actual farming to pay for their land or to get through lean years. Even where it seemed that the farm was being paid for by farming alone, the farmer was accomplished in some specialized skill that appeared to be part of his farming because he did the work at home. He might have been a sawyer. Or he ran the threshing machine for his neighbors. Or operated a seed cleaner. The farming alone did not pay for the farm. Since the industrial revolution at least, farming has had to operate in an economy geared to manufacturing, with a money growth (interest) tied to factory production capabilities, not to rates of biological growth. A cow never heard of 15 per cent interest. Science can push her milk production higher (always at the sacrifice of some other biological attribute) but never as fast as the accelerating exponential interest rates of money, especially when under inflationary pressures.

But the traditional farmer is hardly aware that there is a difference between money growth and biological growth. As with all his practices, he either instinctively understands or is taught by a cautious father that to be crisis-proof, don't borrow large sums of money. . . . Because he won't borrow big money, the traditional farmer is content with a small farm, smaller at least than the "factories in the field." He prefers a small farm anyway, choosing to use biological energy whenever practical, just as all craftspeople do. Biological energy is limited in quantity and in quality, whether one is making milk or making furniture. But the actual size of the individual traditional farm can therefore vary for the same reason: one farmer, like one cabinetmaker, has more skill, more energy, more desire than another. I once asked an Amish farmer who had only twenty-six acres why he didn't acquire a bit more land. He looked around at his ten fine cows, his sons hoeing corn with him, his spring water running continuously by gravity through house and barn, his few fat hogs,

his sturdy buildings, his good wife heaping the table with food, his fine flock of hens, his plot of tobacco and an acre of strawberries, his handmade hickory chairs (which he sold for all the extra cash he really needed), and he said: "Well, I'm just not smart enough to farm any more than this well." I have a hunch no one would.

Here the traditional merges into the timeless, the natural response of life to life, as the intuitive ground of a utopian dream of the future, in behalf of which Gene Logsdon writes. Everything fits together, making a synergistic whole, nothing pulled out of shape, all the elements of the living complexity that is a farm in balance with each other. The human well-being and happiness are in striking contrast with the conditions described by Robert Engler in the *Nation* for April 27 in a long article, "Many Bhopals: Technology Out of Control." Engler, a professor of political science at Brooklyn College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, began:

Last December, a toxic cloud escaping from a Union Carbide pesticide plant brought death to at least 2,500 residents of the shantytowns crowding its edges. The alchemy that overnight transformed the Indian city of Bhopal into a gas chamber injured perhaps 200,000 and brought terror and suffering to hundreds of thousands more. From a count of burial shrouds sold and other indicators, some observers estimate the total killed at between 4,000 and 10,000. Exactly how many died we may never know.

Only weeks earlier in Mexico City an explosion of liquified-gas tanks belonging to Pemex, the government oil corporation, killed at least 450 dwellers in nearby slums. The two disasters evoked memories of Seveso, Italy, where in 1976 the dioxin from an exploding chemical reactor hospitalized hundreds and contaminated many acres. In the United States, the 1979 radiation leak from a nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island forced the evacuation of some 60,000 people in the surrounding areas. And the percolation into the soil of twenty-year-old lethal wastes stored in a corporate chemical dump site brought ailments and anxiety to 1,200 residents of Niagara Falls, New York, rendering their modest homes in the Love Canal neighborhood uninhabitable.

Each time, the headlines suggest that the calamity is isolated, unique. . . .

But "each time" a disaster occurs, it becomes less unique and more like part of a pattern, an ugly and frightening growth that is raising its outlines with greater definition to the sight of all. As Engler puts it:

When one studies disasters like that at Bhopal not as freak happenings against all expectations but as integral to industrial development, and when one views American occupational and environmental casualties in aggregate terms, then the answer to the question, Could it happen here? becomes clear: it already has and will continue to. . . . The cumulative record for the developing world is even more shocking, though figures are imprecise. In India, where the permissible limits on workplace exposure to lead are much higher than in the United States, one-fourth of the employees who were examined at battery plants had lead poisoning. Almost one-third of the workers at an Indian plant making DDT, which increasingly has been restricted in the United States, were found to be sick. An Oxfam report cites 15,000 cases of pesticide poisoning in Sri Lanka in 1978, 1,000 of which resulted in death. There is a global double standard that places a greater value on Western lives.

Mr. Engler quotes from an issue of *Multinational Monitor*:

U.S. chemical corporations . . . export from the U.S. at least 150 million pounds of pesticides each year that are totally prohibited, severely restricted, or never registered for use in this country. Oxfam estimates that 375,000 pesticide poisonings, 6,700 of which are fatal, occur each year in the Third World.

Little noticed was the battery plant on the outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia, that was operated by Union Carbide. . . . At one point, more than half the work force of 750 were diagnosed as having a kidney disease linked to mercury exposure. Little noticed, too, was the mass poisoning in Al Basrah, Iraq, in 1971. Cargoes of American barley and Mexican wheat arrived in Al Basrah treated with methylmercury, a fungicide prohibited for use in the U.S. and other countries. The grain, intended as a seed only, had been chemically treated to prevent dry rot and had been sprayed with a bright pink dye to indicate the presence of the mercury solution. The shipments were not, however, marked in Arabic, the language of Iraq. The grain was sold to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. One observer estimated that as

many as 6,000 persons died and a 100,000 were injured.

In one place Mr. Engler turns to farming:

As Americans recognize from the experiences of their own country, the Bhopal plant is part of an industrial process that integrates agriculture into the international business system. At its best, farming was a local nurturing activity by which those who loved the land worked with nature rather than, in E. B. White's phrase, attempting to beat it into submission. Now farming has become largely an extractive industry, responsive to global market fluctuations and controls.

The pace of change has heightened, our powers multiplied and grown, so that what was a century ago far in the future has become the past and the present, exacting its tribute from all mankind, but especially from the poor. Meanwhile, our state of feeling is changing, with confusion preceding the clarity of intuitive vision. A world modelled on the moral instincts seems far away, but we have the evidence of the timeless that such a world will work, and our laggard intellectual powers are beginning to see how and why.

REVIEW

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT

KATHLEEN PAINE'S book of essays, *Defending Ancient Springs*, first published by Oxford University Press in 1967, and now restored to print by Lindisfarne Press (\$8.95 in paperback), celebrates and contributes to the recovery of the Western mind from a long and wasting ill, called, in brief diagnosis, Materialism. The book is about poetry and the work of certain poets; its energy is devoted to discovery of the long-neglected resources of the human spirit for making manifest the wonder, beauty, and meaning of human life—the task of the authentic artist.

Is there, for the poet, an unwritten language which can nevertheless be divined by an untethered imagination, making it possible for some of its resonances to be set down? Does the secret of this language lie in the wonderful ambiguities of symbol and myth, which alone can give voice to both the longings and the realizations of the soul? The great poet will not ask this question; he has already answered it for himself, and made his answer the basis and life of his art. But greatness, to find expression in a world like ours, always requires a cipher, yet the living presence of meaning within the cipher has the power to touch the open heart and mind, producing sublime feelings which no verbal generalization can explain or give an account of. Beauty is the term Kathleen Raine uses for this power, in one of her essays.

The poet, William Butler Yeats seemed to think, pursues a courtship of the voice of the spirit, saying in an essay (1918):

He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer.

Shelley implored the mighty West Wind—

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

In her essay, "Yeats's Debt to William Blake," Kathleen Raine speaks of a kind of knowledge not taught in the schools, which Yeats sought from his youth. Seeing in Blake evidence of the possession of this knowledge, Yeats went to an older man, Edwin Ellis, who became his guide and friend, and "asked to have Blake explained." Speaking of this, Ellis remarked that "so large a demand could hardly be satisfied," but that with Yeats's "eye for symbolic systems, he needed no more to enable him to perceive that here was a myth as well worth studying as any that has been offered to the world." There is, both Ellis and Yeats believed, a kind of "exact knowledge" quite different from that achieved by scholarship and academic studies, requiring as much from the imagination as from intellectual discipline. Dr. Raine says:

"Exact knowledge" means different things to different people; it depends at what level we are attempting to be exact. To the pedant, exactness means a textual or historical accuracy of dates or punctuation of a text; for which neither Yeats nor Blake cared at all. Such pedants may rightly point out that in quoting Blake, Yeats nearly always misquotes; but far from proving that he did not therefore know Blake as well as the quoters of chapter and verse, it in fact proves that he knew him so well that he trusted his memory, so full of Blake that he could at all times draw upon it: he did not feel the need to look up passages which had become as part of his own thought. Blake did not quote accurately either, and for the same reason. Both poets wrote from the fullness of their thought, and not from books of reference.

One begins to see that for Blake, Yeats—and for Kathleen Raine as well—there is a knowledge which has its validation from within, which does not arise from a comparison of texts or from syllogistic evolutions, although these may be of

some service. This is an order of certainty belonging to prophets and sages, although all men can have it in their own degree and according to their subjective labors. The passage quoted above continues:

The knowledge which Yeats calls "exact" is, on the other hand, of a kind which the verbal critics ignore altogether. There is a learning unknown to textual scholars and literary historians no less exact than theirs; and this learning of the imagination (from his studies of theosophy, the Cabala, and Swedenborg he already possessed the key) Yeats instantly recognized in Blake. Blake commentators have since wasted much labour in the invention of interpretations, more or less ingenious, but irrelevant once it is granted that there is an universal language of symbolic discourse, age-old and world-wide, but inseparable from the kind of knowledge which it embodies. The present difficulty in understanding this language—or even divining its presence—arises from the denial, by current philosophies coloured by positivism, of the reality of a spiritual order.

This is the recovery we spoke of at the beginning, afforded in the declaration that "there is an universal language of symbolic discourse," and that it represents spiritual knowledge. Yet it is a recovery which has various and some perhaps needed obstacles. There are naturally those of the positivist and methodological persuasion who, while chastened by the ominous condition of the modern world, will feel compelled to ask: *How do you know?* The question throws the entire matter into another gear, raising the issue of how subjective knowledge is verified—given, that is, a "public" character.

The very nature of knowledge is in question here. For generations, even centuries, the consensus in the West has been that all real knowledge is objective in character, subject to demonstration. It has to show its capacity to survive falsification, its ability to stand up under rigorous test. But only affirmations about finite things can be so treated. So we say in effect that only knowledge of the finite is verifiable and therefore reliable. All else is speculation and guess. Which is to say—not worth pursuing.

This is the great crossroads to which the recovery of the idea of spiritual reality conducts us. We have lived for centuries in reliance on Aristotle's demand for apodictic learning, for uncontradictable certainty, looking for formulas that cannot be proved false. But now we are beginning to suspect that apodictic knowledge is not enough. We are beginning to fear that a world which divorces itself from the roots of aspiration, transcendental longing, and conceptions of spiritual reality is a world slated for self-destruction—destruction by both moral malnutrition and irresponsible action. Yet, unwilling to leap into the unknown of subjective explorations, following private maps of higher realms, and intuitive visions—on the ground that this undefined area, while it may supply the inspiration we need, is also the region where fanciful extravagance and self-deception are unlimited—we stand at the crossroads, timid and uncertain, not doing much of anything.

We want scientific rigor in an area where science, as presently practiced, cannot go. Kathleen Raine would tell us that the poet has rigor of another sort, the mystic his stern discipline, but we fail to recognize this because our culture and civilization gives no opportunity for its experience.

Who will attempt to practice something in which he does not believe? Yet there are many traces of this experience in our cultural past. Kathleen Raine says:

In Europe spiritual knowledge is embodied and transmitted principally within that tradition which descended through Orphism to Plato, to the neo-Platonists and the Gnostic sects, and to their successors both within Christendom (Dionysius the Areopagite and Dante were of them) and outside it. It is the language of Alchemy and of Cabala, and of all allied ways of thought whose foundation is what Blake calls "the language of divine apology," the teaching of the Smaragdine Table of Hermes, "as above, so below." The created world is, at every level, a manifestation (and therefore a symbol) of anterior causes. It is the language also of all symbolic art; or one might rather say that symbolic art is the natural

language of such thought. The measure of its exactness is its conformity to the spiritual knowledge of the Perennial Philosophy. Just as the terms of mathematics must remain meaningless to those who do not comprehend number, so this symbolic language must remain forever hidden from those for whom its universe of discourse is as if nonexistent. It might be called "occult" or "esoteric" since it is hidden from all but initiates; yet it is so hidden only in so far as its terms are incomprehensible except in the light of knowledge of a certain kind. To those who, like Yeats, are both by natural bent and by a fortunate environment, capable of discerning its traces, it is everywhere apparent throughout the entire range of imaginative art.

What encouragement have we, then, to try to discover corresponding "traces" in ourselves? And how shall we know they are "real"? In another essay, "The Uses of the Beautiful," Kathleen Raine recalls Tolstoy's story, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which one character, "a sensual brute of an ordinary man," has also an inexplicable love of music. He is moved to an agony of conscience by a piece of Beethoven's, and wonders how he should change. How is this to be understood?

Plato would say that the music stirred in him a latent knowledge, the anamnesis the soul has of an order inherent within it, a wholeness, a harmony to which the outer life is scarcely even an approximation. If this order be real, then may we not call the mundane reality less real—as the Platonic philosophers in fact did, on the grounds that it is only a partial realization, a blurred copy, a faint imprint. He had experienced beauty; and what he saw he recognized as a harmony already and forever existing, something he already possessed, but as lying away in the dark. Plato and Plotinus would say that this experience was in no way inexplicable; for this harmonious order is said to be an attribute, a possession of the soul, and not at all alien to it. If this were not so, the more perfect the beauty, the more foreign would it seem to us; but the contrary of this is true—the greater the beauty, the more does it strike us not as strange but as deeply familiar; "that's how it is."

Defending Ancient Springs invites us to think of ourselves in this way.

COMMENTARY **KNOWN BY ITS FRUITS**

IN speaking of his book (see page 2) Warren Johnson uses a formidable word, "selflessness," to identify its theme. The word makes something of a difficulty because we hardly know how to give it a meaning. How, after all, can people be "selfless"? Nearly everything they do is in the interests of the self, and we are told by our instructors in economics that this is completely natural and as it should be. So, as an ideal, selflessness takes on a somewhat stark quality that a reader is likely to pass by without reflection.

Yet we ought to reflect. Most of this issue of *MANAS* deals with the effects of concentration on self-interest. First, in the lead, there is the testimony of military historians on what the modern making of total war has done to self-respecting soldiers. If there are any of them left, they are likely to be ashamed of what they are obliged to do by "the crusading spirit of total war."

Then there is Mr. Johnson's account of what the acquisitive drive for prosperity has done to the way we make our livings, showing how and why it doesn't really work, and is only making us nervous, anxious, and miserable.

There is what we as a nation are doing to our land—wasting it away—rendering it unfit for future use, very nearly destroying it forever, as Wendell Berry says on page 7.

Robert Engler shows what our methods are doing to other peoples—as in Bhopal, in Mexico, in Indonesia, and Iraq—and at home near the Love Canal and in Pennsylvania (Three Mile Island). These are not isolated happenings, as Engler says, but repeating elements in the pattern we have established.

Finally, there is what we are doing to children and the young—turning them over to a "profession" that has become a bureaucracy, because we are too busy to accept responsibility

for their education. A third of the population, Jonathan Kozol makes clear, is functionally illiterate and being trained in failure.

Plato, Blake, and Yeats had another way of looking at things, another way of acting. How long, one wonders, will that way continue to be ignored?

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

FROM PASSION TO PROFESSION

ONE of the clearest thinkers of this century, Alfred North Whitehead, did a book called *The Aims of Education* (Free Press, 1967). While there are dozens of ways of describing these aims, Whitehead's way is valuable for its intellectual precision and its lucid account of the objectives of education. The title essay begins:

Culture is an activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them the ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art. We have to remember that the valuable intellectual development is self-development, and that it mostly takes place between the ages of sixteen and thirty. . . .

In training a child to activity of thought, above all things we must beware of what I call "inert ideas"—that is to say, ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations.

In the history of education, the most striking phenomenon is that schools of learning, which at one epoch are alive with a ferment of genius, in a succeeding generation exhibit merely pedantry and routine. The reason is, that they are overladen with inert ideas. Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful—*Corruptio optimi, pessima*. Except at rare intervals of intellectual ferment, education in the past has been radically infected with inert ideas. That is the reason why uneducated clever women, who have seen much of the world, are in middle life so much the cultured part of the community. They have been saved from this horrible burden of inert ideas. Then, alas, with pathetic ignorance of human psychology, it has proceeded by some educational scheme to bind humanity afresh with inert ideas of its own fashioning.

Let us now ask how in our system of education we are to guard against this mental dry rot. We enunciate two educational commandments, "do not

teach too many subjects," and again, "What you teach, teach thoroughly."

A contemporary of Whitehead, José Ortega y Gasset, who lived and taught in Spain and Latin America, but wrote for the world, has in his own way said the same thing. In *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* (Norton, 1969), he wrote:

What is considered in the courts as intolerable abuse—that justice not be done—is in teaching almost the norm: the student does not study, and if he does, putting his best will into it, he does not learn; and it is clear that if the student, for whatever reason, does not learn, the professor cannot say that he is teaching; at the very best, he is trying to teach but is not succeeding.

Meanwhile, generation after generation, the frightening mass of human knowledge which the student must assimilate piles up. And in proportion, as knowledge grows, is enriched, and becomes specialized, the student will move farther and farther away from feeling any immediate and genuine need for it. Each time, there will be less congruence between the sad human activity which is studying, and the admirable human occupation which is true knowing. And so the terrible gap which began at least a century ago continues to grow, the gap between living culture, genuine knowledge, and the ordinary man. Since culture or knowledge has no other reality than to respond to needs that are truly felt and to satisfy them in one way or another, while the way of transmitting knowledge is to study, which is not to feel those needs, what we have is that culture or knowledge hangs in mid-air and has no roots of sincerity in the average man who finds himself forced to swallow it whole. That is to say, there is introduced into the human mind a foreign body, a set of dead ideas that could not be assimilated.

This culture, which does not have any root structure in man, a culture which does not spring from him spontaneously, lacks any native and indigenous values, this is something imposed, extrinsic, strange, foreign, and unintelligible; in short, it is unreal. Underneath this culture—received but not truly assimilated—man will remain intact as he was; that is to say, he will remain uncultured, a barbarian.

We return to Whitehead, who says in *The Aims of Education*:

The result of teaching small parts of a large number of subjects is the passive reception of disconnected ideas, not illumined with any spark of vitality. Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child's education be few and important, and let them be thrown into every combination possible. The child should make them his own, and should understand their application here and now in the circumstances of his actual life. From the very beginning of his education, the child should experience the joy of discovery. The discovery which he has to make, is that general ideas give an understanding of that stream of events which pours through his life, which is his life. By understanding I mean more than a mere logical analysis, though that is included. I mean "understanding" in the sense in which it is used in the French proverb, "To understand all is to forgive all." Pedants sneer at an education which is useful. But if education is not useful, what is it? Is it a talent, to be hidden away in a napkin? Of course, education should be useful, whatever your aim in life. It was useful to Saint Augustine and it was useful to Napoleon. It is useful, because understanding is useful.

Whitehead speaks most of all to teachers:

When you analyze in the light of experience the central task of education, you find that its successful accomplishment depends on a delicate adjustment of many variable factors. The reason is that we are dealing with human minds, and not with dead matter. The evocation of curiosity, of judgment, of the power of mastering a complicated tangle of circumstances, the use of theory in giving foresight in special cases—all these powers are not to be imparted by a set rule embodied in one schedule of examination subjects.

I appeal to you, as practical teachers. With good discipline, it is always possible to pump into the minds of a class a certain quantity of inert knowledge. You take a text-book and make them learn it. So far, so good. The child then knows how to solve a quadratic equation. But what is the point of teaching a child to solve a quadratic equation? There is a traditional answer to this question. It runs thus: The mind is an instrument, you first sharpen it, and then use it; the acquisition of the power of solving a quadratic equation is part of the process of sharpening the mind. Now there is just enough truth in this answer to have made it live through the ages. But for all its half-truth, it embodies a radical error which bids fair to stifle the genius of the modern world. . . . But whatever the weight of its authority, whatever the high approval which it can quote, I have

no hesitation to denouncing it as one of the most fatal, erroneous, and dangerous conceptions ever introduced into the theory of education. The mind is never passive, it is a perpetual activity, delicate, receptive, responsive to stimulus. You cannot postpone its life until you have sharpened it. Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now. That is the golden rule of education, and a very difficult rule to follow. . . .

There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations.

Interestingly, Gordon Pradl, who teaches English literature at New York University, shows by example what Whitehead means by there being only "one subject-matter for education." Discussing what he calls "The Real Literacy Crisis" in the Fall 1984 *et cetera*, Prof. Pradl says:

. . . by becoming a "subject," English inherited all the inertia that such a classification seems to entail. From a living dialogue between author and reader, literature was transformed into a body of seemingly endless and unrelated facts . . . forced upon unwilling children in the form of rote memory work and mindless tests. The results of such English training became clear enough: I. A. Richards, for example, revealed in the 1920s that university students could barely extract a literal meaning from a poem, let alone offer an original and sensitive interpretation. There were exceptions to this bleak picture, and literature, of course, survived, but really only outside a pedagogical context. In the schools and universities, the literature that was passed on had had the life wrung out of it; simultaneously, the profession of English became solidly entrenched.

Is there a remedy for this? Of course, but not in the schools and universities. See the writings of John Holt.

FRONTIERS

On Illiteracy—Two Kinds

IN ILLITERATE AMERICA (Doubleday, 1985, \$15.95), Jonathan Kozol, a writer schooled in drama (he wrote *Death at an Early Age* about the Boston public schools in 1967), takes up the cudgels for the functional illiterates in the United States. He says:

Twenty-five million American adults cannot read the poison warnings on a can of pesticide, a letter from their child's teacher, or the front page of a daily paper. An additional 35 million read only at a level which is less than equal to the full survival needs of our society.

Together, these 60 million people represent more than one third of the entire adult population.

The largest number of illiterate adults are white, native-born Americans. In proportion to population, however, the figures are higher for blacks and Hispanics than for whites. Sixteen per cent of white adults, 44 per cent of blacks, and 56 per cent of Hispanic citizens are functional or marginal illiterates. Figures for the younger generation of black adults are increasing. Forty-seven per cent of all black seventeen-year-olds are functionally illiterate. That figure is expected to climb to 50 per cent by 1990.

Fifteen per cent of recent graduates of urban high schools read at less than sixth grade level. One million teenage children between twelve and seventeen cannot read above the third grade level. Eighty-five per cent of juveniles who come before the courts are functionally illiterate. Half the heads of households classified below the poverty line by federal standards cannot read an eighth grade book. Over one third of mothers who receive support from welfare are functionally illiterate. Of 8 million unemployed adults, 4 to 6 million lack the skills to be retrained for hi-tech jobs.

What is "functional illiteracy"? Drawing on work done at the University of Texas in 1973, Kozol summarizes:

Given a paycheck and the stub that lists the usual deductions, 26 per cent of adult Americans cannot determine if their paycheck is correct. Thirty-six per cent, given a W-4 form, cannot enter the right number of exemptions in the proper places on the

form. Forty-four per cent, when given a series of "help-wanted" ads, cannot match their qualifications to the job requirements. Twenty-two per cent cannot address a letter well enough to guarantee that it will reach its destination. Twenty-four per cent cannot add their own correct return address to the same envelope. Twenty per cent cannot understand an "equal opportunity" announcement. Over 60 per cent, given a series of "for sale" advertisements for products new and used, cannot calculate the difference between prices for a new and a used appliance. Over 20 per cent cannot write a check that will be processed by their bank—or will be processed in the right amount. Over 40 per cent are unable to determine the correct amount of change they should receive, given a cash register receipt and the denomination of the bill used for payment.

From such studies of the Adult Performance Level it is concluded that 30 million men and women are now "functionally incompetent." Another 54 million, Kozol says, "just get by." A review of the evidence used for these conclusions will easily persuade the reader that Kozol has been conservative in the estimates he adopts. There is no exaggeration.

For some twenty years, Jonathan Kozol has been working to increase the literacy of people in America. He has reason to know what will work and what won't. In his book of some 250 pages he unfolds in detail the resources that we have for teaching reading and the people who might do it best. There are those who have been doing it for years and he has learned from them. What are the obstacles? He describes them at length in *Illiterate America*. Particularly touching is the letter sent to Congresswoman Louise Day Hicks by some children in a Roxbury public school:

Dear Mrs. Hicks: We are the students of the fourth grade in the Wendell Phillips School in Roxbury. We have had 17 substitute teachers this year. Last year, we had 24. Our books are old, our building is collapsing. Nobody is learning how to read and write and do arithmetic. We would like to go to better schools—the same schools that are serving children of white people. Please, Mrs. Hicks, will you do what you can to help us with this problem?

Mrs. Hicks, however, had been elected "on her reputation as an adversary of school integration," Kozol says. He comments:

Teachers who allow this kind of lesson to take place and who pretend to children that by exercises of this kind they are engaging in "collective processes of democratic practice," do not merely leave unchanged the impotence of children who have been entrusted to their care. They *advocate* impotence. They *teach* futility. They train pupils to accede to rituals of guaranteed debilitation. The lesson, once it has been taught, remains to curse the learner with a set of inhibitions that will guarantee a lifetime of surrender: "Ask, try, plead, fail. Puzzle a moment on the reason for your failure. Maybe the letter was not spelled correctly. Maybe it was not properly addressed. Maybe your penmanship was poor. Now is the time to move on to your next surrender."

Illiterate America is a strong book; the dimensions of its subject make it so. One cause of this condition is cultural illiteracy at another level—that of some of the policy-makers in this country. Earlier this year, when David Stockman was the nation's budget director, he said that it is good for agriculture "when a lot of farm families go broke and lose their farms." Later, in a reply to Stockman appearing in the *New York Times*, Wendell Berry noted Stockman's argument for the continuing dispossession of thousands of farm families as the way a dynamic economy works, and that there would be new jobs for these people in "Silicon valley." This, Berry said, is much more than a personal opinion. It is "an attitude that has been dominant in the offices of agriculture since Ezra Taft Benson was Secretary, in the Eisenhower Administration," and requires an answer. Berry went on:

The most important question is whether or not good farming can be understood as an industry. The answer is that it cannot be so understood. The reasons are complicated but they may be summed up in two facts: first, farming depends upon living creatures and biological processes, whereas the materials of industry are not alive and the processes are mechanical; and, second, a factory is, and is expected to be, temporary, whereas a farm, if well farmed, will last forever—and, if poorly farmed, will be destroyed forever.

Moreover, good farming preserves the soil. "Our present tragic soil erosion rates suggest that our high agriculture yields are coming at an enormous cost, which sooner or later will have to be paid." Stockman apparently thinks that the "dynamic economy" is eliminating "inefficient" farmers, but more likely, Berry says, it eliminates the young ones trying to get started. He concludes:

The argument in favor of a stable, soundly established population of farming families involves many more questions than those. But even so few suggest inescapably that good farming involves a long-term connection between particular people and particular parcels of land. To subject this connection to an economic determination necessarily indifferent to it is to destroy it—and, finally, to destroy ourselves. For we Americans are not just a crowd of separate individuals competing for spoils in a "free market." America is a community and a land. If we do not understand that, we cannot know our losses though we are suffering from them.