Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 1

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To María Beatriz - always in all ways

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Introduction

This is a miscellany of pieces, most of which were written during the summer of 1983, when I was teaching summer school at Phillips Exeter Academy. The usual fortunes of free-lancing had been mine: a stump of rejection slips, one or two acceptances in magazines that paid only in copies. Feeling somewhat down about my writing fortunes, I decided to give myself the mythical job of writing a daily column of 750 to 1000 words on whatever happened to cross my mind. (I also imagined editorial congratulations for anything I wrote in addition to a rather handsome paycheck as the objective correlative of the judicious praise.) I wrote steadily for two months, taking week-ends off.

It was a good discipline, that writing. In the two hours before I went to class I had to create something readable, factually correct, and intelligent. The only chance for revision was on-the-run; I gave myself no chance to let things get cold and see them in the cool light of the next day. Reading these over now, I'm surprised at how clearly most of them came out. Every once in a while the clunker phrase or word crops up, but for the most part they are free of jargon and stupidity. Something, however small, for a writer to be thankful about.

The reader will also notice that many of the pieces are about adolescents and education. I've been a teacher all my professional life and went into that work because it offered a window into social problems. TV, drugs, abusive families, Reaganism - they all end up in the school and in the classroom and have to be dealt with. Not many people think that teaching high school English would put them in touch with what pulses through the body politic, but that is exactly what happens. Therefore, as any good writer should, I wrote about what I knew (which often included what I didn't like).

Also, I have made no attempt to clean these up or update references: for instance, "wife" means "then-wife," not "current wife," and so on.

Nibble at these as you will. May they nourish.

Michael Bettencourt, 2015

Keats

(On The Death Of A Small Dog)

Death is like an inside joke: we all know the punchline but we don't want to talk about it for fear of having to face it. Death is not an abstract that can be discoursed about: adolescents do that and tie themselves into knots. *Thing*s die; there is no concept here, no abstract haze to hide behind. It is a conjunction of inevitable small deaths, an accumulation of decay, an apotheosis of entropy so woven into our lives that this one thread will destroy them all, unravel us to our bones. The death of Keats is a small matter in the universe. He was here and now is gone, a faint ripple like the green glow of the television as it warms down to that brittle star in the middle, then gone. He was cute, mellow, a ganglia of puppiness, a frail compost of quirks and insistent needs, a trail of our patience into which we could pour all of our separateness and attempt to find some way to extend ourselves, extend our affection out in a selfless and nourishing way. Keats was an opportunity to be human, to teach ourselves composure, tolerance, ingenuity, and now that opportunity must be found elsewhere, in other things, people, places, ideas. Such events must happen but that does not dilute the pain or the wishing for something better to have happened. Nothing that is inevitable is ever painless.

We did not know him long enough to be truly attached to him. We feel the pity any human feels when the light that is life, and a life so singularly helpless and appealing, is simply and curtly snuffed out. There is no question we had to choose his death: he recognized nothing about himself from the seizures, about us, indeed about anything. He was no longer an animal with a semblance of attention and spirit, just a switchboard for erratic impulses, a gameboard for chaos. Yet again that does not draw off the brine in the wound, that here was something so precious because alive, so wondrous because so common, that now no longer shares anything with us. Pick the metaphor: the dousing of a candle, the shutting of a door, the moving finger moving on. The words add no balm, are just a failing struggle to grasp this reality of now you see me, now you don't. Keats' death is one of those situations in life that is fraught with knowledge and yet offers no lesson. His death is simply the way things are, not cruel, not merciful, simply done and over with. What lesson can be drawn from that, what comfort?

There is an ache that comes with the death of an innocence like Keats, an ache that comes from knowing we have no tribunal to reverse the decision, and

that gentleness is no guarantee. Death shows us just how alone we really are, how unsure our hopes for surety must always be.

Yet I can find no balm in this resignation, no Stoic grace. The heart, my heart, always arcs in remorse for small and delicate things that must perish.

Woodstock

Last night on NBC the movie *Woodstock* appeared. I only watched a few minutes of it, having seen it many times before, but it made a succinct impression on my mind, given the situation I find myself in here at Exeter, and throughout my work with adolescents.

In that movie the kids, vapid-headed and seemingly out of touch, nevertheless had a dirty innocence to them, as if all their ignorance, all the believed clichés and efforts, mock or not, made toward the Age of Aquarius, had a redeeming quality about it. That redeeming quality was some sort of quest for authenticity, some visceral response to phoniness, that flung them outward, like a nova, in search of some ground of knowledge that they not only could call their own but could really rely on to be essentially and infinitely portable, some food that would nourish them no matter what the famine.

Of course there were those who abused the situation, who never had a thought larger than the next drug dose or party, people who, in any historical situation, would have been the ones who tore the buildings down and delighted in the rolling of heads. But that is true of any era (check out the 20s) and is no demerit against the 60s.

What those kids at Woodstock had was a sense, a perception, if only glimpsed, that something had to be different, that what *was* could not be all. To them, what had been handed down was not sufficient; they had a cavernous doubt that fueled a needed resuscitation of the American dream. This impulse was made flesh in a number of ways: politically, musically, chemically, morally, even militarily. Each of these paths had its brambles and cliffs, yet that impulse to doubt and question, to needle and pierce, was valid and necessary. That it now has such aspersions cast on its head should not delete its importance.*

What about kids today? What have they inherited? They have lost the quest for some truth and have as a legacy instead a smoothly grinding music industry that sells any tripe and calls it a movement. They have an ad industry dedicated to fleecing their pockets, please to have such a large and captive audience. They have inherited a party attitude and a lax attitude toward drugs, taking the hedonism and rejecting any of the intellect that went with it. They have inherited a society concerned primarily with narrow self-interest and Ronald Reagan. Above all, they have no idealism, no sense that being human automatically puts one in the position of having to care. All in all we have ended up with a generation of

children who are basically useless, with no common sense, with no impulse that could be called transcendental or political or humanitarian.

This is ruination because, even at Exeter, people are groomed for responsibility by pampering them so much that their brains can not be sharpened in a real sense, in that College of Hard Knocks parents used to promote as the best college of all. Kids have had taken away from them a tangible, risk-taking world and have instead had it replaced with a nebulous pattern composed primarily of their inchoate feelings and strivings, so much so that they can think of nothing that does not satisfy themselves or a small circle of friends. It is as if they had been handed a mirror and told that what they see is the only thing the world is about. No wonder they are so defenseless and guilt-ridden. They got the down-side of the 60s and the adults have done nothing to change that except make it harder for kids to be real and functioning people.

* Why is such doubt only recognized as valuable in a religious context? The weekly poster at the Unitarian church has something to that effect, that an ounce of doubt is worth a pound of faith. Is it because we know that religion ultimately doesn't matter and that any urge toward religious doubt is only the refinement of an empty hole, useful to no one, and therefore no real threat? When doubt becomes politicized, and if it can steer clear of nihilism, then it has potent power because it claims nothing and checks everything. And when something has potent power that does not come from in-house, then the impulse is to destroy, as we do today, badmouthing the 60s to cover our embarrassment at having been caught in a moment of insight questioning and going outside channels. We wish to demote our freedom to security.)

Callie

(On Having To Move To A New Apartment)

Well, the floor is mopped and the car aired out. Of course there is a lot more hair to pick up - she shed like leaves - and we have to throw away her dish and bowl and bone and somehow get rid of the chain run. What do I feel now that Callie has been given away to the SPCA? I feel some anger, of course. Not anger at Christine, though she thinks I do. Yes, it was her idea to get the dogs (to which I acquiesced willingly), and I cannot blame her for her growing alienation from Callie. And I find anger at myself because we couldn't provide the sort of home that would have been good for her, provided her with running space and much more love and affection than she got. I hope they find a home for her - I almost have to believe they will. No, the anger is directed elsewhere.

Callie was never much fun. She was too hyper, demanded too much from our crowded schedules. She had energy to burn and it is a tribute to her animal patience that she did not do more destruction than she did, for she had to wait upon the whims of human beings who were capricious and unscheduled for her food and affection. In all of this she showed immense dignity and restraint, putting up with our indifference with good humor and constant attention.

I am angry at us, both Christine and myself as we are, and human beings in general. We act so cavalierly toward the animals we make our slaves, expect them to entertain us, then, when unneeded, to be gotten rid of in the least visible way. For almost a year we and that dog lived together and shared any number of experiences that created bonds of both love and hate, but in any case bonds that were strong and forged out of living flesh. Now, when it does not suit us to keep her, we don't, and off she goes, like the obedient animal she is.

I do not know right now if she has any inkling of what is happening to her. She sits in her cage at the SPCA waiting, seeing nothing but strangers. I wonder if she just thinks it's another one of our outings, and that we'll be back sometime, if not soon. We always come back. Like Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, she trusts implicitly, with no logic to muddle things. She, in a sense, gave a year of her life to us, and now we just give it back to her with no interest earned, no regrets. She was a sprightly dog, full of energy and personality. We had no time for her good qualities, and so they never got a chance to shine. We wanted her as an adjunct to our lives, not as a focus of it, like an appendage that responds only

when we want it to. I guess we didn't want her to have any sort of personality, just a compliant nature.

I suddenly do not like myself much today for having done this, though I can logicalize all I want. I think this hits deeper than I'm letting it. Certainly our lives are easier - but is that a reasonable criterion? Is that the only measure of things, if it makes our lives easier? I would like to say no, but I would be wrong. We will not have children because they interfere with what we want. I can live with that, but how strong are those teachings that tell us to suffer and to strive and to have pain as the absolutes of knowing that we are alive at all! And we cave in to expediency. I hope Callie will be better off; I am not sure we will be.

There is death here, surely. I would like to think that life will run pretty much as before, that only now I won't have to run home to let her off her chain, that now I'll be able to take lunch in the dining hall and rub elbows with my colleagues. But it doesn't feel like that. In her there was an unreserved energy for us. Maybe love, I don't know, but when she saw me walk up the path, her whole body would display such recognition, and she would bounce into the house in a way, that I, in my more jaded or cynical moods, would not appreciate. I would yell for her to lay down, be quiet, and she would, but it wasn't what she wanted at all - she wanted attention, a reward for having spent so much time alone and with such good behavior. My heart aches for her splendid ignorance. She wanted very little - food, a place to stay, some petting - and she had no real sense of the larger, more dangerous scheme that swirled around her. Why, as humans, are we balanced on this knife between the bliss of supposed ignorance and the desire for truth at any cost? Why is it our particular fate to be enmeshed in complexity so thick that to breathe is sometimes a victory and to simply get through a day with some sense of person intact is a banquet to our minds? I wish sometimes life would pan out, bottom out, that I would be fully happy with what I have and not desire anything more than what I already had. I wish to have no desires, and to have no desire for desire. Peace inside. But it won't come. If it cannot come for a simple dog, if it cannot come for an animal who desires nothing more than sustenance, then it will not come to me who has even a less clear notion of what to do and what to want. Surely there is death here, not only Callie's, but also of every possibility for peace and tranquility; I must face turgid waters and keep from letting the rocks have at me.

I don't like myself for having done what I did. I am afraid that such abandonment will come to me, too, that life will simply leave me with my illusions

and no way to pierce them, that I will be as empty as I suspect myself of being. A truly human existence must be one in the constant face of pain and disillusion. Happiness can only come from defeat *and* renewal, not one or the other. Hard going.

Meanwhile, Callie waits.

Ice Cream Stand

An ice cream stand is as good a place as any to watch people. There is something soothing about a summer night with ice cream, sitting in the car slouched over a double scoop of mocha almond chip (for my wife; I take a sherbet), listening to mindless summer music. All sorts arrive: a visiting Little League team; teenagers from the beach; an elderly couple who eat their entire dessert without exchanging a word; a young father with three children in the back and a harried wife trying to negotiate peace while he struggles with three cones, a float, and the change.

People do funny things while they wait. If they're with a group, they'll talk, but never really *to* each other, their eyes glancing somewhere, at the electric bug killer (it's *crunchzap*!!, somewhat unnerving reminder of the gist of things). Women will always cross their arms across their breasts, even in the hottest weather. Younger women will often be dressed in anything, sometimes stylish, sometimes not. The older women, if they are the kind who sing in Sweet Adelines choruses and play golf, will wear unflattering culottes and sleeveless cotton shirts through which one can see the outlines of formidable foundation garments, complete with K-Mart sneakers and blue peds, their hair neatly architectured, their skin, if tanned, still slightly flabby, all of them carrying the detritus of simply getting older. They will gab - that is the proper word. Content is not important, only that the time be filled with chatty circumspect conversation.

Not all groups are as lively. Couples, momentarily faced with a small wait, will talk discreetly, often cryptically. I sometimes think that they are embarrassed by the wait, the empty time calling out the sudden emptinesses that can crop up even between ardent lovers. Much better to have the cones and have the mouth busy than suspect whatever suspicion may bring out of the dark closets. Kids will run around, their elders suffering their presence.

Loners are even more interesting. They will read the menu, twice, and a third time if the line is slow. They will read the small print about the meals tax, concentrate on the ghost letters in the signboard where the sun had left a shadow before the letters were moved, even read the dollar bill, not understanding the Latin, realizing that, yes, the number one occurs sixteen times. They fidget, slouch into the hip, shifting back and forth like a peripatetic philosopher struggling with the question of the good life, and read the menu again. Uncomfortable with the abridgement of their non-thinking schedule, with

the sullen mirror a few uneventful moments brings out, their ice cream is all the sweeter for the anodyne it gives to the brain.

We as a species are not good waiters. We often don't know what to say to fill the time and are hampered by the notion that somehow the time ought to be filled, that silence is an admission of failure. We will fill the spaces with any sort of triviality, feeling uncomfortable with the unaccustomed freedom a rend in the fabric of a hurried life gives us. More content are we to take our ice cream and walk calmly back into what is expected of us, bearing into the usual and the routine a bit of sweetness to offset the return trip.

And as I pull out of the parking lot, I, too, have my bits of sweetness to write as these thoughts. And all of us melt back into the compartments we call our lives, intersecting occasionally, like bees daubed with pollen, indifferent to where we spread the fertility, unconscious that we have done so, only eager to get back to the honey that sustains our quiet, our tentative, our mostly unknown lives.

Hampton Beach

Not quite yet the summer season. People still are wearing jackets, long pants. No incentive yet to display the body, to flirt; the chaperone, winter, is still around.

Funny sort of place this time of year. Not all the stores are open yet. Like tombs with stones in front of them, they wait the rising sun, the wallets with money like keys. Their boarded windows are like dour aunts at a cotillion, their blind stare reminding everyone just how much they cannot do, how fragile the idea of freedom really is, when freedom consists of the possibility to do nothing except what nothing gives rise to. They are the mote in the eye, the fly in the ideal ointment.

Kids are here, naturally. Clots of them collect outside the arcades, the fry dough places, McDonald's, along the pipe fences that leash the beach from the street. The girls, most of them, are nicely dressed, their hair done in almost the exact same fashion, slightly feathered, off the face, seemingly teased and infused with air so that it bounces and shines. No lank hair here, no bangs, just a simple helmet to let everyone know that they are from the same tribe, wear the same thoughts under the hair. They guys stand around cool, nervous, fidgety, outnumbered by the girls, not knowing how to handle the advantage, their inexperience squealing like an unoiled cog behind the smooth machines of their faces. You can almost feel the ache of these males, the edge they walk between risk and failure - or, more commonly, between desire and unfulfillment. The girls can get away with more, act more silly, more clubbish, more hair-brained; guys must keep to themselves, be a pole for the May-ribbons.

At the apex of summer the place will be infested with youth, their sole reason for being at the beach to coerce out of their time there as much fun untainted by adulthood as possible. They will decide, usually non-verbally, usually without what would be recognized as thought, to flow with the action, to recapitulate in their restless touring up and down the strip the soluble rolling of the waves, wearing down time and expectation, they think, into a fine useless grit that will blow away with one restless breezy laugh of assent to the sun, their bodies tuned to the soothing circularity of day and night. They choose not to remember the coming first day of school, money obligations, perhaps college; they do not know that the grit they think blows away only recollects somewhere inside as the guts of the hourglass slowly drying out memories for the thick skin of adulthood.

For now they are unattached to the scheme of things, to history, children of a pleasant hiatus. But now, at early June, when the street sounds are only just beginning to be punctuated by the heavy gargling of a TransAm and the spiced blare of a tape deck, and the stores aren't all open and the hotels are just airing out the guest register and there's still the threat that winter will come back full of onerous necessities, they rehearse their summer in small groups full of staccato crossfire, trying out flirting with the passing cars, trying to look studly or bouncerish or proletarian, arranged on the strip like some barely coherent Morse code, dots of desire, dashes of hope, abbreviations in a cipher that promises good times for as long as forever will last.

Girls

My wife and I are the dorm parents for 35 girls attending the summer session. We have a good seat, then, for the pageant and kitsch that makes up the life of the usual well-to-do middle class female adolescent in America. It is not a very exciting or inspiring picture.

Of course some of them are fine. Some show a useful sense of proportion and humor, speak at a human decibel level, dress without anxiety, and seem to have accepted themselves without too much trauma. As such, they are pleasant people to know, to trust.

And then there are the others. The most striking characteristic of the "others" is their essential uselessness. I use both the adjective and noun knowingly. "Essence" in the sense of my sense of there being nothing there underneath the smooth skin, tonsorial off-handedness, expensive clothes, and frenetic animation of their personalities. What I try to find in them is some ballast, some of what was once called "character." I don't mean some sort of ruthless entrepreneurial spirit, but more of a solidity that announces to me that the person has some grounded sense of herself and her possible purpose in the world. The British historian Macaulay once said that "the measure of a man's character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out." In this sense I would neither trust my life nor possessions nor anything like responsibility to these people, since the only thing that keeps them close to a line of acceptable behavior is their knowledge that they might indeed be found out. It is a petty goodness that requires a continuous master.

They are not juvenile delinquents. Most of them would simply be good out of habit, partly because they've never really known enough passion in their lives to be truly tempted, and so don't have the habit of rebellion down. This brings me to my second point, "uselessness." It is a point larger than the girls, but I'll come to that in a moment. Females by and large throughout history have been considered superfluous in any number of ways. Only recently have people seen how dangerous and untruthful such an assertion is. Yet, most of these girls are being raised (the passive construction is deliberate) as if they were indeed superfluous to the work of the world, as if the last decade had not happened. For one thing, their manners show it. Most play the helpless female in the face of adversity. One girl, who had a blown lightbulb in her lamp, told me on opening day that the lamp was broken. I checked the bulb and we found out the hypothesis was wrong. But it never occurred to her to check the apparatus herself. She

automatically assumed it was broken because it didn't work to her specifications, and then, instead of perhaps fussing with it to see if it could be fixed, checking out her hypothesis, automatically ran to me, the male (not my wife, who was the dorm head), and voice her plea. Variations on this helplessness happen daily.

Also, they act as if their uselessness were a social plus. They speak in loud voices that are continually squealing out "Oh my God!" like raucous ravens. They dress in unbecoming clothes which are partly unbecoming because they are not serviceable for real life, but are frippery, indications of the fact that they don't have to engage the world. And even though they are shelling out a lot of money to learn, they act as if such a thing as an idea has never passed the portals of their lips. They are loud, squealish, affected, and most oblivious to the troubles and delights of the world around them.

The boys are no different, though they have other deficiencies and express them differently: they are victims of other myths. I sometimes think that this essential uselessness is the virus of adolescence, not because adolescents are congenitally lazy or incapable of taking charge of their lives, but because we, the adults, have gone about raising a leisure class who believe that schooling is a right, even if they don't have to take advantage of it, a good job is theirs by *droit de seigneur*, and that the rest of the world, even that world within the confines of their hometown or city, is not legitimate until they decide to recognize it.

Such inbred solipsism is dangerous because it destroys virtues the world needs to extricate itself from its problems: a sense of self-government, a purposeful engagement with the world of work and politics, a sense that oneself is not the center of the universe. But these adolescents don't have those virtues because, in the name of love, they have been protected from having to exercise them. This is a love that kills.

Boys

In the last opinion I wrote that the boys at this summer session have other deficiencies, and are victims of other myths. Now it is time to give them equal time.

The standard uniform for male clothing this summer consists of underwear (I assume), a pair of shorts with pockets (tennis shorts, preferably), docksiders or sneakers (no socks usually), and a tee-shirt, though it's never other than a Lacoste or a clone of Lacoste. More sports-minded boys will wear a pair of socks with the sneakers. Haircut is pretty standard gauge, short but not too short, shaped over the ears, off the forehead, and full in back, often swept back along the side of the head. Very little if any jewelry - I've seen no one with an earring and I don't think many with a ring or necklace. A spare group of people.

Except that they are not spare. The dress is not an expression of economy. It is dress suited for people who don't have a summer job and don't need one, whose primary duty is to hang around. The boys are pretty as well. Not effeminate, but certainly well taken care of. Most are tanned and slim, with smooth good looks. *GQ*-pretty in some ways.

Why all this physical description? A story. When I was teaching in a rural high school I had a group of students, mostly farmers' kids and auto mechanics, who had to learn English before they graduated, at least according to the state's standards. Somehow one knew that the males were males in that class. Most did chores before and after school and knew a lot about a lot of things. The most noticeable thing to me was their hands. Often grimy under the nails, calloused, the knuckles bitten by some piece of metal, they were most assuredly hands that worked. They were not good students in any sense of the word. Most had stopped playing the good-student game a long time before, if indeed they ever played it. They were marking time for the "paper" as they called it, and suffered the teachers.

I raise their image in contrast to the boys here for two reasons. One is that they knew they were going to have to work. The only way they were going to get any advantages in life was to earn them through their own labor. They were not saints. They were still rowdy and unread and they are not the sort of people I would like to spend eternity with. Yet they were solid. They were going to have to perform the work in this country - fixing cars, growing corn and milk, working on the roads, doing the volunteer firefighter's job - work that keeps communities

together and allows the upper strata of society to be as insulated as it is. Perhaps they were being traditional, males that considered themselves *men* with all the bias that goes with that word. But at least one knew what they were and was forced to deal with them as real and functioning entities in the world.

The work that most of these summer-school boys will do will be service work: lawyers, accountants, brokers, and their ilk. Some will be doctors, though more often for the money than the profession. Their jobs will certainly have more status than the jobs of my rural students, and they will, in a sense, always be in school, for the most part comfortably salted away somewhere and discouraged from tackling the world. In this way they will never grow up and will always be adolescents.

Second, these boys suffer from an amorphousness of upbringing. My farmer kids lived in a small town, and while they had access to a large mall, video games, beer and pot, and sundry other temptations, they were not really corrupted by them. The world of that town had a strong footing to it, based on family, church (sometimes), local bars, softball teams, the high school. And while the city ten miles away lapped over into that town, the town was distinct, a registered trade mark on the countryside that gave its inhabitants some sense of identity.

These summer-school boys, vaguely liberal, well-heeled for the most part, from middle-class families that are now making the news as the new battered group in society, imbued with a vision of the world that says the world is their banquet table, are being raised in much the same manner as thoroughbred horses: beautiful to look at but essentially a frivolous item in the world. They have no useful sense of place, no center to their orbit. Outwardly they are well-groomed, delightful to the eye, as are the girls; yet inside they've not been encouraged to create a strong sense of themselves and the work they could do in the world to make it better. They have been raised to be free electrons, ready to mate with any strong center that happens by.

I like these girls and boys. They are harmless and gentle for the most part, having been made docile by decent schools and loving parents. But if people in this country cry about what is coming out of our public schools and howl that the future leaders of this country will be illiterate (not really a rational possibility, if one thinks about it), I would add that these thoroughbreds are spiritually illiterate and that that is as great a threat to our future stability as auto mechanics who can't read.

The Gilded Cage

For the past few opinions I have been writing about the people I spend most of my time with. I chose to do this work freely and have never really regretted putting in the time to improve their minds and morals.

But I am fearful about the future of these people. I like them well enough, and when I have a chance to be friends with them, instead of playing the somewhat restrictive game of teacher/student, I like them even more. But then I read. I read the recent report on education, "A Nation at Risk", that everyone is making political hay out of. The statistics are frightening enough, but what is more unnerving is seeing fairly intelligent adults batting this report back and forth for their own gain in the limelight, blithely taking out of their vest pockets complex schemes to further restrict and control the lives of adolescents. I share their fervor for improvement without sharing their taste in solutions. Because the other half of my fear gets its nourishment from the excessive way adults in this country control and deform the lives of children, and the kind of children who emerge at the other end of that process.

To be sure, children need some guidance, which is more synonymous with love than with discipline. They need to share the opinions of others and share the wisdom others have gleaned from experience. But ultimately they have to fend for themselves, and it's this fact that adults ignore. Through an excess of tyrannical love adults have cushioned the world so that adolescents cannot go out and make mistakes, fight for their places, learn what they need to learn to survive. If the school report is filled with pessimistic assessments of adolescents, adults have no one but themselves to blame, for they created a world that, on the one hand, calls for little engagement in it except for the pursuit of pleasure, and, on the other hands, denies the adolescent a full measure of participation in the rewards and punishments of that life. No wonder the news is so bad. If adults had to live with such restraints (and many do), they would scarcely feel motivated to improve themselves or the world around them (and many don't).

Think of their lot. Launched into school at five (or earlier), pressured to do well in ways that mean promotion and pleasing the boss, made to tolerate vast stretches of dullness "for their own good", taught material that is outdated in a way that is also outdated, made to attend school by law without any of the attendant rewards adults get for forced labor, they are then expected to have

a compelling motivation to do well "for their own good" and to act in a selfless manner no adult is ever expect to have or achieve.

And when they don't, when they decide it's a hell of a lot easier to play enough of the game to get by and pursue the kinds of pleasures they want when they want to, we suddenly get alarmed and militant about the situation and figure out ways to make better cages. Instead of looking at what we need to do with children to help make them better people, we look at schools and figure that that is where the problem lies.

It doesn't. The problem is adolescence itself, or rather, the age ghetto called adolescence imposed on a captive generation for their own good, i.e., to keep them off the streets and out of the job market. We are raising, and have raised, generations who are lop-sided. They have no valuable work to do in this society, nothing to knit head and hands together, to provide that mix of plain living and high thinking that used to characterize certain Yankees. Instead, adolescents finds themselves being manipulated to buy anything from records to video games so that the industries can live off their money. They are simply expected to consume: clothes, cars, records, their parents' food. In return little is expected except that they do well in school and live a life somewhat in conformance with their parents' values. The adolescent has all the advantages of a pampered class, and all of the fetters as well: prolongation of childhood, inability to make moral calculations, a valuation of feeling over logic, political apathy, fear of engagement with reality. That some do not turn out this way is a testament to the gumption of the individual and parents who love in the right way. But in the society at large there is little place for adolescents: They are in a holding-pattern, bright animals fattened for later use.

I realize the generalizations I'm making. Here at this stellar academy one believes that one sees the future leaders, the antithesis of all my statements. But, if anything, these good people at Exeter have even more to lose if society suddenly decides to ask more of them: their contacts, their fast track upwards, their insulation. And for poor adolescents the society has another fate: invisibility. Adolescence is a burden to carry in this society, a kind of hedonistic powerlessness that makes being powerless palatable. If adults would stop moaning and see the ways they participate in those problems, then perhaps this gilded cage of adolescence would open up and we could reasonably expect this generation to become reasonable people.

Politicians, Part I

Have you noticed how no one seems to be talking about the Presidential candidates anymore? The last month or so has brought a cooling to the media's coverage of the various Democratic Marco Polos in search of power. But at the beginning of this year, by the number of articles in my files, it seemed as if the race of Mondale/Hart/Glenn/Hollings/Cranston/Askew was in the clubhouse turn and the fans, some in despair, some in joy, were clutching their tickets in breathless dread and anticipation. This in spite of the fact that the 1984 elections were over a year away.

But we all know how the media hype things anyway. This present silence is probably the real turn of events that should have been happening all along. And a blessed silence it is.

For who really cares? Most of the theatre that takes place in Washington is for the benefit of the politicians themselves, a kind of inbred passion play that we get to eavesdrop in on, which is our reward for giving them our money to play with, like peasants at the palace window watching the ball. Every four years we are subjected to a circus that supposedly winnows out the people competent enough to govern and lead. Yet anyone knows from reading the papers that it is money and access and contacts that win elections, not intelligence or a demonstrated ability to inspire and lead. We like to soothe ourselves with myths about the benefits of democratic wrangling, but the truth is that the process, abetted by our own ignorance and inaction, has instead laden us with an aristocracy dedicated to their own preservation, and who are at best superfluous and at worst create havoc and confusion under the guise of principles and national interest.

Harsh, you say? I agree. *Washington Monthly*, in its most recent issue, published an article about some of the people in state governments who are actually causing things, good things, to happen, curbing the excesses of power and inciting prosperity. The notable thing about the article is not the achievements of the politicians but the fact that it needed to be printed at all. For the intent of the article was a small defusing of the generally deserved skepticism about the power of politicians to do anything right and worthwhile. More accurate, probably, is Gore Vidal's assertion that we have one party in this country, The Bank Party, and two wings of it, Democrats and Republicans.

For what is a politician after all? By definition he must have one purpose in life: to gain and maintain power. And what is power? The ability and chance to manipulate others to abide by your rules. In this country we try to do this with a semblance of consensus and fair play, since this makes us feel good. But we all know that only rarely does power rest in the voice of the people, since the people who supposedly represent that voice are too busy representing the voice of Fortune 500 presidents and swarms of lobbying groups willing to part with their money for an hour of valuable contact. We may talk about principles and political tradition, but we must also recognize in the same breath that power is not restrained by anything except its own hunger. If principles will further its ends, then it will make use of principles. If it needs democratic trappings to achieve a guise of legitimacy, then it uses such disguises. But it has no standard of behavior outside its own nourishment. We should not lose sight of this fact whenever a man (or woman) stands in front of us and tries to convince us that he or she is the best for the job. For "the job" is the maintenance of their own access to the teat of power.

I guess I cannot advocate ignoring politicians completely. That would only give them a greater blank check to shaft us. They are, after all, our servants and we should remind them of that humbling fact as often and as loudly as possible. The only proper attitude for a citizen to take is *against*, one that from the start believes nothing the person says and trusts nothing that the person does. And then if through this litmus test of skepticism the person appears to be someone you can trust, then by all means give him or her your vote and send them speedily onward. But the posture we should take most often, and most strongly, is Thoreau's in "Civil Disobedience," to be a counter-friction to the machine, working as often as you can to divest the politicians of power when they abuse and distort it. For in the end what we really want to do is make being a politician a job done out of love and a sense of humor and a selfless desire (as selfless as humans can get), not a job chosen out of number of professions one can leech onto for life, nor a job chosen with an eye to its economic usefulness in the future.

The circus is coming to town, so be prepared for the Mondale/Hart/Glenn/ Hollings/ Cranston/Askew act, the one that tries to get your attention while the cutpurses go through the crowd.

Politicians: Part II

Some of you may have thought my last opinion a bit unfair to politicians. After all, they are charged with a great responsibility and most, if not all, act in good faith toward their constituents and the country at large. True? Let's see.

Walter Shapiro in the July 1982 *Harper's* calculates the price attached to a House seat. Shapiro, who is from Ann Arbor, Michigan, decided as part of his research to see how much a mythical campaign against the then incumbent Carl Purcell would cost. The various consultants he visited all pretty much agreed that anywhere from a quarter to half a million dollars would be a somewhat bare minimum to get himself started. Not to buy a guarantee to win, mind you. Just to get into the race with some semblance of seriousness.

He goes on to speculate, after looking at the 1981 financial disclosure statements, that there are at least 100 millionaires currently serving in the House, and that close to half our representatives have assets of half a million dollars, which would put them in the top .6 percent of all Americans. He concludes that "more and more of [the candidates for the House] are likely to be hobbyists, wealthy men who see politics, and the celebrity that even a House seat can now bring, as an enjoyable avocation after a half-life of anonymous financial success." Created to be a microcosm of America, the House is now a good cross-section of the upper middle class. Now, with the rising costs of campaigns and the kinds of people who can afford them, we can expect the interests of the politicians to be even further from most of us. (Note the selflessness of governance when they gutted the federal inheritance tax in 1981.)

But wealth itself, as troublesome as it might be to our sense of the inclusiveness of democratic politics, is not necessarily a disqualification for office. But where wealth resides, there also resides the possibility for corruption and self-aggrandizement, and the evidence shows that politicians, far from being monetary teetotalers, go to the trough with glee. In two articles, "The New Slush Fund Scandal," in *The New Republic* of August 30, 1982, and "The Senate's Secret Slush Funds," in *The New Republic* of June 20, 1983, authors Bill Hogan, Diane Kiesel, and Alan Green detail, from publicly available information, the various abuses to the political process caused by the ready availability of deep wells of money. Their evidence is indisputable since it comes from information given by the politicians themselves. Their conclusion is that members of both houses of Congress have acted with an impunity not available to the ordinary

citizen and "have demonstrated that their special society operates under its own set of rules." And with so many incumbents ignoring their own internal rules and benefiting from the laxity in federal election laws, there is very little impetus for reform. And why should there be? Why would the pigs want to exchange the trough for a righteous diet?

But this rendition of Congress' moral laxity is only half the story. We must also look at the industry set up to influence Congress, a very successful industry dedicated to the democratic ideals of buying access and lobbying for narrow special interests. Such firms as run by Robert Grey (The Power House, profiled in *Harper's*, August 1982) and Anne Wexler (see *Harper's*, August 1983) make it their business to bribe government officials. They, of course, don't call it that. They call it "access" and "influence," what Robert M. Kaus describes as terms having a "nice, clean ring to [them], a sort of due-process legitimacy." Add to this the power of the PACs (See TRB in *The New Republic*, December 27, 1982, and the *New York Times*, January 19, 1983), and you've got a powerful case that the people we elect to represent our interests don't really have those interests at heart.

Why be concerned about all this? A good question. Not all politicians are on the take. There are people out there doing good work, and they should be praised and returned to office as often as they can. But the activities of those who do break rules and laws and who give in to "access" and "influence" poison the possibility of all politicians to practice good, clean, relatively effective and morally integrated careers in the public service. Robert Kaus offers four reasons why we should be concerned about all this. One, the possibility of trading on official connections inevitably skews the performance of the officials who acquire those connections toward their own self-interest. Second, "access" is not a neutral commodity. The more money you can afford in order to buy the biggest names, the more votes you inevitably have. A lack of money is equal to muteness. Third, access peddling makes its participants forget what they stand for - and even that there's something worth standing for. And fourth, influence peddling is simply corrupt. It is graft. People should not be able to enrich themselves simply because by chance and luck they have connections with the powerful.

None of this will change, of course, despite the media's much vaunted talk about post-Watergate morality (which usually means laying low until the heat blows over). But we must continuously see that the greatest threat to our

democracy comes from deceit, when those to whom we entrust the charge to act in our best interests use the mechanics of democracy to further their own schemes. Such cynicism guts any political enthusiasm on the part of the electorate. And we get Reagan in return, the greatest shill for the well-connected ever conceived.

Politicians: Part III

For the last two opinions, I have been lambasting politicians and some may be thinking that I'm counseling political apathy, that you should simply throw up your hands in despair and give up on the system. To do that, of course, would give the politicians the kind of triumph they would like, since an uninterested electorate is a pliable electorate. As righteous as it may feel, political apathy is not an available choice (even though over half the electorate chooses it every four years).

The solution is quite the opposite: vigorous and sustained political involvement. In what way? All the politicians spend millions of dollars on TV ads and mailing campaigns. Where is there room for the good ol' volunteer? It's there if you look for it. In presidential races, money is undoubtedly the overwhelming priority since the necessity of blanketing the country requires an expensive use of the information networks. But in the smaller races, in the congressional races, in state elections, in local contests, volunteers coming forward could significantly reduce the amount of money needed to fuel the fires. It would also have the added benefit of drawing upon peoples' better natures, asking for a little bit of altruism in a time when people seem only willing to be paid in money. The politician should really be out there asking for this sort of help instead of being taken in by the hype of the "experts." But the local citizen, if he or she is really concerned about making politics again somewhat of the province of the people who vote, must also step forward and demand that he or she be used.

Political races are not the only political forum for citizens. The world is full of wrongs that need to be righted. Depending on what principles guide you, there is no doubt an organization somewhere that could use your money, time, and effort. During some free moment, drop into your local library and leaf through the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. You will be amazed at the number and diversity of organizations sprouting up like mushrooms. Some are frivolous (like The Curved Dashboard Club) and others offensive (The American White People's Party). But there are scads of groups out there willing to accept voluntary help in their causes. It may not sound like politics to be out helping the local YWCA or organizing the Plant-A-Maple-Tree-On-Main-Street Committee, but anything that increases peoples' involvement in the lives of others and in some way defrays the cost of loneliness, deprivation, or exploitation is a political act and as such is dedicated to helping people have greater control over their lives.

The main thrust of what I'm getting at here, then, is that each citizen must take into his or her own hands the responsibility for his or her own political education. One cannot depend upon the politicians to be adequate mentors, nor can we depend upon capitalistic media to be the disinterested purveyors of clear and sound information. And citizens have by and large given up this responsibility through a combination of several things: 1) their being persuaded by the media and the government that they do not have the smarts to think for themselves (a reality reinforced by the public schools they've attended); 2) their own inherent laziness as human beings; 3) the rich society that has, until recently, made them dangerously comfortable. Self-education is hard work. It means sifting through several publications to find out the biases of writers and thus find out what the truth is. It means writing: letters to the editor, local newspaper columns, journals. It means self-discipline. It means above all a certain kind of moral anger mixed with the humor of Murphy's Law that impels you into the fray and buoys you up during the fight.

Jefferson believed that the essence of a successful democracy is an informed citizenry. He felt that newspapers, as prone as they were to hyperbole, were the best guarantors of that access to information. Well, the technology has changed as has the political shape of things, but Jefferson's dictum still stands. Only now, the education cannot and will not come from the leaders in the society (if it ever did). They have abdicated their role as teachers and have mostly concentrated upon the maintenance of their own status. The resulting vacuum has to be filled by the citizen's own mind, heart, and sweat. Only through this kind of self-education will the electorate again gain the respect of the politicians and gain also the respect for itself. Being informed is hard work, but the alternative - continued dependency upon people who do not and will not have your best interests at heart - is worse, since it is the beginning of a subtle but iron-clad tyranny.

Books

I could, at the drop of the merest invitation to pontificate, gush about the wonder of books. It is a wonder not much talked about anymore, buried as we are under the hype for new "learning systems" and swayed by the fond idea that the computer will somehow increase one's literacy because it uses the alphabet on its keyboard. Yet it is a wonder worth bruiting about, not only because of the pleasant glow of nostalgia it causes, but also because it has a solid political utility to it.

Dylan Thomas said that "my education was the liberty I had to read indiscriminately and all the time, with my eyes hanging out." How often would you hear any such sentiment from the graduates of our public schools, and, for that matter, from our best private schools? Reading in school is a chore. I know - I've assigned enough reading to enough choruses of groans to know that the thought of picking up a book and diligently paying attention to it is, to many, Sisyphus-work. This summer, on their information cards, I had my students list their favorite books and authors, as well as how often they read. The composite list was weighted heavily toward Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., John Knowles, John Irving, J.D. Salinger, Robert Ludlum, Stephen King. A few students, a minority, read what we might consider "good" literature: Dickens, Shakespeare, the Bible. The reading habits were even more interesting. While some stated that they read all the time, most said that they might read a book every two months or five books a year. Some were diligent newspaper and magazine readers, but yet others, if they read magazines, limited themselves to *Time* or *Newsweek* or *Sports Illustrated* or *Reader's Digest*. My students are reading on their own, to be sure, but not particularly intellectual fare and not with any attitude approaching voraciousness. When they talk about "hanging out," they are not talking about their eyes.

Perhaps it is a bit naive on my part to expect them to be better than they are. After all, they lack much of what makes reading both enjoyable and necessary to the human spirit. For them, books are not a primary way to get information. There are less demanding teachers willing to dilute complexities down to platitudes, and media dependent not upon the word but upon a wash of images, sound, and vacuous stereotypes to slip its message (massage?) across. Add this to a culture whose primary requisites are acquisition, anxiety, turbulent uprootedness, and the featherbedding of the self, and we are far away from the yankee desire for

plain living and high learning and closer to some mixture of Tantalus, Circe, and Mae West.

Reading well takes time, and self-discipline, and a certain kind of farmer's appreciation for the heft and texture of solid things. Henry Ward Beecher, hopefully not speaking of a bygone era, said, "Where is human nature so weak as in the bookstore?" You either do or do not know what he means. When I go to Boston I love to go to the Brattle Book Shop. I rarely buy anything; I simply like the feel of being surrounded by books. There is a tactile excitement in wandering up and down the aisles, watching a thousand varieties of script reach out to me, smelling the sweet staleness of a book one or two hundred years old.

This kind of sensual and intellectual experience has been pretty much killed off for my students. The school system deadens the excitement of books by forcing people to read in the most unnatural ways. And since books do not have flashing lights or a place to carve your initials when you've nuked five thousand alien ships, they strike the adolescent as static and dull-witted. Most of all, a voraciousness for books and for the ideas in them, and the demand for time to read and digest, comprises a simplicity anathema to our culture's message. If one reads and gets one's pleasure from the unadorned engagement with the printed page, then there is little else one needs. As Erasmus pointed out in the sixteenth century, "When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes." A person who believes that books and reading is more essential to life than material necessities is dangerous because that person will not consume the coin of the realm for consumption's sake. Instead, he or she asks for the integrity of the mind, and is thus placed by definition in opposition.

Perhaps, then, that is why my adolescents, and the greater portion of American society, are such horrible readers. The schools and the society at large have worked to induce a conformity of attitude and action; reading, contrary to the piety of the President and his commission, would only negate this scheme by allowing people to think for themselves. Despite what the state says to the contrary, the state benefits if most of its members cannot read.

Reading as radicalism? Indeed. It has always been thought to be such, a way to connect minds and actions in order to nullify the existential barriers of space and time. But our culture has gelded that notion rather cleanly. Today one does not read to link up with ideas and writers of the past; it is not an historical activity. It is instead self-massage, a search for thin buns and washboard stomachs and fictional characters who reflect our modern love of avoidance and

safety. Books today are sold as opiates, unregulated by any FDA of the mind. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that there is a great difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and a tired man who wants a book to read. We are, it seems, becoming very, very tired.

"Oh My God!"

We have all heard this Valley Girl phrase take a one-and-a-half gainer from the lips of excited females (and a few males). It seems to be the phrase this summer, stealing a march on such stable slang as mega, awesome, wicked (often paired with awesome), to the max, totally, and excellent. It appears, at least for the summer of 1983, to be the catch-phrase par excellence, the primum inter pares of ejaculations.

But what exactly does the phrase catch? It appears to be attached to excitement or surprise, or at least it helps simulate excitement and surprise. The words can come anywhere in the sentence, being no respecter of grammar, and can be used as a coin to pay for any emotion, from disappointment with the eggs at brunch to the failure of a test. It is a fairly indiscriminate groups of sounds, ready to hire out its emotional guns to anyone and everyone.

But what is even more interesting is what the phrase is not. No one uses it as an appeal to God, as it might be used in the beginning of a prayer, since most people, even if they believe in a god, don't ask him for much anymore; it's easier to get things through MasterCard or Visa. It also has the vice of its virtue. One might as well burp excitedly or string nonsense syllables together, since the effect would be the same. An intricate question now bubbles to the surface: Why would people use a phrase that has no meaning to it to express feelings about situations that supposedly have some importance to them, no matter how small or brief? Doesn't this sound, after all, well, a bit *crazy*?

No, not crazy, but certainly unthinking. Donna Cross, in an essay called "Catchwords," makes the observation that "catch phrases have been used so much and so loosely that they have become a kind of substitute for thinking - an automatic response void of content or meaning." When a group of girls outside my dorm squeal "Oh my God!" because someone got a package of chocolate chip cookies from home, and then I happen to overhear later someone whisperingly say those magic words as she relates how she broke up with some guy she really liked, some sensitivity to and flexibility of the language has been lost. Instead, it is language by numbers, full of insertions that appear to carry meaningful information but which really only indicate that one has banded to the group one is talking to, a kind of insider's lingo. Catch-phrases catch fashionable conformity.

I think even more can be gleaned from this phrase. Why is this phrase primarily the property of girls? Boys on campus rarely ever say it, and if they do, it is not with the squeal and vibrato that girls use. The phrase seems to reinforce a stereotype about females that the girls on campus do not seem especially anxious to get rid of, namely, a heedless, unpurposed, impulsive creature with no more than a catch-phrase and helpless demeanor to her credit. To the extent that this observation carries weight, then the girls are only damaging themselves, not only in the eyes of those around them, but in their own eyes as well since they are building up habits that are extremely difficult to dislodge.

I am not saying that girls should be like guys, since guys have their own set of social expectations to live down to, and don't have life any easier. Both guys and girls have to realize that the world is full of users of language out to manipulate people out of their money and their dignity. Unless people understand how they fool themselves with their own unthinking use of language, the shysters will have a field day. That self-protection beings with the policing of one's own language and the eradication of everything that is thoughtless and stereotyped. That, after all, is what education is about, to be aware of how aware the self needs to be.

The Copper Beech

Something stupendous in trees comes from their solidity, their quiet "thereness." The thick, horny, supple hide of the bark, the zen sibilance of the leaves in wind, the spines of branches grazing the sky, all remind of what we are not now: rooted, continuous, fleshed out and arching upwards. Compared to the mayfly quality of our lives, trees are the closest cousin we have to immortality and eternity, a shuttle for Lachesis' thread of life on a loom much larger and longer-lived than ourselves.

From the library I could watch the huge copper beech from an air-conditioned distance. The tree reminds one of nothing so much as an explosion in freeze-frame. Its dark hueless leaves spill out in rough sharp-eaved parabolas while its trunk spews upward in grey silence a splay of splined branches. From where I sit the tree is perfect, harmony, the roiling symmetry of its presence soothing my jangled asymmetrical nerves.

Then I left the library to stand underneath it and hear, in the echo chamber of my imagination, what it might be saying to me, wanting, of course, to hear about longevity and permanence. But the grey convoluted trunk is splitting in places. Some branches, small ones to be sure, had no leaves, the tributaries dried out. Above me other branches, broken off by wind or intrepid climbers, hung like rabbits in a butcher's shop, waiting for entropy to make a meal of them. The knuckled roots were still strong, spiked into the ground with the force of an irrefutable argument, yet it came clear to me then, as it should have been clear to me all along save for my misty romanticism, that even this magnificent spasm of life will, too, pass away into forgetfulness and disheveled anarchy, no different and no stronger than any mayfly of the moment.

I am always surprised when, in the midst of my machinations for happiness, the obvious boxes my ears, that I will die without choice in the matter. I am not especially depressed by that fact; I see no brutality or denigration in it. On the contrary, it is probably the greatest spur we have to live a full and decent life. Like Thoreau, we should not want to find out that when we come to die we had not lived. The only way, then, to insure that that doesn't happen is to live as if death were imminent; or, as the character in the movie *Breaker Morant* says, "Live every day as if it were your last, because one day you'll be right."

Death puts a gloss on everything in a way an afterlife cannot. If you believe that some god will take care of you in an eternal day-care center (see Twain's

Letters from the Earth about this), then you've no particular impulse to make the best of this life because, by god, you've got an eternity waiting for you just around the corner. Even if there be an afterlife, I think we should forget about it, not only because we have no idea if it is better or worse than the life we now have, but also because it devalues the life you have now by allowing you to skim like a water-skater over the fearsomely beautiful depths of the pond.

But if you don't allow an exemption for an afterlife, you will find that the world around you is suddenly more precious because of the precarious waltz you are sharing with it. Most of us do not look closely enough at the world around us, do not really *see* anything. Oh, we get fleeting light images across our retina, like irritating itches, and we associate these with things we know.

But we never really inspect things in all their detail, in all their "thereness." To do so takes work, and most of us are lazy. To do so takes patience, and most of us are in a hurry. To do so takes humor, and most of us are dour and tired. Think of all the animals that have died for you, all the paper made, asphalt laid, buildings erected, plants grown. Think of all the innumerable connections that bind you to everything else, how, in one way, you are the center of a universe of messages transmitted and received. Think of all this, and more, and an afterlife will pale into the airiness that it really is.

This life, substantial, painful, intricately marvelous, is our only stomping ground; we are responsible for making whatever wine of happiness or bitterness we drink in this life.

What about the fear, you say. I can say nothing about that. Ernest Becker has eloquently spoken about this fear in his *Denial of Death*, the "worm in the apple" as he calls it. The fear of leaving the known, the death of our fantastic brain, the complete and utter absence of our selves from the hands of the earth - all this we try to deny, which leads some to sickness, some to religion, some to existential rebellion, and some to happiness.

It seems to me that the fear one feels is proportional to the life one doesn't lead. A person who tries to live his life so fully that he can have no regrets, or at least only minor ones, on his deathbed is a person who is not afraid to die because he knows what he has seen, knows to the lees the endless repetitiveness and variety of life, and thus has had his curiosity satisfied again and again.

It is only when we are timid, when we refuse to reach out into the life around us, when we hold back from plunging into the stream, that the fear becomes

magnified. Because it is in reality two fears: one, that you will not have lived a full life when you die; two, that when you die you will not have a chance to live a full life. The only antidote to this is to live; the only cure for the fear of death is more life.

Music And The Ants

We went to a concert yesterday afternoon. The music was by Do'a. The place was an outside amphitheater in the quietly rich town of Lincoln, Massachusetts. The afternoon was delightful.

Do'a, if you don't know, is two people, Ken LaRoche and Randy Armstrong, who are proficient on twenty-five instruments from countries around the world. Their music, as Paul Winter has testified, feeds a hungry soul, and on this afternoon, full of sunlight and gossiping breezes, we soaked up their music as if it were water for a thirsty man.

We were sitting outside on folding chairs, all of us quiet and attentive. As I stared meditatively at the patch of ground between my feet I finally noticed, though they'd been there all along, the ants playing Italian traffic near the Coliseum at 5 o'clock, darting off like bits of dark sparklers in every direction, no particular navigation to follow except for whiffs of pheromones and the clicking metronome of instinct.

Now, any run-of-the-mill opinion writer would sit down and write a single allegory about human life, music, blind movement, and purpose. Not I. Well, not exactly. I offer several allegories so that this piece can service several audiences and thereby increase my reputation and fame.

THE CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY: God plays celestial music all the time, the music of His grace, and it is a music to refresh the soul. Yet we in all our creatureliness, in a stupid denial of the soul, go meanly about the earth like ants, following material navigations, deaf to the music that invests the world around us. We hear only the din of our own desires. We are base creatures whom God has chosen to love. We must give in to His love and lift up our head to worship.

THE EXISTENTIALIST ALLEGORY: Of course we're like ants. There's no God anyway, or if there is one, we ought to deny him because he's a mean dude who likes to see people suffer. We're nothing but lonely creatures doing our beingness, finding our essence by our existence. The music? Vibrations of molecules, randomness. If you want to interpret it as music, fine. That's your freedom. We're all free. Too bad.

THE BUDDHIST ALLEGORY: You have within you, brother, both ant and music, both earth and soul, though the former often takes over the latter and you are fooled by illusion, by earthly visions. You must find your original face, extinguish earthly desire, open the mind and have no preconceptions about the nature of things. The ant of worldly want must give way to the music of your own self.

And so on. I suppose I could have added the Sociobiologist Allegory, the Madison Avenue Allegory, the Libertarian Allegory, but enough. Each of these, of course, has a mutual problem: they're not seeing what's really there. Any person mouthing such an allegory has to wrench reality to fit a particular Procrustean bed and thus continually re-forms the world into his or her own image instead of the other way around.

And each has some meta-idea about the way things are. The Christian must presuppose God, a dubious proposition (a "hypothesis" as Laplace called it). The Existentialist must make a virtue of despair; without despair, he is meaningless. The Buddhist must recreate the fiction that man is at the center of the universe and all else is illusion. That meta-idea is like a radio that receives only one frequency. And one frequency does not a good philosophy make, if we can mean by philosophy some explanation of how things hang together.

Of course we all make up the world we live in - that is what the mind does with the information streaming into it. But there is a difference between making a map according to the information we have about the territory "out there" and making up a Narnia that exists nowhere but "in there." There is no allegory to the music and the ants. There are simply facts and questions: Do the ants hear the music? If so, what is it to them? Do they have any information about what sound is? Why can't I hear the ants?

There is no mystery here except the mystery of fact, and that is mystery enough.

In a sense allegories are facts, but they are the facts of a fear, a species of insulation against the fact that each of us will die and be forgotten. But instead of creating fictions to shore up our sense of a crumbling self, we should reverse course, dive more deeply into the world, to find our trusses and pillars. We have to try to understand the ants as ants, not as allegorical pawns. And in the same fashion we must understand ourselves as physical creatures inhabiting a

physical earth full of unlimited unknown fact, possessed of a mind able to delve, solve, and build.

Our Kind And The ETs

When we were at the Do'a concert on Sunday, we were surrounded by people we recognized. Not that we knew them outright as friends or acquaintances, but they were "our kind," an odious phrase, smacking of parochial bigotry, but still true. They were white, mostly middle-aged (around 40 or 50), and prosperous-looking. They all appeared self-assured, like people who simply expect outdoor concerts on Sunday afternoons as part of their lives, as part of life itself. We were wrapped together by more than our chance meeting at the concert; we all expected life to give us good food, comfortable quarters, the blessings of wisdom, and above all possibility. We were not *at the mercy* and knew it. Whatever existential strife anyone had was merely a mild perturbation on a mostly calm sea.

But then there is Salisbury Beach. Just over the New Hampshire/ Massachusetts border, it's a gritty, sticky, steamy amusement park full of the kind of people who do not go to Do'a concerts on Sunday, who would think Do'a meant "door," and who, in many ways, are extra-terrestrials to me. Why? Don't we all share the same basic emotional equipment? Do we not, like Shakespeare's Shylock, bleed the same, weep the same, laugh the same? Aren't we all concerned with the same ends in life, to be happy, secure? On the macroperson level, yes. But it's on the lower levels of particulars that the strangeness creeps in.

I don't use "extra-terrestrials" blithely, to cash in on the bumper crop of silliness raised by Spielberg's movie. I use it for its accuracy. They are "extra" as in "outside," sharing the same earth but filled with quite different and sometimes incomprehensible thoughts and emotions.

Salisbury Beach is full of those glittery tinsely rides that don't so much scare people as make them mildly nauseous and fun-houses that aren't fun and haunted houses that aren't scary. I go there sometimes when I want to get away from the cloistered seriousness of the Academy, truthfully to see how the other seven-eighths live. The people who go there aren't smart. They don't drive BMWs (except as motorcycles), but pick-ups. They don't stroll but clomp around. A lot of them have dirty hands from working with them, and the hair is not expertly coiffed and the clothes tend to jeans (not denims with labels on them) and tee-shirts without animals over the hearts.

They even look different in the face, what my friend calls rough around the edge. The girls and women have hair that is stringy and unSassooned. Their faces are pinched, hard-edged, just lacking the fleshiness that might give them a chance for prettiness. Or they are heavily made-up, with eyeliner strongly stroked over and under the eye, with a mild eye-shadow and noticeably colored lips. The boys and men have the same hard-edge to their features. Sometimes thin moustaches, hardly beards. Hair that will fall into the face like two valves from a part down the middle.

I've had these kinds of people in classrooms. They don't for the most part read, don't like reading at all. They don't reflect much or deeply. They think and reason and calculate, but shallowly, for advantage. They see no utility in thinking for its own sake, no beauty in simply teasing an idea apart. They want a kind of immediacy out of life: quick drunks on the weekends, cars that move fast, fights when they can be had, a man or woman to be with. Their world is not filled Do'a concerts or books or any of the proud accouterments we call civilization. They take from the banquet of life straight doses of technology and not philosophy, urgency instead of reflection, hardliving instead of soft possibility.

I share this country with them, even a kind of overall humanity, but we don't share much beyond that. The shame of that is also the strength of a democracy, that we can all inhabit our niches without having to justify our existence. Yet I belong, for want of a better word, to a class who has the power in this country and who tends to see the country in its own image, as full of educated people mindful of the accomplishments of society who want to be engaged in the exercise of power and the fashioning of the world. Yet the world that gets fashioned are those people at Salisbury Beach. They are the "hard-working decent Americans" Reagan loves to conjure, yet they share little with him, with his ranch and china and perquisites. They are used, not understood, and therefore swept to the side, the fossil of a stereotype.

We are all, then, extra-terrestrials to one another, none of us especially more in tune with the music of the spheres than anyone else. Yet our politics can never really take cognizance of this equality of strangers, can't reflect it in its polity except for the divisive representation of single issues. If industrial policy or any of the other catch-policies is going to work, if social theorists are to have any bedrock, then they must work with the people at Salisbury Beach, must be in a sense initiated by them. But until politicians and the rest of us in that class spur ourselves to know these people instead of ignoring them or using them as

pawns, or as clay to be re-made into our own image, then all our sophistication and knowledge and supposed superiority will be a cannon rolling on the deck, maiming by good intention, killing by willed ignorance.

Clogs

I am not a fancy dresser. My job requires that I wear a suitjacket and tie, and for a while I tried dressing as nattily as I could, but this soon died out when it became too much of a bother. I'm not that much different from the students I teach - I wear a tie that is serviceable even if it will never win awards from *GQ* and the same suitjacket all year: something to fill the form if not the spirit of the rule. Convenience will out.

My attitude toward clothes is pretty much governed by that criterion: convenience. I look for clothes that will last so that I don't have to buy into the planned-obsolescence roulette game: a good pair of workboots, jeans or painter pants, flannel shirts (tee-shirts for the summer), and a useable suit for interviews and the occasional formal party. I have never had the body or the mind to play the clotheshorse scene. With my 29-inch inseam, 32-inch waist, and size 40 coat, I am not what anyone would consider svelte, sleek, suave, or snappy. And never having had great quantities of money to spend on clothes, I've never acquired the addiction for designer appearances that some males and many females have. My mother used to buy my clothes: I wore what was in the closet.

A couple of times I decided to break out of this rut. When I was a teenager in the infamous 60s, I bought a pair of hip-hugger pants, with a zipper about three inches long, and a string of beads. But the beads came unstrung quickly, scattering wildly over the floor at a high school dance, and the hip-huggers felt as if they were in imminent danger of sliding down to my ankles at any minute. I could never co-ordinate the picture of the free-loving adolescent hippy with the geography of my body and my tastes, so I settled for Ken Kesey novels and incense. The only other sartorial excursion was when I bought myself an Edwardian-cut suit, with the slightly flared skirt at the waist and the clanging bell-bottom pants. I looked like Disraeli when he was accused of looking like a French dancing master. Out it went, and so it goes.

In all my clothes-wearing life I have never run into anything like stares or questions about what I was wearing and why. As I said, I dress mainly for convenience and comfort, and that usually means a fairly low-key look. Last summer, however, I decided to buy a pair of clogs because I was tired of the chore of tying shoes, a conspiracy for time-wasting and frustration if ever one existed. (That is also partly the reason I have a beard, for the simple fact that I

hate wasting the time on the barbarism (pardon the pun) of scraping my face every day. A slight trim is all the tonsorial reconstruction I need.) Suddenly I started getting comments and stares about these wooden shoes.

People are not as shy about this as you might expect them to be; they feel quite free to comment openly. Children are perhaps the worst. I was once walking down the concourse of a mall and a little girl stuck out her finger and said to her mother "Why is he wearing girl shoes?". Other children will point and run to their parents with whispered questions. I've had students ask me why I wear girl shoes, whether I wear them all the time (I do, up until the first snow), and, gall of gall, why would a man ever wear such things. In Europe, I understand, men wear wooden shoes all the time without comment. Something very American is going on here.

I think the clogs confound peoples' ideas of what a man is, or at least what a man should look like. He should not look like a girl, which is euphemistic for not being a homosexual. My clogs, combined with my earring (yes, I have one), jar expectations, and at the same time set in motion subconscious prejudices firmly planted by parents, friends, television, and cultural norms. And to American males, who have never really been encouraged (or allowed) to be fashionable unless they happened to be homosexual (in which case they weren't really "men"), the clogs represent a sort of cultural betrayal. I seem to be both male and not-male, and since I don't fit neatly anywhere, I cause confusion, and therefore consternation. For instance, I've had my colleagues in the department chide me for wearing my clogs as a kind of adolescent rebellion! Yet their flash of brightly-colored Nike sneakers is accepted as mature and stylish because it falls within the perimeters of the male uniform.

All of this is so foolish. Fashion is froth, insubstantial puffery, despite the money it generates and the history it commands, and one should heed Thoreau's declaration that he would never think less of man who wore at patch at his knee. We would *all* do better to dress more simply and with less attachment to image. Barring that impossible revolution, however, I think we should all encourage whatever expands and increases the possibilities for male clothing in this society, anything that loosens up prejudices. Perhaps then the men, as the song in *Hair* suggests, might regain their place alongside the males of other species, baring their rightful plumage to an admiring world and banishing their willful blandness to the back of the closet.

Boredom

At our last faculty meeting we expelled three boys for being outside the dorms without permission after check-in. According to the procedure, we hear an explanation of the incident by the student before the faculty votes. In each of the narratives we heard, one common theme exposed itself: boredom. Each of them left the dorm because he was bored. And from the sound of their pleas to be allowed to stay at the Academy, they believed boredom a good enough excuse to break rules they knew should not be broken, and certainly a good enough excuse for absolution.

My students talk often about being bored, about "having nothing to do." And by "do" they mean the usual entertainments of our culture: cinemas with ten screens, rock concerts, dances, parties, cruising in automobiles. From their complaints and the testimonials of the three ex-Exonians, boredom appears to be a major epidemic infecting the imagination, atrophying curiosity and inventiveness, enervating motivation and resourcefulness. Is it true?

My first tendency is to chide them, remind them of what Helen MacInness once said: "Nothing is interesting if you're not interested." But I realize that that is not the case at all. True, some of the fault for their malaise lay with themselves, with the deficiencies of their own spirit. But this is blaming the victim. Much more of the fault for their boredom comes from the thin oxygen of our society. Everything they do, everything most people do, is, in fact, done *for* them. They may go to a movie for something to do, but in reality they go to have something done *to* them. That's what they pay their $5 for: to be laved with effects, to be mildly lifted and painlessly edified. Creative energy is spent in finding things *to do*, not generating things to satisfy the fullness or desperation of the spirit.

What my students are saying is symptomatic of modern man's greatest burden: living with the comfort he has technologically created for himself. Anyone who has worked on an operating farm knows that there is very little time - or need - to question if what one is doing fits what one wants to do, whether means and ends coincide. The Sisyphean rock of "chores" is the ubiquitous answer. The daily armistice farmworkers must make with reality anneals mind and body so that body and mind are not out of joint.

But when the bulk of society's work is service-oriented, that is, geared toward everyone taking in everyone else's laundry, then very little substance is produced, "substance" being something palpable that can be used as a

measure of progress or accumulation. When the day's work is erased by the five o'clock Monday-through-Friday Daytona 500, when a person looking down at his or her desk sees merely yesterday's landscape slightly rearranged, then it is difficult to feel that one's efforts has any worth or durability. To earn money in this fashion is, in a sense, to earn hemlock, with the ironic twist that the more money one earns, the slower the death.

Thus the boredom that my students speak about is real and corrosive. It describes both the sparseness of their own imaginations and the paradoxically rich emptiness of the culture that enfolds them. It is not a failure of character. They are reacting in the only way they know how to the world in which they live. When that world does not offer enough clinquant goodies for their delectation, they understandably feel adrift because the only tactics they have learned, like the adults they emulate so well, is to consume. Or, rather, to be consumed by the things they consume, to be nothing more than the evanescent entertainments that amuse and stimulate them. And when the lights go out and the music stops, so do they, in a manner of speaking. For those three boys to act as if boredom were a self-evident defense is perfectly logical, no matter how intellectually distasteful it may feel to the jury.

But there is nothing inevitable about any of this. Life is best lived as a balancing act, in a constant flux that does not reach extremity (or reach it too often). The only way to achieve this is to make sure that our immensely talented imaginations get exercised. Our hands need something to mold; our eyes require geometry; our hearts need to sense triumph; our brains demand malleable conundrums. The more society fragments - the more different people do different things for different people at different times - the less chance one has to ride herd on those forces that can directly affect one's happiness and mental health. There comes a time when one has to stop being part of the cattle and become a drover instead.

My students, as adolescents, have little enough chance to ride herd on anything. Yet they hold on to the faith that as they become adults, gain their driver's licenses and the right to drink legally, they will somehow find a fulfillment they do not now possess. But they will only find more of the same ennui they experience now; they haven't learned the habit of happiness. We would do well to heed what Bertrand Russell once said, that "boredom is a vital problem for the moralist since half the sins of mankind are caused by fear of it." That fear is also tinged with self-loathing and the various lesser cousins of self-loathing:

laziness, passivity, apathy, willed ignorance. This is the legacy our adolescents, as well as ourselves, are inheriting. The three boys asked to be excused because of boredom. There should be no excuse for it at all.

Winter

When Shakespeare began *Richard III* with the line "Now is the winter of our discontent," he began with the wrong season. Summer, for any right-thinking yankee American, is the season of discontent, with its ague of humidity and its hysteric behavior where people take clothes off bodies that should not, by reason of good taste, be exposed. In the summer people frantically cram vacation down their throats, trying to fatten themselves like geese so that they may enjoy a good meal of themselves. But it never works since pate never gives pleasure to the goose and it's the hotel merchants and the bric-a-brac shopkeepers and restaurant owners who have the best dining since, like lucky hunters, their prey willingly serves their snares. Summer has all the disadvantages and none of the benefits of temptation, ratcheting the desires up tight with devilish enticement but never offering a spasm worth the twinge, or even the satisfaction of an indulgent remorse over one's sins. Summer is cheap seats, Dairy Queen soft ice-cream, crumbs in the bottle of the cold water bottle.

Well, all right, summer does have some virtues, like a boring man who at least dresses well. It makes the crops grow and provides us with the amply common miracle of turning mucky brown sillioned fields into lenses of green and gold that soften the harsh edge of living's light. It makes the ocean usable to swimmers, especially here in New Hampshire, which is no mean feat. It does slur a bit winter's tight-lipped sternness, forces up the ends of the mouth into a somewhat smile, so that people do not feel totally like slaves to routine or concubines of necessity. The livin' *is* easier, and we should always be thankful for respite no matter how it's packaged.

But as the winter lover will tell you, nothing is ever gotten without a little transaction being necessary, an ounce of flesh here, the dashing of a delusion there. One of the great illusions of summer is that one doesn't really need to work, one is free to enjoy life and go with the flow. The real moral of the fable about the ant and the grasshopper is not that work proves the virtuousness of the individual but that work makes life have meaning. A season that endorses the notion that work can now be avoided, that work is in fact something different than the true enjoyment of life, exacts a high price: atrophy of self-discipline, self-indulgence without self-understanding, the illusion of comfort. The only thing the Devil need have shown Jesus on the mountaintop is summer; it would have fit his sales pitch perfectly and saved him some time.

So what recommends the great and glorious winter, this season of content? First of all, many people don't understand winter. Where they see summer as the doffing of necessity's girdle, they see winter as just the opposite, as confinement and negation, the natural equivalent of puritan frigidity and being sent to bed without supper.

But the opposite is really true. Winter is a time of expansion, reviving the creative powers narcotized by summer's sloth. It hones reality down to inescapable essentials: warmth, decent food, serviceable clothing, proportional thought, considered action, and thus releases us from the sirens of suntan oil, Walkmen, and the illusions of a freedom that asks no questions. Winter helps us measure ourselves because it resists us and does not protect our cherished myths about superiority or talent. It is a harsh-lighted mirror that constantly throws back to us what we are not and what we need to become.

Where summer is sand that shifts, winter is crazed ice over purling water, a hard cast that holds our weight yet speaks in soft tones of one element in two versions, just as we in ourselves hold the ice of death and the free water of imagination.

I speak here of New England winter. Where winter is longer it becomes as dreary as a South Seas summer. And the winter I think of most often is the winter Thoreau must have spent at (and on) Walden Pond. A cabin ten by fifteen heated from a fireplace built with his own hands, his woodshed a few steps from his front door. The closest sign of life is the railroad a few rods from him; Concord's a mile and a half away. As the shingles of his cabin grew more weathered during his first summer there, they must have blended well with the surrounding forest during that first winter, the way an animal's fur changes to fit the changed scenery around it. He was as much one with his world as a human being can be. By investigating it, he investigated himself. The depths of the pond he recorded so dutifully were also his own depths; the obdurate ice that hid the sluggish fish below was his own mind filled with slow animal thoughts.

Thoreau could not have done what he did if it were summer. He needed a world of contrasts in order to find comparisons. He needed a restricted world in order to find what was free and unlimited. He needed a world freed of the static of material desire, even of emotional desire, so that it could hear and mine the silence of a chilled December night.

vOur modern world, freed as it has been by the emancipator technology, is in part filled with too much summer, too much that simply *is* without question

or explanation or balancing contrast. A strong dose of Thoreauvian winter, both literal and figurative, would remind us of essentials, and the coldness that surrounds us might be balanced by the warmth of discovery and explanation.

Suck

In George Orwell's *bildungsroman* "Such, Such Were the Joys...," he talks about having "suck" with the headmaster and his wife. "Suck" was pull, influence, an insider's hand that got the sucker sweets, attention, position. The term also had its smarmy side, as Orwell explains with an unflinching saddened anger. Inevitably, having suck abraded any self-dignity a person might feel down to simple self-interest, reduced altruism to calculation. In a word, individuality got bought off and any impulses to rebel against the arbitrary despotism of the headmaster and his wife were shunted like old rail cars to a sideyard of envy, greed, and bitching one-upmanship. Orwell, through the lens of his gawky adolescence, focuses for us the dry rot of tyranny, the unavoidable ossifying of the soul that the pursuit of favor incurs.

But is there anything really wrong with this? Isn't this how the world works? You have to go along to get along, the politicians say, and we all have our tales of compromise. Perhaps Orwell is wrong, merely cranky because he could never get suck, and he simply disguised his crankiness and failure in his usual smooth prose. Don't we, after all, have an obligation to look out for ourselves?

The answers to these questions are not easily extracted from the world; they depend in large part upon how powerless one is. To one who has in some sense arrived, who has enough money to pay bills and enough leisure to enjoy money left over, it's easy to argue that integrity ought to be preserved at any cost precisely because one's integrity is not being challenged. One is not racked by any particular envy, not subservient to any interest (even if one is a subordinate at one's job), and answers largely to one's own drummer. This is an easy integrity, an integrity by default because unchallenged by any venom, an integrity of righteousness.

But the answer is not so easy for someone who dances to another's piper. Integrity at that point becomes only one among other options, to be donned when the occasion demands or permits. The only route for the powerless to travel toward the crumbs dropped by the powerful is, to borrow Paul Simon's phrase, to "slip-slide away," play the Artful Dodger among egos built like the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. At these murky depths, surety is not so clear. While the moralist in the bathysphere may believe he's penetrated the darkness, the truth is that the lantern fish prowling the darkness for each other with their phosphorescent twinges of bait rule this ethical niche.

Isn't there something absolute, though, some dike that needs no fingers? Must everything be relative, subject to political negotiation? Let's take Phillips Exeter Academy, touted by *Time* as "the most prestigious secondary school in the country." In the deed of gift, John Phillips declared in 1781 that the essence of the Exeter education was the teaching of goodness with knowledge and the learning of the real business of life. If any place is a mecca for educational and ethical sanity, Exeter would seem the best candidate, a place which appears to preserve some version of the absolute pieties.

Yet it only takes a semester before one starts hearing about "college suck," those things which, when on the resume, will sufficiently impress an admissions officer to recommend a student for election. I hear students recommend to each other doing one activity or another for suck, regardless if the activity is enjoyable or not. The students get the message clearly and quickly, as they usually do: You gotta have a job, right? Right. And it's better to have a job that pays a lot? Right again. And you gotta get into a good college, better an Ivy than UNH, to get the papers that get you the job? Right three times. So I'm going for suck because if I don't, I'm not gonna get my Betamax.

Unimpeachable logic, of a sort, and a logic that we faculty don't do much to dissuade. Oh, we talk long and earnestly with students about learning for its own sake and the importance of answering to one's own conscience, and it takes with a few students; but it's mostly palaver. Our actions here speak more loudly. We say not to be overly-concerned with grades, we even chide students for being "grade-grubbers," yet we don't change the system so that grades aren't a temptation. We talk about not going to college and instead going out to discover the world. Yet we maintain an athletic college placement office that begins its indoctrination at the beginning of the junior year. The students have the inside story: the "real business" of life is to do the things that get you somewhere, that give "suck." The rest - exhortations to the joy of learning - is blather.

So even the best at its very best replays the old conundrum: the powerful, the faculty who are comfortable and adult, offer to the powerless, the adolescents, an empty ethic, an ethic not good for another decade or so. The powerless, in their turn, go about business as they see it. Perhaps Orwell, then, was being merely ethically archaic when he detailed the damages of suck, a man superbly out of touch with his age.

And yet that assertion just doesn't sit right. The students may be right about how they see things, but it's not a "right" in the end worth being right about.

For suck is never done without a cost, an arrears in the soul that manifests itself in dissatisfaction and anxiety and emotional discord. Of course the ethical repugnance of suck needs to be balanced with the real-life necessity of compromise, but in the end suck ought not to become a habit because the price is too high. No matter what the cost, integrity is the better, if not the easier, option.

Cyril Connolly, in his book *Enemies of Promise*, says that Orwell as a child was never a "stage rebel" but a real one. Suck is stage rebellion, integrity, real rebellion. We faculty would do better to teach *that* real business rather than the business exposed by our hypocrisy, and we would all do better to do less stage managing and more living.

Gerry Studds

My friend Paul (not his real name) is bisexual. Or should I say he is *a* bisexual? The difference the article makes is important: it is the difference between whether one considers bixsexuality an adjectival condition, as a mere appendage to a noun, or a state of being existing in its own right. Another way to state the difference is the gulf between toleration, with its varying degrees of sufferance, and acceptance, which implies some level of equality.

Paul, who lives in Berkeley, is tying up the loose ends of Ph.D. on bisexuality, specifically the effect of bisexuality on families. He does part-time counseling work at a center for bisexuals and has done other counseling work with homosexuals and lesbians. He is also in two relationships, one with a man and the other with a woman, who, in the fashion of French farce, met one evening at a party given by Paul. While it may be true, as Woody Allen says, that being bisexual doubles your chance for a date on Saturday night, it also doubles the usual miscommunications between humans. Oh well, so it goes. Paul is happy, living as he does in a community which accepts and nourishes him, and that is what matters most.

Of course, however, the Berkeley/San Francisco axis is not quite representative of the rest of our society, either in population or thought patterns. And that, to some degree, is a shame. For whatever hysteria the AIDS news causes, no matter the number of *Time*-type articles on the changing homosexual lifestyle, the fact remains that people who do not fit the mold of the typical American male and female nonetheless have a chance to live there openly and with some degree of dignity and power. This may gall some, infuriate others, but it is simply what membership in a democratic society promises. The fact that many people, who would consider themselves staunch supporters of democracy, can not stomach the thought and act of tolerance for certain groups broadcasts a great deal about how much farther we have to travel as a society before we give up the false saintliness of tolerance and blossom into the true democratic virtue of acceptance.

Of course, tolerance, to some extent, is necessary in life. It is something like social oil that lubricates the passing frictions of many unlike people occupying the same space and time. Politeness is another term for this sort of tolerance, a holding off from the more visceral reaction to punch the bus driver in the nose when he won't take your transfer, a holding open of doors for people we

don't know. Yet, as Herbert Marcuse showed many years ago, tolerance can be repressive when its primary purpose is to disenfranchise a group from sharing power. Women, for instance, were tolerated in the work force as long as they kept their mouths shut and did the work they told to do, and this, according to Marcuse, is just as repressive as outright political imprisonment because it infects them with a sense of futility and takes away any desire for political redress.

Homosexuals in today's society must also suffer this repressive tolerance, feeling forced for the most part not to divulge themselves for fear of an Anita Bryant-style purge. It's a betrayal of our democratic heritage and rhetoric for this to happen to any group in society, and yet we betray ourselves all the time. We do not look to the more honorable course of acceptance but instead give in to the laziness of prejudice. The fact that Jerry Falwell can state in all seriousness and be believed that AIDS is a spanking from God (his word) of a society that has lost its moral compass is a disheartening fact. It shows a drawing away from the inescapable vigilance democracy entails into an egotism that many defend as their inalienable right to privacy but which is simply meanness of sprit and pettiness of mind. Tolerance, after all, reduces our capacity for responsiveness, cauterizes the willing of a better nature.

Rose K. Goldsen, that perdurable fount of common sense residing at Cornell University, recently gave a talk on the social effects of the new information technology. She made some very prescient remarks about the nature and possibility of democracy. She said that the thrust of this new technology is to "privatize" personal time, that is, make everyone draw into himself or herself more strongly since there will be less and less impetus to engage the world directly, even through such mundane activities as grocery shopping. The effect of this would be to devalue democracy. To her, the essence of democracy is empathy, the ability to be in the place of those people who are not like us, and to accept their existence as valid and equal in importance to one's own. Without this vital elixir, democracy shrivels down to tolerance, to neighborhoods of sealed-off emotions and thoughts suffering barely the existence of one another.

The issue of homosexuals presents us with the same challenge. Either we accept them into this society as equal participants, or we do not have a democracy worth the name. A good test of this principle will be Gerry Studds, the recently censured Congressman from Cohasset. In his televised speech before the House he made an important distinction. On the one hand, he said, it was

no one's business what he did with his private life, least of all the Congress. Yet it was clear that he meant by this that it was not anyone's business to know and then condemn, to use the knowledge as a buttress of prejudice. Instead, he implied, it is our business to know and then understand, to have, in Goldsen's words, empathy with those who are not like us. If people can understand that, if they can refrain from making his future political campaigns referenda on his homosexuality and instead vote him in because he's a good politician and a decent human being, then we all will have gained a measure of maturity and our democracy will have gained another corroboration of its worth.

Spirits In The Material World

When I was in college, during my freshman year, in fact, I discovered Henry David Thoreau, the patron saint of simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. He was an emotional purgative for my triumvirate of poisons: loneliness, drift, and adolescence. (Perhaps that is all one poison after all.) His cabin by the pond became my philosophical mecca. During my sophomore year I experimented; I owned nothing (beyond my books, my bicycle, a desk, and a chair) that I could not carry on my back. I slept in a sleeping bag on a bare floor. I did a wash every other day (yes, I used the machines - no pond was nearby with an available rock). I tried to cut off my liaison with material possessions so that my soul would not be bartered for them. I wanted to see how I would change under the onslaught of simplicity.

I lived like that for a year. At first I suffered from what could only be called the materialist equivalent of hunger pangs. I found myself wanting to buy a poster, one tiny poster, to adorn the bare walls of my room. I wanted my stereo back, and I wanted to buy records to put on it. Worst of all, perhaps, was food, for I had vowed to eat as simply and as infrequently as my stomach would let me. This meant no in-between meal snack, no late-night pizzas, none of those prandial amenities that make eating a luxury, that allow the delight of satisfied cravings.

But that soon changed, and more quickly than I had thought possible because, to my mind, the poisons of materialist appetites went all the way back to the cradle. I soon found an interesting peace residing in my veins, peace like a silence after a great static. I found it easier to concentrate on my work, easier to judge what was of value to think about, above all, simply easier to live. I wasn't fettered with a constant uneasiness about the worth of my life since I had decided to judge my life not by how many cravings I satisfied but by how much progress I made in the direction of my ideas. The only metaphor I had at the time to describe myself was from *Walden*: the pond's ice breaking up in the spring with great whoops of release as the rotten ice melted under the zephyred assault of spring. I ended my experiment with well-tempered mettle, and refurnished my room and all my cravings.

I went into teaching partly to continue the results of that experiment. I wanted to be of some service to people, in this case adolescents in need of ideas and guidance, and share the peace I'd found in clear thinking and direct action. I had also chosen teaching because I never would be tempted to get rich

at it and would always do it, if I always did it, for the delight and necessity of the work. It seemed the perfect mix of profession and ideal, one that would please the curmudgeon of Concord.

And yet...The other day my wife and I went to a stereo liquidation sale, the sort of sale that seems just one step above buying out of the backs of vans late at night. I hadn't intended to buy anything except cassette tapes, yet I ended up paying out $600 for a stereo system worth over a thousand. I didn't *need* the stereo since I already had one, but I *wanted* it and saw no reason not to give in to the impulse. Yet even while my wife was making out the check and I marveled at the new gadgets, a voice like a flute edging out over a late-evening pond sounded deep within me. Had I changed, I thought, had I become one of those materialists that Thoreau had fought against in his life? Had I become nothing other than what everyone else was, a captive of advertising, a hapless consumer? Even now as I listen to the wonderfully full music coming out of the machine, the voice still nettles me.

This, then, is my apologia to Thoreau. Henry, you railed, and rightly so, against the creeping and corrosive entrepreneurism of your society because you saw how it atrophied the higher instincts, reduced everything to a cash nexus. Your formulation of worth is just as valid today as then: the cost of anything is the amount of life it took to get it. Yet you always talked about the *price* of life; because you never owned much you could not understand the enjoyment of *owning*. Yes, you were right to condemn the farmers mortgaged up to their ears, because their ownership could only bring them sorrow and frustration. You were right to excoriate the money-lenders in the temple because their commercialism did not enlighten life but weighed it down.

And yet...Listen to the continent music that comes rolling from these speakers. Go to the delightful concerts my car take me to. Peruse in envy the hoards of books my civilization makes available to me. Look at the poetry I can create from dance, even though I must earn endless amounts of money to take classes to do it. Am I, then, one of the whited sepulchers, one of those young men pushing his farm and possessions down the road while the birds fly in freedom? Will I not get through the eye of your needle? Or is it different for me, Henry? Can you listen to this Beethoven, something you never heard in your life, and tell me my money is ill-spent, that I wasted life to get this? I don't think so.

My materialism is not what you condemned because it's the continuation by other means of the search that began in scintillating naïveté that sophomore

year. I buy books and music and the means to store and use them because I, too, and looking for that simplicity which is synonymous with beauty which is synonymous with reality in all its fullness.

Thankfully, though, the voice is still there, a counter-ballast to the Vanity Fair of my life, still forcing me to correct my course and justify my ways to myself. Because of him I'll always be living out of my back pack, trying to keep what is useful and meticulously real.

The New Hampshire Farm Museum, Part I

Yesterday I spent a marvelous day at the New Hampshire Farm Museum in Milton, New Hampshire. I used the word "marvelous" in its more or less natural state, as a description of being filled with wonder and astonishment. The occasion was the Museum's annual Farm Day, a time when the museum's keepers drag out all their old equipment and call upon the good will of local and not-local craftsmen (craftspeople? artisans?) to set up a retrospective of life through the various centuries of this country's existence. It was a relaxed and fairly unsystematic gossip about how things got done "back then," a casual intimacy with history.

As I walked onto the grounds and paid my two-dollar entry fee (a bargain, really, when one thinks about the unsatisfying fare at the local movie conglomerate), the first exhibit was a walk-through display of the various domestic skills a woman needed to keep her family together: looming cloth, grinding corn for meal, churning butter. I was impressed, as I always am, with the simple animal strength it took to do what we would consider mundane household chores. For instance, they had an old washtub there (which was certainly an improvement on the washboard and ringer) with a series of wooden rollers on the bottom of the tub and a rocker assembly that was depressed by a foot treadle. Between this sandwich went the clothes, to be rubbed back and forth across the rollers by a swinging motion of the rocker. To do a simple load of laundry meant pumping iron; and this was simply one of the tasks that a normal daily routine called for.

But what is even more interesting to see, aside from the relative brutishness that early life must have had for its inhabitants, is how people figured out how to do it more easily. For example, I watched a woman drop-spindle wool into thread, a laborious process that, for all its tediousness, by no means guaranteed a uniform-sized thread. To gather the thread for a good-sized shirt required a dulling of the senses we would scarcely countenance today. Yet, a few feet down the row was a spinning wheel, a quantum leap in efficiency and ease over the drop spindle. Another example is grinding corn. Early on, people would pound the corn into meal inside a hollowed log with a pestle made from the root of a tree. The kernels jumped all over the place (I tried it) and the meal was by no means fine. Later, however, when things were more flush, one could get the grinder that shucked the kernels off the cob, and then the hand mill that made a meal not coarse or gritty. And even later the one-lunger engine could do the milling for

you. I'm sure I don't have my centuries right, but it's clear to anyone that people used their brains in a way we don't have much call for today: to solve problems of how to save muscle energy, how to more easily get one thing from there to there. It was a wrestling match with material substance the likes of which we (at least in the industrialized countries) have pretty much given up today.

After the domestic exhibit I wandered to other displays. I saw flax being woven into threads, from its initial retting to the final unwinding from the distaff. (This process has a most interesting language: retting [the soaking of the flax to rot it], scutching [dragging the fibers across a curved wooden block], distaff [the football-shaped spindle for the fibers], and a few other terms I can't remember.) I watched a builder cut mortises and tenons with old chisels; a wood-hewer with his broadhead axe and two-man saw; old one-lunger engines that milled grain and cut logs and ground bone into meal; a stonecutter split a massive piece of granite in twain; a wheelwright fit a rubber tire to an old carriage wheel; a beekeeper separate the honey from the comb. I even picked up a recipe for goat's milk cheese.

And then there were the animals: draught horses as large as a small cabin and a pair of oxen that were six feet at the shoulder and weighed a ton-and-a-half apiece, along with the usual gaggles of baby geese, lambs, chickens, and rabbits (one of which was an angora, whose fur was being woven into thread as it calmly sat in the spinner's lap and allowed the old hair to be pulled free). A tour through the restored farm house and a chicken barbecue capped the day.

But not quite. The activity that amazed me most was dowsing. Again, I use "amazed" in its old sense of bewilder. I had no opinion one way or the other about dowsing, figuring that I'd simply hire a drilling company when I finally had my land. But now I don't know. The man who was directing the exhibit had a slew of forked branches (and even a twisted rubber tube) which he handed out to people to try. I jumped in, took up the branch the way he showed me, and I'll be damned if that branch did not dip down on its own to point at water. (We were walking over the site of an old well.) I tried it several times with different branches and from different directions, and each time it did the same thing, as if drawn by some magnet.

The dowsing brought together in my mind (and for this essay) what I had been feeling all day , a kind of wholesomeness and simplicity that came from watching and doing, however vicariously, the actions of people who tried to make life as good as they could by using their brains and muscles to do it. They had an

affinity for the earth and for reason that we seem to have given up. The dowsing made me see that quite strongly. I had no trouble feeling the pull, but there were people traipsing all over the grounds who could not. But, most amazing of all amazing things, the old man would take one of their hands and one end of the branch and walk with them, and that branch would dip as easily as an old fox-trotter at a dance marathon. He shared whatever power he had with people who had none, and, to some degree, the Farm Day did that as well, reminding us of a time when people had to be more resourceful with their lives, and were closer to what we all intuit as reality, to the connectedness of man and planet, idea and action, harmony hidden in diversity. It satisfied, for a short time, our dowsing souls in a parched world.

The New Hampshire Farm Museum, Part II

I ended the last opinion with an encomium about dowsing. I said that dowsing showed, in microcosm, the connectedness that people back then felt with the life around them, the sensitivity to reality that we have lost with our greater insulation against nature. I do not mean this poetically at all. I am not rhapsodizing about the "good ol' days," especially days I really know nothing about and which were a couple of centuries outside my time. I'm simply saying that because people then had to wrestle with material substance in order to grind out a living from the earth, they had access to a balance and self-peace that we modern people have by and large cut ourselves off from.

Being a modern human being is hard work in itself, though, a kind of work at which our ancestors probably would not be good. Marshall Berman, in his fine book about the coming of modernism, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (a phrase taken from Marx), details the severe contradictions and paradoxes modern people have to shoulder: material enrichment along with an alienation of the soul, enormous sprees of city-building along with greater divisions between people, greater personal freedom along with fewer standards by which to make choices. All of this causes, as Freud points, civilizations and its discontents. Yet this disconnected world, this bundle of neuroses and confusions alongside massive material wealth and unparalleled opportunity, is ineradicably our world, one that we cannot and probably would not choose to give up.

We have learned to live with the dynamism of this culture so well, have learned the balancing act on this knife's edge that passes for today's version of harmony, that despite all our longings for the days when life was simpler, we would not want to have them because they would be stale and motionless. For a while, yes, we wouldn't mind being there. That's why people flock to colonial Williamsburg and Sturbridge Village and tolerate excessive crushes of people to go camping and do not want to be denied single-family house all their own. Yet we really only want to visit, only grab a bite of inner peace and then be off again, because we recognize, however much below the level of words, that nostalgia can only provide a respite but not an alternative. So we ooh and aah at the weavers and blacksmiths and the calm canopy of stars overhead (as we also listen to the radio we happened to bring with us) and then go back to our opportunities.

For we also recognize, no matter how consciously, that while they may have had some sort of symmetry to their lives, they worked awfully damn hard to get it, and that that work in the end restricted the choices they had in their lives. Some people might think that a good, this kind of restriction, arguing that permissiveness and an open field have destroyed morality, by which they mean decisions already made and not to be argued about.

But none of us today would welcome the kind of restraints a 19th-century farm life would bind upon us. It was difficult, constant work, the kind of work that makes most of what we do with our lives paltry by comparison. All you needed to do is walk down that row of devices at the Farm Museum and feel in your biceps the energy it took to churn butter or grind corn or cut the timbers for a house and you would appreciate, even if you did not approve of, the Cuisinarts and chainsaws and ready-to-bake boxes of cornbread that are our legacy.

While we may have fragmented our culture by turning it into a service economy, we have also profited immeasurably from the freedom we've gained by not having to do so much ourselves. The brute strength necessary to survive and prosper on a 19th-century farm may have had its pleasures in a simpler and more direct life, but that was in part achieved by a dulling of desires and the minimizing of opportunities. And none of us today, even those in the depths of existential angst, would trade. We want the distillate of their times, but the compensations of our own.

And even our ancestors recognized this need for ease and possibility, otherwise they would never have invented the technology to make life easier. Historians talk a lot about the changes wrought by technology, but they often talk in massive terms. Small changes were happening all the time as people tried to figure out how to save a little muscle here, doing something more efficiently there.

Our life today is our inheritance from their efforts. While they may not have wanted to create a world that seems as disjointed as the one in which we live, they set certain patterns, politics, and expectations in motion which we still continue to borrow from and modify. Our world is in a sense their world as well, just as my manhood is connected, even though different from, my childhood. We should not bemoan the differences in life and mewl about the "good ol' days" but instead understand what it was then that allows us to be us now. Only then will we be able to achieve the sense of harmony and balance we accord our ancestors, an equanimity achieved by understanding connections, in this case

historical instead of agricultural. We are not so disjunct as a culture that we can't tie together our disparate parts and reach an inner peace equal to, and as durable as, that supposedly residing in our historical cousins.

The farm day was fun and I intend to use a lot of what I learned on my own farm when I get it. But I am also very glad that I can walk down to the hardware store and not only buy my nails and lumber but also electrical outlets and in the evening switch on my stereo for the divine music of Beethoven.

Ultimate Questions

Right now I'm slowly making my way through Hans Kung's *Does God Exist?*, an 800-page tome whose ultimate answer, with elaborate erudition, is simply "Yes."

Kung's title is the *primum inter pares* of ultimate questions. Also included in the brood of which Kung's title is patriarch are questions which have troubled people all through time: what is the nature and purpose of life? what is the nature and purpose of the individual human being? do we have a soul? is there life after death? These questions have propelled people to do incredible and monstrous things, to found monasteries and spark long personal quests, but also to mortify the flesh and justify the worst excesses of massacre and inquisition. We have then deduced from all the energy and concern expended on finding the answers to the questions that the questions themselves are important, are worthy of our attention and somehow evoke what is noble in our characters. That, however, may a mistaken assumption.

When I was a teenager I was taken over by these questions. As a serious Catholic, a Catholic boy seriously contemplating a career with the Trappists, these questions were the meat-and-potatoes of my religious existence, my reason for being. And when the religious impulse died under some very expert tutoring by a priest who was later defrocked, the intensity of the questions still persisted, fueled by the usual idealism of adolescence. I soon began to take on a casual Keatsian air, the young romantic unwilling to soil himself with questions of mundane reality, but who instead kept his sights on the celestial nature of things, who, in his own mind, was a noble character because he dared to ask and face the essentials questions of life.

I continued this innocent sentimentality on into my first years at Harvard, where my airiness could be nourished by a 5-million volume library and hordes of intelligent and committed teachers. I searched among the various philosophies and religions for answers, I argued long hours with roommates over minor points of meaning, I wandered in existential angst up and down the banks of the Charles. In short, I indulged in the life of the knight errant in quest of the Grail, feeling sterling because tragic, justified because unsuccessful.

This may sound foolish but I assure you I was dead serious about all this. The problem, of course, was that I was getting nowhere. I continued to be racked by unappeased desires for certainty, and certainty, in the form of answers to

those questions, was simply not available. As much to take my mind off these problems as to do my duty to society, I volunteered to do some tutoring and teaching in the community and at a nearby state prison. It was then I found the answers to what had been unanswerable before.

I realized much later that a good source of my existential problems then was how I had asked what it was I wanted to know. The form of the question is important because the form to some degree should help determine the shape of the answer. I had asked large amorphous questions that suggested large equally amorphous answers. Really, what possible answer is there to the question, What is the meaning of life? The word "meaning" in this interrogation implies a certain definitive restriction and hope: it is this and no other possibility. Given the multifarious nature of our existence, the crazy-quilt texture of our lives, the question is really meaningless because we're looking for an impossible uniformity, a "meaning," amidst what works best as a jumble, a confusion, a hoard of infinite possibilities. A good question is a request for information that is, or will be, available at some point in time. A good question is also a way of provoking reality to give up its secrets; it is a pry-bar on some unseen phenomenon.

Ultimate questions really don't work this way; they are questions that do not really look for answers. Instead, they encapsulate a certain romantic urge for definiteness and order. Having them continually asked provides the questioner with a sense of continuity over time, a continuity that would be destroyed by an iron-clad answer. Asking the question "What is the meaning of life?", then, is the answer to the question. Asking the question, not finding the answer, is the meaning of life to those interested in such questions.

But anyone can see the fruitless circles this would send someone in. What appears as nobility is in fact simple foolishness. Questions are only good if they keep leading one back to actual life, back to testing and verifying the surrounding world. Richard Feynman, the physicist, in a recent NOVA program, suggested that we would all do better if we learned to live without the open-ended questions because physics, at least by what it shows now, indicates that they won't be answered. I agree fully. Far from being debilitating, this lack of certainty is vivifying. It provokes us into finding out how things work, but finding out in a way that is consistent, through the method of science, and attached to the material universe in which we reside, since this is the only home we can definitely say is ours.

In the BBC production of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the giant computer Deep Thought has come up with the answer to the question posed to it earlier in the show, namely, "What is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything?" The answer is 42. When his listeners exclaim disbelief, outraged after waiting seven-and-a-half million years for what they see as a frivolous answer, Deep Thought gives them some very good advice. It's not the answer that's at fault, but that they did not know how to ask the question. Now that they have the answer, they have to go back and find the question. Our universe is like 42; it is, in a sense, our answer. Our duty as human beings is to find questions that fit the answer. Ultimate questions don't do this; science does. Kung's "Yes" is not an answer at all, only an assertion. Let's get down to the computers and the microscopes.

Impoliteness

The other day, as I was driving down the four-lane highway that is our town's version of the Great White Way, a car ahead of me had nudged its nose out far enough into my lane to present me two options: either stop on the highway or pull into the other lane, thereby slightly inconveniencing myself. This is a normally busy stretch of road. Several plazas line it, in addition to innumerable gas stations, banks, fast food joints, and car dealerships, and it's always hard to break into the conga line of cars. I understood that, more than once having appreciated the vehicular courtesy of someone stopping to let me out.

But the day was hot and I was sweating and this driver had, to my feverish calculation, overextended his claim on the good graces of the drivers who, after all, had the sense not to be caught pulling out of the parking lot into the flow of traffic. I could have simply pulled over into the other lane (my rearview mirror was free of cars), but instead I stopped and leaned on my horn, shrilling out my protest of his ignorance and rudeness. He, for his part, squealed into the opening I'd created, giving me a vigorous gesture with his middle finger, and left a small viscous cloud of dust and stones in his wake. Fuming, irrationally ticked off both by his making use of the opportunity I'd give him and the (admittedly self-imposed) inconvenience he'd caused me endure, I cursed in a fine spray of curses the impoliteness of drivers and wished, for an instant, that I'd had a 20-millimeter howitzer cannon strapped to the hood of my car so that I could have blown him to bits.

Later, under the more beatific influence of an air-conditioned room and a glass of cold water, I felt thoroughly ashamed. I felt ashamed that I had acted so meanly, and that I had caused him in return to be so rude. Neither of us had advanced the cause of charity one iota; instead, we'd only confirmed the usual observation about American society that its essence of democracy, it lack of classes and thus class discipline, creates a petty-spirited bravado, a simian posturing that was all bluff and no grace.

And as I thought more I recalled scores of times I and others had been impolite: not giving up readily a subway seat to an elderly person; not quite holding a door for someone, unseen, coming behind; rushing like a frenzied lemming to a just-opened check-out counter, just barely not elbowing others out of the way. Memories like these could be multiplied a hundred-fold among all of us, and would tell us just how ethically sloppy and unthinking we supposedly

more conscientious and moral creations are. Surely impoliteness, even if it doesn't rank up there with nuclear devastation and toxic waste, contributes just as much if not more to the lack of comfort and security we urban creatures continually feel. The small acts, like the rodents at the dinosaurs' eggs, eat away at the vital yolk of the simple giving of graciousness from one human to another.

What is politeness, then, that we should take such notice of it? Let me first define it by what it is *not*. Last year United Technologies, for reasons only their corporate executives understood, ran little adverts in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. One, entitled "Whatever Happened to 'Yes, Please'?", decided that the phrase died slowly because "all of us…did not use [it] enough". The ad went on to lament the semantic decline of polite speech, ending with the chestnut from William of Wykeham (b. 1324) that "Manners maketh the man," and advised that we hand this eulogy to the next child who says "Huh?".

The insipidity of this analysis, a cranky lecture from a cranky adult, was immediately picked up on by my students, who circulated a parody saying that "Yes, Please" had "died / a well-deserved death….We decided that it was time / to stop hiding / behind the cowardly, hypocritical / mask of politeness / and actually show some of the / humanity contained in us all." And they were right on the money. United Technologies missed the mark altogether. They saw politeness as something due from an inferior (a child) to a superior (supposedly a UT exec). UT's kind of politeness, as the students brought out, was "a justification for / ignoring the problem's of today's / world as too many executives, / politicians, and copywriters do."

Politeness can not be a hypocritical act, an act of brigandage whose purpose is to establish a domination. It should come from a genuine graciousness. The Woodstock generation tried to show this to the world, to show that politeness, i.e., people getting their living together, need not be an instrument of division but of unification, of equality. UT wants a different world, and it's a world most of us should reject for its banality and casual violence.Politeness is charity; politeness is empathy. True politeness comes from the cache of an imperturbable self that is not knocked off kilter by the humanness of others, by their sometimes forgetful and egotistic behavior. It comes from a self that does not need to jockey with others like a greyhound in the pack to feel some sense (ultimately churlish) of superiority and victory.

Yet it is also something we must work at, since politeness goes against our self-aggrandizing nature. It is not a natural fluency but is the accumulated habit

of successive conscious acts to make life better for others. It comes from the conscious decision to be in another's shoes, to accept their reality as one's own and as something worth preserving against harm and denial.

We ought to be polite, then, for very commonsensical reasons, which are what ethical decisions usually come down to. We should be polite, first, because it makes life better for others, and, second, because the residual sense of goodness and self-satisfaction will make life better for us. Or, to attach cause and effect even more strongly, we should be polite because making life better for others inevitably returns to make our lives better since the *quo* for the *quid* is equally given and received with equal gracefulness.

One time when I was hitchhiking home from college, it began to rain. Car after car passed without an offer of oasis. Finally, one stopped, driven by a salesman. He began immediately to talk about his business and he let slip that he was getting off one exit before mine. When he asked me where I was going and I told him, without hesitation he said he'd drive me there. I protested but he stuck to his promise and drove a good fifty miles out of his way to get me home. The next time I see a car nosing into the street, I should, and we all should, remember that salesman.

Dance

Dance is an art for the young, when we mean by dance that classically disciplined art that is not bars and not ballroom but more ballet and Broadway jazz and Martha Graham. Yet I don't mind a completely ridiculous challenge at times, to spice up my life. So at the less than supple age of 29 (I'm now closer to 32), an age when most male dancers are hitting their prime, I took up dancing. I had done some dancing in college, in musicals and such, but never took formal class until I was 23 and in graduate school. But I got hurt from bad training. Being a male, I was used (and abused) because males were in such short supply. My body learned everything wrong and told me so in an inventory of aches and pains that convinced me to seek less hazardous enjoyment.

But, as things went, having been bitten by the art once, I was ready to be bitten again, a sort of aesthetic version of malarial fever. Under the gentle tutelage of a loving wife plus my own curiosity at how much adulthood had adulterated by body, I plunked down $50 for materials, and walked bravely into the (admittedly minor) storm.

Certain things do not come easily to a 29-year old body trained in football and basketball, with heavy thighs and an upper chest like a weightlifter's. I was invariably the only male in class and was always chagrined by the seemingly tendonless stretch of young, pink-glowing bodies. When they slid gracefully into full splits like a pair of shears in a tailor's hand, I made a shallow V. Where they rippled their arms like the breathy sweep of a second hand on an expensive watch, my arms ratcheted around like the arthritic second hand on those clunky old school clocks. Where they pulled like taffy, I was hard candy; where they skimmed and flitted, I waded.

Naturally there came a time, after several months of this disciplined exposure of my body's dirty laundry, when I had to seriously get in touch with why I had decided to punish myself this way. I'm sure this time comes to all dancers, and all artists, but I think it comes with a special poignancy to an older dancer who wishes he were a younger dancer. My failure to be even an unreasonable facsimile of Nureyev was rusting the joints of any self-worth that might have been loitering around for an encouraging pat on the head. It was not a very nice rack I had stretched myself on.

As I look back now from those intense two years of class and performance (I no longer take class), I realize what a crucial moment that was, in both senses

of the word. I had tasted failure, or so it seemed. Not all the good will in the world was going to give me a 180-degree turnout. I'd believed, naively, that my noble acceptance of the challenge would have somehow automatically transformed me; but the only automatic thing was Terpsichore's indifference to my good intentions. I was angry, and the anger threatened to make any progress or enjoyment of dance impossible. It was a kind of wood alcohol and I was being blinded by drinking it.

As I said before, I think anyone who wants to be an artist goes through this coronation of failure; it's not particularly novel or interesting. What isinteresting is how I had to change to accommodate these new images of myself as a naked failure. I had reacted to my insufficiencies in typical male fashion: I was going to give myself no loving quarter, no time off for good behavior. Which told me much about how men do, and don't, endure. Men endure best, will go through forests of pain and privation, when they're reasonably assured that they'll gain some profits from their efforts. The body, then, is an instrument that should tolerate no weakness nor exhibit any hesitation. Men are not good long-haul people for the most part because their intimacy with their bodies is often purely contractual, like stabling a thoroughbred to earn money at the races.

Dancing had broken that contract of denial and forced me to see "me" in a very startling new light. If I was going to dance I couldn't use my body like a racehorse until it dropped dead in its tracks. I had to nurture this hunk of flesh, pamper it with patient regard and tender congratulations. If I continued to use is as a machine, I could only expect that anger at it one feels when a machine gives in to entropy.

But that was not all. Mind and body became more integrated. The defense/prosecutor coalition I'd been using to judge myself gave way to a gossipy quilting bee. And suddenly (though it took a while for that "suddenly" to bloom), I understood more clearly what women had understood for a long time, what Steinbeck has Ma Joad say in *The Grapes of Wrath*: "Man, he lives in jerks.... Woman, it's all one flow, a stream...[that] goes right on." I had wanted to jerk my body over the threshold of ignorance into the honeymoon of accomplishment, forgetting all the tiny marriages and truces along the way that would knot mind and body, idea and expression, into a strong, durable, accomplished state of being.

I'm not speaking here as if this is the way men and women really *are*; this is dance, after all, not real life. All I mean is that in the process of becoming an

artist I had to recognize and make use of certain traits that have been, rightly or wrongly, designated *feminine*, such as softness and delicacy of movement and expression, as well as treat my body much more "femininely," as an integrated partnership between muscle and mind, not as an anxious truce with each distrusting each. I am still male, still masculine, but when I dance those words say little or nothing worthwhile about who or what I am as a person. The more I dance, the more I describe and think of myself as a *dancer*, the less I am able to think of myself as a male, a man, a masculine creature. I am a better dancer for the balance; I am a dancer because of the balance.

I'm not going to New York, of course. I choreograph for local groups, take a class a day if I can find one, perform when I can get, or can make, the chance. But a person doesn't need to go to New York to be certified a dancer, only to his heart, and it's a good bet that a person can't find his heart if he has to go to New York to do it. I'm glad I took the challenge, even though I'll never be noticed by Arlene Croce or courted by Peter Martins, because it showed me that becoming a person is much more interesting and curious - "curiouser and curiouser" as time goes on - than being neatly enwrapped by the cartouche of "man" and thus made to play a game of limits.

Individual Worth, Part I:
The Fat Man On The Motorcycle

It is a Sunday afternoon in August, rather humid. My wife and I are lying the under the cool barrage from the air-conditioner. She's taking a nap, as she's been doing most of the afternoon, determined to be as lazy as she can today. For my part, true to form, I'm reading, and not just some light novel appropriate for a humid Sunday afternoon in August, but a great dense theological work by Hans Kung. The clock shows 5 p.m. I'm in the middle of an exposition about Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; she is calmly trolling in the waters of dreams. Suddenly I'm struck by an odd thought, possibly coming from the reading, but feeling as if it's thoroughly serendipitous: If we both happened to die by 5:30, which of our lives at that moment would be considered to have been better spent? And the answer is as automatic as it is unsettling: Mine would, because I'm trying to improve my mind.

Wherever did such arrogance come from?

This reminds me of another thought I had a few days earlier, as I was driving. Since I've started dancing again I've been more and more aware of bodies. And, as much as I don't like to admit it, I've also been more and more critical about those bodies. I feel distinct aversions for women who have pot bellies, for men whose bodies hang loose and unshaped. My mind automatically kicks out "Why couldn't they take better care of themselves?," as if their worth as a human being depended on their muscle tone. But I can't seem to help it. I figure I've worked hard to get and keep my body disciplined - why can't they show the same strength of character? It's a thoroughly arbitrary arrogance, but one I seem increasingly unwilling to squelch.

In any case, as I was driving down the road, off to my right, just ahead of me, were two men, one of whom was trying to get a motorcycle started by jumping up and down on the starter. The onlooker was an average-shaped person. But the other was immensely fat. He was the Pillsbury dough boy gone on a binge. He had long blond hair that strung dirtily down his back. He wore a black tee-shirt, ripped under one arm, that didn't reach his waist, and a pair of jeans that didn't begin at his waist but somewhere halfway down his buttocks. In a moment I was past them and over brow of the hill.

But in that moment a judgment was delivered: Worthless. Based on what? That he was a dirty fat man standing on the dusty shoulder of a back road

trying to start a broken motorcycle. the unvoiced conclusion? My life was better because I taught, trying to bring young minds to clarity, and danced, and read hard abstruse books. Again, whence this arrogance?

Is Northrop Frye, the great professor of literature, better than a Hell's Angel? Consider the two. The former has a gifted supple mind that has read deeply into all the great books and helped countless students understand the complexity of humankind's imaginative powers. The latter openly professes a scorn of anything intellectual and is concerned primarily with the satisfaction of his own hedonistic, often violent, whims. He will make no mark on the world except by the amount of beer he drinks. Many, in fact most, of the people I know, if prodded sufficiently hard, would say that the question is easy to answer: Northrop Frye, hands down. But such a facile answer only creates more confusion, not less. Better how? Better when? Better for whom? If one were recruiting for the Marines, Frye's intelligence might disqualify him as a fighter; the Angel might be "better." And the opposite is true for tenure decisions at Oxford. The word "better" is so freighted with class and aesthetic distinctions that it becomes useless as a standard or as an explanation of itself. One can only use "better" by somehow not thinking about what the word means or the consequences of using it, not a particularly helpful tack in this kind of ambiguous exploration.

We have other restraints in this regard as well. We are constrained by our democratic heritage which tells us that people are equal as far as opportunity and protection of the law are concerned, and that in a democratic society all have a right to live as they choose. And we are also constrained by a less enlightening heritage, Original Sin, where we are all equally deficient, and self-congratulation in really just overweening vanity. We cannot judge others because we are all, so to speak, equally leprous. Add to these heritages the biblical injunction that we should not judge lest we be judged (Matt. 7:1, for the curious), and the folk wisdom that owners of glass houses should be careful to whom they speak, and it seems that whatever clarity the Frye/Angel comparison had at the beginning has evaporated and that comparative judgments about the worth of people simply are not ethically desirable or possible.

Except that those damn judgments just leaped out!! Here I was in the sanctity of my own ivory tower passing sentence on people, acting as if my deliberations had weight, authenticity, and truth. Acting, in fact, as a small version of God at the end of time, separating the goats from my sheephood. Where did the impulse come from? How deeply buried is it? Why didn't the

decency that I thought permanently resides in my soul rise up in indignation? What makes me think that all my supposedly social work as a teacher, my moral duty paid to the preservation of what is good in society, entitles me to an exemption from the duties of empathy and tolerance? What makes me believe that feeding my mind through scholarly study and writing articles that never get published and doing nothing of the actual physical labor of producing wealth makes me a more worthwhile, more respectable character than the fat man on the motorcycle? Why is it easier to be mean and petty, and disguise it as the requirements of educated criticism, than it is to keep one's mouth shut and leave well enough alone? Why, in short, this very drastic need to make infinite and infernal gradations among people who are all, in the last analysis, going to kick the bucket at approximately the same time?

Stay tuned.

Individual Worth, Part II: The Preacher

Ecclesiastes is probably the strangest book in the Bible. Everywhere else - except in Prov. 30:1-4 - the Bible affirms that not only is God knowable but also that he has in fact made himself, his will, and his salvation known to man. The writer of Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, punctures that smug reassurance by forcing the reader to look straight at the darkness that surrounds him and challenging him to still hold to his faith.

The Preacher, the unnamed writer of the book, has three ethical pieces of advice. One is that we must face facts and not go on asserting or accepting as true what will not stand examination. For instance, he constantly proves that dedication to wisdom or virtue, the pursuit of pleasure, the accumulation of wealth do not add up to happiness. Prov. 13:6 claims that "righteousness keepeth him that is upright in the way: but wickedness overthroweth the sinner"; but The Preacher says, and proves, that this is not so, that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong."

Second, one must learn to live with what one cannot change. In this sense, says The Preacher, people are *like* the animals rather than superior to them, because both are subject to the same quirks of fate and to the same death. All our efforts to transcend mortal existence through wisdom or creative effort are doomed from the beginning by our very nature. Third, added to the qualities of honesty in facing facts and the courage to accept life as it is, is the precept that we all must find enjoyment in work and in the experience of living. Accept whatever happiness comes and do not miss the present joy by straining after what cannot be achieved. Life can be sweet if it is not wasted in bootless anxiety and unprofitable ambition. The good of life is the living of it.

What relevance does this have, though, to the previous discussion about individual worth? The Preacher strips away particularly comfortable illusions with his "certain slant of light," to use Emily Dickinson's phrase, illusions that allow us to create false and uncommendable distinctions between one person and another, between one group and another, between people and animals, between civilization and nature, and so on. For instance, if all life has no guarantee to it, if the trappings of virtue do not insure virtue, then no one can make moral judgments about another. If certain things cannot be changed, if there are limits to our wisdom or power and we are not privy to any divine revelation, then no one can be superior to another. If we are all surrounded by darkness and must

therefore eke what happiness we can out of the flux and erosion of life, then no one can exploit another for personal gain.

But, you may say, this is against human nature. Such sentiments are all fine and good for some hirsute prophet in the desert of a backward country millennia ago who didn't really have to face life, but they are not possible for the rest of us. It's just human nature to judge.

But this is not a good argument because of the imprecision of the major premise "human nature." Human nature is not some set choreography of action that we're locked into because of our genes or some amorphous "spirit" inside us. According to The Preacher, human nature is not some predetermined way or action but an argument justifying certain actions that people, if they were being morally honest, would not otherwise agree to do.

In short, the concept of human nature is really a moral laziness and a willful blindness used to justify false perceptions about the nature of the way things are. If a person argues through "human nature" that it is right and proper to make moral, political, and economic distinctions, and then acts as if those distinctions have the force of truth about them, then that person simply doesn't know the low-down about life. To acquiesce in these illusions, and to allow evil to come out of them, creates the only sin The Preacher recognizes in his sermon: Vanity. He exhorts us to understand that if we dig deep and see the vain roots of our nature, get beyond the speciousness of the "human nature" argument, we cannot then rest comfortably and must accordingly change our lives. According to The Preacher, to recognize the truth means to live by it, and to live by it in a way that constantly recognizes it.

Okay, you say, so what if The Preacher has shown that the whole idea of human nature is a bad idea, full of false assumptions? So what if logically, philosophically he's proved that we shouldn't judge others? People still judge. And they'd judge even if every one of them read Ecclesiastes and recognized that such judgments were foolish, evil, and against the nature of things. People are stubborn and don't always listen to good ideas. And you would be right about that.

So far I've been talking about the force and integrity of ideas, about moral ideas (why is it right or wrong to judge others) and philosophical questions (how things hang together). And while some of the great thinkers in history understandably have an affinity for the power of ideas, such as when Keynes said that "ideas shape the course of history," it is perhaps a stronger truth that

minds are coated, in John Dewey's notable phrase, "with varnish waterproof to new ideas."

Ideas are ineffable things; they cannot be weighed or hogtied and it takes a lot of effort to keep the mental gears oiled to catch hold of and process them, an effort many people don't want to make or have never been taught to make. Moreover, good ideas, ones worth really having, are never comfortable. They always shake up settled notions and cause people to revalue what they thought sedentary and immutable. People, then, find it psychically and emotionally easier not to think, preferring well-worn paths to the mental machete work needed to make new ones. As Aldous Huxley said, "most ignorance is vincible: we don't know because we don't want to know."

But why don't people want to know? It's too simple an argument to write off the human population as a bunch of ignoramuses, ignoramosity (if there be such a word) being simply a component of human nature. (And we know how slippery a footing "human nature" is.) Something deeper here needs extraction. Saul Bellow once said that "a great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep." If we must maintain the illusion of distinctions, what's the deep energy source that fuels the effort? What's everyone afraid of? Again, more questions.

Karl Marx will be a help here. He believed questions about human nature were to be answered by looking at the socio-political situation in which a person lived. Perhaps there we will find an answer.

Individual Worth, Part III: Marx

At the end of the last offering I proposed that Karl Marx might give us an insight into why people feel a deep need to maintain the illusion that other people must be separated out and judged as inferior, since our reliance on "human nature" as an explanation was ill-founded. Marx, through his theory of dialectical materialism, believed that human nature is a result of the way things in society are set up, most specifically a result of the way things are economically set up. He believed that if one understands the economic relationships between people, then a great deal can be explained about how and why people in that society hold certain beliefs and act in certain ways.

Let's look at one economic relationship between people, between consumer and advertiser. Advertising is business' barker, who goes out, calls the audience in, and peddles the company's wares, more or less honestly. The purpose of advertising is to get a person to buy a product, emphasizing that somehow one's life is incomplete or unfulfilled if one does not buy the product. Thus advertising sells by division, by divvying up people into discrete groups and tailoring appeals that will hopefully create a need that can only be filled by a material object made by American industry.

Does this divisiveness trickle down into the society? Of course it does. Recall the recent trend in designer jeans. Would the selling campaign have worked as well as it did if people weren't willing to buy jeans as a way of dividing themselves off from those benighted enough not to buy the jeans? Or Perrier, which is really only expensive club soda. Or German engineering in cars. Or the new chewing gum for the rich, Stimorol. Or any of a thousand things that we could all think of whose profitable existence depends upon making specious differences between people who are fundamentally more alike than different. Yes, you may say, advertising does do all these things, but does it really have that great an effect?

Let's broaden our economic relationship, then, to TV as a whole (commercial TV). TV is an economic relationship because even though it appears to be free, the viewer ends up paying for it with higher prices on products because of the enormous fees for commercial airtime. As even the most unaware in this society knows, TV has had, and is having, a corrosive effect on our social relationships. Opinions as to why and to what extent differ considerably, but no one would argue that TV has had little or no effect on the way people act: children do not

read, families do not spend time together, people are no longer able to think linearly and logically.

All right, you say, I agree that advertising and TV have a harmful effect on the way people act. But how does it work? How does it trickle down? Partly by what Marx called atmosphere. Marx was astute enough to realize that not all economic relationships have money at their base, have a profit motive. The connection between people and TV is a good example. Indirectly we have an economic tie with the companies because we all shop and buy, but the activity of watching TV itself asks for no direct exchange of money. The atmosphere is the important thing here, the climate that TV and advertising create, both within the culture at large and within each person.

And that climate, as we know, is a divisive one. We are all labeled by some company and then encouraged to indulge our distinctions from other people. And TV presents stereotypes of human beings that reinforce our already unedited prejudices. Women, for instance, despite a decade of successes, are still portrayed pretty much as bubble-headed creatures, or if they are successful on TV, it's shown that the success comes at the expense of their more "feminine" virtues. This only justifies people who already have uncritically accepted the social inferiority of women, and this in turn negatively influences their actions and ideas.

One can multiply this example a hundred times, for men, for sex roles, for personal fulfillment, and one can begin to understand how the nebulous but powerful atmosphere is created and how it works to make social division a norm of our culture. Are we to conclude, then, that social structure alone is to blame for the impulse to make distinctions? And, if so, would changing the structure do away with the impulse? Or is this divisiveness a symptom of something deeper, beyond the reach of social structure?

Marx, of course, would argue yes to the first two questions, but he doesn't have history on his side. No doubt the atmosphere of our culture is a poisonous one if we look at how it fragments social ties. As the world got more modern and more industrialized, people began giving up the things they used to do for themselves - grow food, blacksmith, make clothes, and so on - to other groups, such as companies, thereby gaining convenience but losing control. Now, as our service society starts to steamroll, people will have less and less control over their lives, and less and less reason for living, since most of the vital functions

of life will be done by others. Marx would argue that this alienation can be destroyed if we all work to create a culture more integrated and more equal.

However, look at the Utopian experiments done in the last two centuries. Very few of them worked; that is, very few of them created a world without divisiveness and invidious distinction. Changing the economic relationships did nothing to mute the usual discrepancies and judging that humans have always indulged. And the same can be said for socialist societies as well. So Marx can tell us how the distinctions are set up, and even go some way toward explaining why they persist. But it seems that looking at the socio-political culture of a people brings us no nearer to an answer to that deeper *why*, that *why* of a deep need for illusion.

If you'll recall, I ended the last opinion with the question "What's everybody afraid of?." Human nature has provided no answer to this because it's both too rigid and ambiguous. Neither has history nor economics because they're too superficial. We'll have to go back to our only remaining source, Ecclesiastes.

Individual Worth, Part IV: The Preacher Revisited

If you recall, Ecclesiastes proposed three ethical wisdoms about life: one must face the fact that nothing is ever guaranteed; one must learn to live with what cannot be changed; and one must find one's enjoyment and purpose in work and in the very experience of life. In The Preacher's world, man is not the measure of all things. He masters neither life nor death, and can find serenity only by accepting the unalterable conditions of existence, and enjoying its real but limited satisfactions.

How many of us would want to live in the world with such a realistic posture? Think for a moment before you answer. This is a world that above all requires constant consciousness and calculation, which puts a premium on deflating illusions. It is also a world that requires the ego to be whittled down to size, that requires narcissism to be curbed. It is a world, finally, that forever reminds the human being about being provisional, temporary, weak, easily forgotten. How many of us would want to front daily that bald awareness of life? How many of us would want to hear such a continued refrain about limitation? Very few, if any.

Because deep at the core of who we are, beyond any strait-jacket notion of human nature, is a bedrock fear of the very world Ecclesiastes tells us to accept. And out of this fear comes our desire, indeed our unrestrained demand, that we separate ourselves from others in a way that showers favor on us and derision on them.

Ernest Becker, in a most marvelous book called *The Denial of Death*, explores the sources and results of this fear. At the very base of being human is the intuition that, as William James puts it, "the world [is] essentially a theatre for heroism." People wish to act heroically because, above all, it places them above all. One of the key engines of this heroic urge is, as Freud pointed out, our individual emulation of the mythical Greek Narcissus: we are hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. One of the meaner aspects of this narcissism, Becker shows us, is our unspoken belief that practically everyone is expendable but ourselves.

Becker goes on to say, in his usual sympathetic way, that none of this implies calculated maliciousness: We do not seem to be able to "help" our selfishness. It seems to come, instead, from our animal nature. And this working narcissism in inseparable from self-esteem, from a basic sense of self-worth. Becker says

that we see this collusion most nakedly in the child, who is "unashamed about what he needs and wants most." The child's whole organism "expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be *the* one in creation." Again, Becker makes clear to us that this hungry desire for fulfillment does not mean that children are "vicious, selfish, or domineering" by nature. More to the point, they openly embody man's tragic destiny: he must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else.

However, as much as this narcissism carries a person beyond the control of others, it cannot overcome the inevitable death of that person; it cannot, in other words, prevent the one event in life a person most achingly wishes prevented. To Becker, as to Freud and Adler and Jung and others, a human's tragic tension comes from the linking of an illimitable symbolic imagination - an imagination so strong that it can convince itself of its own immortality - to an animal body that will eventually die and decompose.

This is the conditional world The Preacher presents, and it is this world that people work hard to repress rather than accept. And this repression, this locking away of the paralyzing contradiction of a glowing imagination in a creaturely body, is a healthy, if not final, solution to the dilemma. It allows a person to cut out "a manageable world" into which "he throws himself…uncritically, unthinkingly."

Becker goes to say that

> he accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look; he doesn't bite the world off in one piece as a giant would, but in small manageable pieces, as a beaver does….[He] learns not to expose himself, not to stand out;…the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him.

Yet this truce doesn't always hold; that is why the solution is healthy, not final. Not final because the contradiction, always present, will eventually work its way through the repression. Even though the fear of death cauterizes any desire for risk, the narcissism longs for recognition against the anonymity of death, and so struggles to establish, as opposed to death, a testimonial to its own force of life. Sometimes it does this through grand acts, as with Hitler and Caesar, but more usually through small daily censures which allow both a small massage of narcissistic enjoyment and a small nose-thumbing of defiance against our

inescapable death. We all want a kind of memorial remembrance, but we also do not want to wait until we die to get it.

So we work it out on a more daily basis, in a thousand ways making distinctions between us and them. The size of the difference is not as important as the fact of the difference, for each difference validates our "cosmic significance," to use Becker's phrase, and allows just enough of that narcissism to emerge without letting out its nether opposite, our own eventual dissolution.

Our urge, then, to make spiteful distinctions comes from our deepest nature, from our fear of our own death and our race to somehow outrun it. Becker ends his book with a stunning recapitulation of this fear and the uncertainty it spawns:

> In the mysterious way in which life is given to us in evolution on this planet, it pushes in the direction of its own expansion. We don't understand it simply because we don't know the purpose of creation; we only feel life straining in ourselves and see it thrashing others about as they devour each other. Life seeks to expand in an unknown direction for unknown reasons....There is a driving force behind a mystery we cannot understand...[To get around this] modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing....Or, alternatively, he buries himself in psychology in the belief that awareness all by itself will be some kind of magical cure for his problems.
>
> But psychology was born with the breakdown of shared social heroisms; it can only be gone beyond with the creation of new heroisms that are basically matters of belief and will, dedicated to a vision....[This vision must come] from the vital energies of masses of men sweating within the nightmare of creation - and it is not even in man's hand to program....The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something - an object or ourselves - and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force.

Let us look at a possible vision.

Individual Worth, Part V: Vision

If our propensity to make malicious judgments is bred in the bone, so to speak, are we then forever prey to the logistics of egotism, a kind of genetic Machiavellianism? Again, as with everything, it depends on where one sits. If one sits in the posture of an unbending human nature, here is what one might expect to see.

Norman O. Brown, in a book titled *Love's Body*, asserts that the only way to get beyond the natural contradictions of existence is in the time-honored religious way: to project one's anxieties onto a god-figure, to be healed by an all-embracing and all-justifying supernatural beyond. In the case of our culture, the "time-honored religious way" is Christianity, with its own version of human nature, original sin. If humans are intrinsically evil and can only be redeemed by accepting God's grace, then one's path is fairly clearly marked: work not to be evil by doing those things that bring God's grace into your account. One's basic evilness will never be changed, but one may lay up some treasure in heaven if one can keep ahead of the devil.

This dependence on a being outside time and space, with that god's promise that if one follows the proper path, one will be absolved of the tragedy of being restricted by time and space, is a powerful draw for people because it anesthetizes the loneliness and pain of being human. There is, after all, a purpose to it all.

Yet many find this an insufficient or unpalatable answer, seeing as how it requires accepting an unproved hypothesis, the existence of God, and a deterministic view of life which jails humans inside an unredeemable nature. Life is far too unpredictable,and humans far too complex, they say, for the "time-honored religious way" to be of much help in understanding life. Yet these same people will often merely substitute religions, putting in the place of the evil of human beings an equally undemonstrable belief in a foundational goodness in people or in an energy flow in the universe that has some sort of "rightness" to it, as in the phrases "Everything happens for a reason" or "the universe is giving me a sign." This goodness and cosmic sentience are just gods by another name, that is, illusions (or, more charitably, myths) crafted to soften the obduracy of our animal fate to live and then to die.

I don't have a strict answer to the question with which I began this series of essays. The more I read and think and write, the more it seems to me that,

by themselves, grand-scale "solutions" to the problems posed by human life under the regime of modern capitalism carry within them the seeds of their own destruction (with which Marx would agree) unless there are also changes on the cellular level, so to speak, at the level of the door being held or not held open for the stranger behind you. At the same time, an increase in courtesy and forbearance will do nothing to stop the rapacious logistics of the capitalist enterprise, which require large-scale transformations through collective resistance and rebellion, even to the point of violence and revolution.

Given these kinds of intractables, my vision for the betterment of human life is, by design, sloppy, rough-edged, of unsmooth velocity and insufficient proofs. It begins in our materiality as creatures, in evolutionary biology and inevitable mortality, in Billy Joel's lyric that "we will all go down together." It is based in science, that looping and magnificent investigation of our materiality, especially when it concentrates on such things as sustainable architecture and renewable design. It is in a personal ethic of doing-with-less and a disciplining of capitalist/consumer desires. It is in the practice of knowing more about my fellow creatures because invidious and murderous judgments of others come out of ignorance; as the Dalai Lama says, "Judging another harshly usually means that you don't have enough information."

It is in the effort to stop taking myself so seriously but also, at the same time, know that my life has meaning only if I live it in a meaningful way. It is in the practice of a fierce humility, a humorous enragement at human folly, coupled with intense involvement in at least one political and social effort at transformation connected to an organization or a movement larger than myself and that makes me forget myself. (Improving the schools would be a good place to start since their curriculum of standardized ignorance is part of the reason why things are in such bad shape. Working to pass living-wage ordinances would be another.)

In short, creating a better world is a messy mix of fighting the bastards who hold the power over our lives and, at the same time, fighting the inner bastards that drive me towards an alienating individualism (and looking for the links between these inner and outer worlds, those nodes where these two worlds reinforce each other on feedback loops). And then trying to convince others to do the same through education and example and, if need be, through force of arms in revolution. (Why not? Those who rule are not going to give up their power without a fight.) There is nothing clear or guaranteed about doing it this way. But

I think it is honest and in accord with the nature of the living that we are doing in this culture. In the end, all one can do is what one can do.

Intimacy

My wife has a rather odd magnetism to her, what I call her "bartender face." In her presence people, for some reason, feel perfectly authorized to tell her the most intimate details of their lives. What starts out as a casual business connection over the phone, or a chance acquaintance at the check-out counter, suddenly degenerates into a confession, usually against a great show of discouragement by my wife, as if their confession has shut off their social-etiquette radar.

The most upsetting of these ad hoc shrivings was by a deliveryman who, in the course of delivering a package, proceeded to involve my wife in a tale of his coronary heart surgery. To make his point, he opened his shirt to show her the scars, completely oblivious to the fact that my wife didn't relish a half-naked elderly man in the office and resented with great distaste his presumption that what he had to say was so interesting and so vital that he could trample over the accepted boundaries of politeness.

After one of these sessions, which she seems unable to stop because she doesn't want to be rude and tell the person to shut up, she feels used, burdened by an intimacy that treats her as if she were an emotional landfill. People come and dumps their problems and then merrily go along, oblivious to the aftermath that my wife has to clean up. She wants people to be either secure enough in themselves to keep their mouths shut, or considerate enough not to mistake their selfishness, their monologue, for a shared secret. She may be asking too much.

People seem less restrained than they used to be about dragging their skeletons out for show. One of the possible reasons is that people have devalued intimacy by mistaking it for casualness, a "Hi" being thought a sufficient prelude to "Bless me, Father." Where once it was a matter of equals agreeing to share what is not normally shared in day-to-day intercourse, intimacy has now been reduced to a handshake, a way of introducing how cool one is because seemingly free of the usual petty social hang-ups prompted by etiquette. It is as if people want to establish credentials of sincerity about themselves right away by exposing what appear to be their inmost laundry.

But there is a subtle, if unconscious, Machiavellianism here, a play for sympathy and credibility without a commensurate risk of reciprocal openness. The intimacy is a mask, a shadow dance. It's not really an invitation to collaborate

but an injunction against judging deeply or truly. And that judgment won't take place because the speaker controls the information and that information, while wearing the guise of revelation, is stacked on a favorable slant: One's first impression will be a good impression because it will be the *only* impression. Intimacy in this case is really a first line of defense.

But this isn't the whole story. It may explain what happens in singles bars, but it doesn't explain why the hairdressers and deliverymen and sales reps feel it necessary to speak explicitly to a total stranger without any provocation at all. What is the pressure that causes the spasm of disclosure? My wife has remarked that she feels a palpable desperation in these people, and this is what probably keeps her attentive when she doesn't want to listen. They sound so pathetic, so needing, and who is she to deny them a day in court?

Desperation. Thoreau once said that the mass of people live lives of quiet desperation because they are living the lives they do not really want, lives of forced anonymity and valueless toil. Is it that these people are so ground down by life that they feel they are standing outside the Last-Chance gas station with their thumb out hoping someone will pick them up and save them from walking across the desert by themselves?

We can get too deeply into the pathos of this, of toiling masses yearning to be free, but it has a useful edge to it. It seems to me that what might cause people to open up so readily and yet be so oblivious to the effect of their openness is some combination of the two situations we've been talking about here. On the one hand, people are desperate creatures. We are all filled with a sense of mortal transience. We know full well, on the deepest level of our bones, that most of us will pass from the earth without a thought being given to our having lived.

This is an intolerable concept, one so corrosive that we do not admit it to the fraternity of people. Yet it will out. We all need some reassurance that we are alive, that we are not totally unnamed. And so strong is this need that it will breach strong walls of social training. To speak out to any ear, no matter if the ear is not affectionate, is to validate one's being.

On the other hand, humans are cagey creatures. The impulse to expose oneself to being named carries with it the caveat not to be named too closely because that would give the namer power to destroy. So, one does not become overly concerned with the listener. To admit the humanity of the listener would be to defuse the confession. This would bring with it the responsibility to listen to

the listener's confession and the risk of real, rather than nominal, intimacy. The confessee is not interested in this risk, and so therefore is not interested in the effect his confession will make. He needs a wastebasket, not a mirror.

Yet humanity can't be totally denied without some residual guilt. So the confessee will allow the other person some interaction, some level of judging, but on the confessee's terms. What ends up happening is that the confessee hacks a twisty trail out from his sanctuary that allows his need for being known free exit, but does not let the other person back along the trail into the inner sanctum, and instead diverts him or her with a dumb show off to the side. Thus he gets recognized without being named, and named without being recognized. He's alive, not dead; with that reassurance he can get through more days of quiet desperation.

Our polite conversations are just not strong enough to hold back these elemental psychic forces, yet they are strong enough to keep the repressive mechanisms working so that the forces are not unleashed all at once. If we all were to give into that bone-deep fear, and its corollary desire to be known, to be the *only one* at the center of creation, our society would not hold. But in the interstices, in dull eddying moments, the worm in the apple pops its head above the surface, and in its grim presence we talk to anyone, whether they listen or not.

With Eyes Averted

I've been thinking about what I said about intimacy, and it seems to me there's more, something even odder. Perhaps you've encountered it, the professional niceness that seems to sit in for actual niceness. I'm not talking about the usual requirements or actions of etiquette, those practices that adolescents see as stony facts of hypocrisy, where people hold open doors for people who, in other circumstances, they might badmouth. Different places require different masks, and better a mask of indifferent sociality than straight-faced impoliteness, being "up front" as the 60s people used to say.

No, I'm talking about the operator who, after coldly giving you two numbers at directory assistance (sounding put out at double the usual load of requests), wishes you a good day. Or the check-out girl who asks you if you're having a good day, does your bill, gives you change, and hopes that you "Have a nice day!" without once looking at your face, never mind your eyes. Or the person at the toll booth. Or the waitress at the all-night doughnut shop.

Each of these treat you with what appears to be civility, but it's deadened, professional. It's what they are supposed to say, but it's said with such little theatricality, such little effort, that it might be better to have them be silent rather than be encouraged to engage in such false sentiment.

I suppose part of my dislike of this sort of thing comes strictly from preference, unreasonable preference. I have had any number of dead-end jobs in my life, from waitering to slapping hamburgers down to shoveling manure. And I usually hated every minute of them. I sympathize with people who have these sorts of jobs because I've sweat their sweat.

But something galls me when the girl at the Burger-King check-out counter acts as if it is the least important thing in her life to take my order. Or when the stock clerk at the hardware store listlessly points out to me (not even bothering to escort me a part of the way) where I can find electrical outlets. I *know* that their jobs are hard and basically meaningless, but I don't want them to show it to me on their faces or in the their person. I don't want to know how put out they are; I simply want to be served, and I would like to be served with a simulacrum of enjoyment and attention, for that is part of the reason they are hired.

But when I become reasonable again, when I have a chance to reflect, I see other things in their behavior, and I see other things behind this dead civility.

Yes, part of it is required by their job, and they might as well do the acting well if they're going to do it at all. But what a waste! Countless hours and untold ergs of energy expended on being something one isn't, simply for money. Seen in this light, their lassitude is a rebellion of sorts.

And the dead civility seems to me another of the countless ways people have of being engaged and not-engaged, of being up front and out back; in short, of letting people see them without really being able to the put the finger on them. It's the aversion of the eyes that gives it away. Many things can be done without eye contact, and many things are easier done without it. In fact, we can get through a day without having to make eye contact with anyone, even the cat, even ourselves as we look in the mirror.

But eye contact is a powerful and piercing challenge. The eyes in our culture, perhaps in all cultures, are the "lamps of the soul," as one poet said. The language about them outruns the language for other parts of the face. They twinkle, sparkle; are hooded, beady; can smolder with lust or be icy-blue pinpoints. They are thought to give us away.

So we guard against this blabbermouth strongly, building up over time elaborate and unconscious ways to avoid locking eye with eye. To make eye contact, then, is to risk interpretation and judgment. It's to grant admission to some sacristy, to award an intimacy that goes beyond the everyday decorum, in fact to promise a possibility of connection and thus perhaps, luckily, a reduction of loneliness.

But when even in the morning mirror we do not directly look ourselves in the eyes but at the bridge of the nose or the line of mouth, how can we expect to look anyone else in the eye? But what's the alternative? What can substitute? Well, that's obvious, because we live with the alternative - a dead civility that, like Frankenstein's monster, looks human but is really a mongrel of parts and practiced looks.

But even more deeply, this dead civility is a compromise with silence, a dread equal to revelation. We do not wish to be judged, yet we do not want to be unnoticed. We do not want to do anything which will commit us, yet we cannot stand the uselessness of being uncommitted. So, again, we humans hew a middle course, trying not to venture too much or too little, saying "Have a nice day!" but distant enough from the sentiment not to be charged with the responsibility for seeing it through.

We are such tremulous creatures after all, tense arenas where competing claims howl at one another, as if our souls were dioramas of the New York Stock Exchange in a bull market. The sweetness of reason - what a luxury it is, how fortunate that it ever has a voice at all in the midst of preparations for a siege from the other world. Such frailty needs more love than we know how to expend. Yet try we must in every imperfect way we can - or else face the silence.

Thunderstorms

For a while now I've wanted to write about thunderstorms. I've never been in a hurricane or a tsunami or a typhoon or a tornado, nothing so violent and grand as that. Thunderstorms are the closest I've been to the real unrestrained destructiveness of nature, but it was a safe seat for the most part.

Last night (actually it was 2 a.m.) I heard the unmistakable grumblings of thunder. I got up and went outside. No one else was up that I could see, except for the occasional car. The air was still, yet not dead, not dead like the humid corpse that had lain across our nostrils all day. It was more tensile, like the diaphragm of an ear. A haze hung in the air, not-quite fog, a scrim; shadows from the streetlights fuzzed off into darkness instead of being sharply etched areas of light/no-light. The yellow glow of the mercury lamps reminded me of Victorian London for some reason (at least the London of Conan Doyle), or Beacon Hill at first snow, dully yellow sulphur made gelid by the tenseness in the air, the dim uncertainty making the air thick yet vibrant.

The sky to the east (the storm must have been coming in over the ocean) was smooth onyx, unseamed by a star or the wisp of a lighter colored cloud. It, too, seemed to have weight, yet not a weight that smothered; it was more as if it had a gravity all its own, as if by its mass and grandness it would pull everything into itself, smoothly destroying, quietly erasing.

The thunder was still far off, the lightning diffuse. The evening before we drove home from a long day trip into the embrace of a thunderstorm. As we sped down the highway, imperceptibly inching forward in the darkness, we watched the dendritic rips of the lightning in the clouds. At one moment there was unmarked blackness, thunderhead on thunderhead piling up for 40,000 feet. Then in a time quicker than it takes to say "Look at that!" a savage rend in the darkness, a coronal glow surrounding the sharp rational conclusion of a lightning stroke as it tied earth to sky with electric blood. Then darkness again. We watched this for fifty miles, watching a nature thoroughly indifferent to our watching.

Now, standing just outside the safety of the door, the wind full of sea smells and tang of ozone, I watched the storm congeal, saw the scattered gravities of tense air and desultory electricity and brooding clouds gather to an omega point. The leaves, like a chorus, announced with their sibilance the soon-to-come susurrations of copious and garrulous rain. The branches swung in idle semaphore; the electric wires and telephone lines whined in aeolian dissonance.

Thunder followed on lightning until they overlapped like competing choirs. And then the storm, spreading its vast wings like a Mahler symphony, sailed into view, the storm not so much the collection of separate events, the sum of parts, as a creature all its own, as humans are more than brain and guts. It took possession.

And then the rain. The rain of a thunderstorm has an urgency to it no other rain has. It is driven, jousting, impatient to strike. It is a phalanx; or, in another view, it is the teeth that soften the hide of the earth into the supple leather of loam and roots and growing things. As it erases it also scores, erases by etching, changing the complexion of its winnowing floor, washing chaff and wheat indiscriminately into the grave.

Standing, letting the water stream down my face and body, pierced by its sudden unsummery coldness, my body drinking down the clarity of its single-mindedness like corn anxious to grow in the night, I suddenly, for a moment, meld into this storm. I become nothing more than rain or wind or the sullen darkness unraveled by the lightning's logic. I am a conduit for this storm's energy, a storm rod conducting a lost vitality to withered roots and socialized deadness. For a moment my mind no longer is an inquisitive burrowing animal; for a moment my helplessness in the face of death is denied; for a moment I am placed and succulent; for a moment I am what poetry cannot describe.

And then, as with all things to this conscious creature, I feel the chill of wet clothes: practicality invades again. I am as suddenly catapulted out of my egoless connectedness as I was drawn into it. What I would wish permanently, what peace I would want without the strain of work or ignorance, is suddenly denied me by the passing of time, by nerves reacting to cold, by a thousand mundane details that again take up their stations after having been, momentarily, forced to resign the field.

But for a moment. Such peace is rare - there is a certain forgetting we must learn to do to achieve it. It is not an easy forgetting because it means erasing the self we have been taught to construct, that very fragile house of cards we call our ego. It means risking quietness, suing for peace, letting go in order to hold on even more strongly. The truths of life are usually contradictory, two dictions speaking against each other, each equally right, each equally incompatible with the other. Peace comes with the unity of the contra-dictions, with seeing the unity that binds the separateness yet does not violate the separateness and keeps each thing distinct and integral. For a moment I was a creature unified,

and it is a moment that keeps me looking at the horizon, waiting for the darkgrey annunciation of a storm.

School Reform

The problem with much of the present talk about school reform is that everyone is talking about means without talking about ends. President Reagan and others are talking about merit pay, performance evaluations, more homework, longer school days and years, tougher discipline (which usually stands for more punishment). But these are all means to the educational end, though they are talked about as if they are ends in themselves, as if all these recommendations were sufficient to create the change everyone wants.

The problem with talking about these things as if they were ends in themselves is that it avoids the talk about the more intangible but certainly more important issue of attitudes and beliefs. What, after all, is the end of the educational enterprise? Or rather, the ends, for the enterprise should match the diversity of the people it teaches, and no single end can encompass everyone. Is it to teach people simply to read and write? If that were true, then it would be best to do that at a young age and put the money into creating good libraries, so that the person could pursue an education according to his or her own wishes. We don't need multibillion dollar industries to teach the rather simple and natural tasks of reading and writing. Is it to create Jefferson's informed citizenry?

A nice rhetoric, of course, but what is "informed"? Knowing the capitals of the fifty states? Being informed means being involved, and how can students be involved if they are secreted away in institutions and kept busy doing work? These are hard questions because they are philosophical, not technical, and cannot be "solved" by the advocacy of particular means. In fact, they are not questions that can be solved at all, but must be continuously asked as a way of checking the solvency of our thinking and the goodness of our actions.

I would like to offer some ways to think about these questions, some ways to get at the understanding of what education could be doing.

Formal public schooling in any democratic society has a double burden. On the one hand, it works to promote the individuality of the student. On the other hand, it tries to curb that individuality so that the student fits into society. The latter is always the easier course of action because authoritarianism is always easier, though more destructive in the long run, than the patience and intelligence to sit and listen and guide and allow for differences.

I think we first need to think about how these two intentions can be balanced. Do we teach much about democratic responsibility and personal self-government by forcing young children to attend schools, under the penalty of law? Do we teach much about the need to make personal choices with as much information as possible by not allowing students a say in how they are educated? The answer is no. One way to think about school reform is to think about how to better make students a functioning part of the system other than being the passive recipients of whatever teachers want to hand out. This will encourage a sense of responsibility and pride in self and institution, in addition to teaching them what it means to participate and volunteer (a cause dear to the heart of libertarians, who call for the dismantling of the whole shebang).

Another area to talk about is curriculum. Many of the reformers today are talking about more homework, and it's true that people learn more when they spend more time "on task," which is only common sense. But a question should also be raised about what it is they are supposed to be spending more time on. Are teachers simply going to give an absolute amount, pile it on, in other words? This is closer to burying students than it is to encouraging independent thinking. What, after all, is homework? What's it for? Doesn't science, for instance, have anything to do with history? Doesn't English have something to do with art? The reason more homework and stricter discipline about doing it won't work is because it only further divides a divided curriculum.

Schools, for the sake of bureaucratic convenience, have always divided up the learning into discrete units, into departments, and very few programs exist where these departments acknowledge that knowledge overlaps, that how Melville wrote had something to do with the history of his times. This way of integrating knowledge, of making people see connections, should be the *raison d'etre* of a curriculum. And homework should spin off this. Only then will the homework have something like a logical reason for being heavy, insistent, and constant.

And it may get done by students who are delighted to find connections. After all, students suffer from a debilitating sense of unconnectedness as it is, and humans generally don't like to feel isolated. Changing the curriculum can make people feel more involved while tying them closer to the concerns of the society around them.

Another notion that might be questioned is, Why should students spend all day in school? What, after all, is the purpose of making school what they do with

their lives, what they do for a living? Longer school days and years, especially if it means increased burdens of homework, will cure nothing. School could be combined with work programs or apprenticeships, and most especially for those students in college tracks who never get to take car mechanics.

This will have several results. One would be to cut down the sometimes harmful division of school society into the "innies" and "outies." The "good" kids never hang around with the "bad" kids, and it's a shame because there is a lot there to share. Second, people might learn a useful trade. Schooling by itself is not a useful trade. Right now, it cannot be exchanged for anything except more schooling, until one gets the magic degree that offers the key into the work force. This is absurd and a waste of time and talent. Students should be learning all along what it is they might like to do with their lives, even if it's a plurality of careers rather than just one single enterprise.

This is really a book-length topic, and I promise to stop before it goes that far. But the thinking about school reform cannot be based on the notion that we have always done it this way, and that what we need to do is more of the same. We need fresh thought, exciting innovations, even radical experiments. After all, if the "back to basics" education gives us people like Ronald Reagan, we certainly need to rethink the whole enterprise.

On Tolerance And Illogicality

A stable tenet of why American democracy works is that it expects, and gets, tolerance for the differences of others. Full acceptance of the other is not necessary, only the recognition that everyone has the right to be left alone and that no one need suffer for being different.

Yet this ban against force in the creed of tolerance is most sorely tested when what has to be tolerated is irrational. And it can well nigh disappear when what has to be tolerated is not only irrational but claims the affection of someone one cares about. My sister-in-law recently moved from a rather secure if not well-paying job and the closeness of her family to Boston where she will soon go on staff at the Church of Scientology. Her official position will be Technical Secretary, or "Tech Sec" in the assonant jargon favored by the Church; she will be in charge of "auditing," the Church's favorite secular version of confession and psychoanalysis.

It would be an understatement to say that her move has caused hard feelings, especially with her mother, who sees the move as a move of desperation and unfinished adolescent rebellion. (My sister-in-law is thirty and a recent divorcee.) My mother-in-law, normally a rather dowdy Republican in her thoughts, has found not one iota of tolerance in her heart, not even to the point of saying simply that it is her daughter's right to mangle her life if she so chooses. The case strikes too closely to the heart and she will have nothing to do with high-mindedness.

If the Church were to disappear tomorrow because of government harassment, IRS audits, vilification in the press, and vigilante action, she would have no democratic guilt that civil rights had been traduced. And many of her otherwise strong Republican and libertarian friends would not think her wrong and would not think the Church's demise a lessening of American pluralism.

Anyone who knows anything about the Church's history, or the biography of its founder L. Ron Hubbard ("Ron" to the initiated), will certainly conclude, even after rounding up the usual humble demurrals that we mortal human beings don't know one-tenth of one percent about anything, that the Church is the worst mulligan of science fiction and religious mythology. It claims to be scientifically able to pinpoint the malaise of the spirit and improve it through scientific techniques.

And if anyone has bothered to read about any of the Church's activities - its near subversion of the town of Clearwater, Florida, its civil suits against writers who dare to publish against the Church, its covert spy activity within the government - will clearly see that the church has no intention of giving to the rest of the society in which it lives the same uncontested tolerance accorded it through the Constitution. It is, by any analysis except that of confirmed believers, a snake-oil show, a pseudoscientific enterprise buttressing outrageous religious claims, an organization whose sole purpose seems to be garnering peoples' money and exercising an abortive control over their lives both in and out of the Church. (Much of the information collected in the auditing sessions is often used to gag potential challenges by disaffected members.)

My sister-in-law's response to something like the preceding paragraph is to assert her right to her ignorance. How do I know that the news stories and interviews and other information were not trumped up, are not out-and-out lies to discredit the work of a great man? This is part of the siege mentality that makes being a member of the Church mean not being a member of the usual community of thinkers.

People fully involved in the Church's activities can not, by definition, give in to the radical doubt that is the basis for all learning. They must act from first principles, that certain things are right without question, and from these principles deduce hermetically-sealed conclusions whose internal integrity provides no opening for verification from the outside world. They create the world in their own image and then let the mind atrophy, keeping it nourished solely on the collected fat of an ersatz theism.

But here's the rub. In a democracy we are supposed to let this sort of thing go on. If the IRS were harassing the organization with no apparent reason than because it is the Church of Scientology, we would have to ask it to stop if we are as good democrats as we think we are. We must accord it the right to say what it wants, to whom it wants, when it wants to, just as we claim the right for ourselves.

Yet it is an apparently shyster organization, and our denial of interference means that some people will ruin their lives and bank accounts. Do we owe these people some measure of protection, even if it means divesting them of some of their rights? Or do we let the free market of tolerance operate regardless of the results? My mother-in-law would disagree with the latter point when it concerns

her daughter, agree with it when it relates to people in the abstract. Her nobility is provisional, and understandably so.

But the nobility, in the end, can not be provisional, no matter what the pain or private reservations. The apparent rottenness of a cause is no warrant for its destruction or intimidation. But the nobility need not be passive. If the Church proselytizes, then those who believe in the power of reasonable common sense have to work just as hard to eliminate what in human life carries us beyond the limits of good sense into a superstitious arrogance that enfeebles the will.

The cost of giving way to the emotional need for vengeance will, in the end, be more destructive than allowing the exercise, however wrong-headed, of one's right to associate with whom one wants to associate. It is a shame that my sister-in-law believes that she can only find herself through the Church, and one can sympathize with her mother's vindictive desires. But if we trade in education and freedom for righteousness, we get nothing in return but the ashes of superstition. The higher morality is found in tolerance; the more worthwhile purpose is found in the reasonable mind. We must remember this at all times, for it is the only thing that makes the fight worth fighting.

Florman And Engineering

Recently, I've been reading what I dub, for want of a better term, "science for poets." These are books like Lewis Thomas' *Lives of a Cell* and Stephen Jay Gould's *The Panda's Thumb*. I've wondered what drives me to read them. It is certainly not some aptitude for science. I almost failed physics (D+), was only a passable biologist, and avoided chemistry altogether. Instead, what attracts me to them is the intellectual excitement when the scientist, bearing his cargo of fact and method, treads on the airy and elite ground of the poet. What blooms is a bracing hybrid of vast thought with granite in its veins, large speculation tied to the dirt of the universe.

One book I came across struck me immediately by its title: *The Existential Pleasures of Engineering*, by Samuel C. Florman. I had never heard it put quite so bluntly before, but I knew from the moment I read the title that Florman was speaking exactly what I believed: that full engagement with material life, such as an engineer might have, provides one of the soundest pleasures derived from living. So, though the book was written in 1976 and reviewed in all the usual publications, I would like to offer my belated but nonetheless enthusiastic endorsement of what this book has to say.

Florman's purpose is to show that the engineer and the existentialist are not adversaries but instead are both engaged in the same pursuit of meaning and intention. He begins the book with an historical overview of the engineer's self-perception of his role in life. Florman points out that engineers not only took great pleasure in the physical changes their machines wrought, but also believed that their way of thinking and doing would improve the world. Florman cites one engineer's words in 1895 which embody this attitude: "We are the priests of the new epoch, without superstitions."

Florman properly recognizes the dangerous hubris in these words, but he does not disagree with the essential truth in them: that being reasonable and open-minded, free of prejudices and preconvictions, approaching problems through the scientific method with an eye to the alleviation of drudgery and hardship, will inevitably add to rather than subtract from the general happiness of mankind.

He then goes on to skewer the "anti-technologists" as he terms them, people like Charles Reich, Rene Dubos, Theodore Roszak, and Lewis Mumford who argue, often with great stupidity, against using technology to improve the

lot of the world (often, as Florman wryly points out, from the comfort of offices heated by oil and built by working class laborers). His arguments are too involved to repeat, but he neatly upsets their posturing by systematically showing the inherent faults of their oftentimes emotionally appealing arguments.

With the anti-technologists safely neutered, he goes on to explore the delights and challenges of engineering, to detail for us what "existential" pleasures it offers to anyone willing to see it with unjaded eyes. He denies the usual animus in our culture that pure thought is superior to thought sullied by practical objectives, that materialism is a defect in human nature, by saying that "analysis, rationality, materialism, and practical creativity do not preclude emotional fulfillment; they are pathways to such fulfillment." He goes on: "We recognize that we cannot survive on meditation, poems and sunsets. We are restless. We have an irresistible urge to dip our hands into the stuff of the earth."

The rest of Florman's book is an exploration and explanation of the "existential engineer." What is truly refreshing about Florman's book is the unabashed delight he takes in material existence. It is not hedonism, which is really just exploitation, but instead a grappling with the forces of the earth that considers problems based on human needs or desires, tests and selects the best solution, and follows through to a finished product. It is the sort of drive that creates the word processor I'm using, prints my words, and makes the trucks that carry this manuscript to an editor. It is not prodigality but metamorphosis that informs Florman's book and, by extension, the life of the engineer.

I like Florman's book for another reason outside his veneration of the "stuff of the earth." It is his implicit but overwhelming reminder that whether or not a life exists beyond this one, our ultimate responsibility is to wrench into being those objects and processes that fulfill our desires for a better, more comfortable, more liberal and liberalizing world.

This forces upon us the moral duty to become more politically and scientifically involved in the world, to base our lives as much as possible on facts, and, wherever possible, delete illusions which cripple and blind us. While the world we live on and our own selves are in some sense finite, we are infinitely capable of creative solutions to the problems of our lives, and it is to this realization and constant that Florman's book invites us to return.

Those That Are Still Among Us

Is it me, or are the TV commercials more stupid, crass, and insulting than usual? The only ones that interest me (I should say "interested," since the company no longer runs them) are the vignettes by Anacin of working people - a welder, coal miner, waitress, school teacher, truck driver - who talk about how they need to get rid of their headaches to do their jobs well. (I'll talk more about these commercials in a minute.)

But what does it mean when we have beamed at us quasi-religious experiences with cereal, deodorant commercials where even athletes don't sweat, and the creeping possibility that you might be a computer illiterate, or even raising a brood of them?

We can round up the usual suspects for answers. Some people will declare that the commercials are simply marketing gimmicks and have not metapurpose beyond getting people to buy products. Others will snicker in superior tones about how the commercials reflect vulgar American culture, how we're all acquisitive, fearful, unsecured atoms leeching onto material objects in lieu of spiritual or existential fulfillment. A third group will react against the commercials' want of aesthetic quality, feeling offended that the commercials lack the cultural panache of, say, the muted company announcements on PBS. Geographically, the first group can be found in New York City, the second in the Back Bay in Boston, and the third in Newport, Rhode Island.

All their answers, to the same degree, miss the point. The first group is purely wrong, as Vance Packard pointed out 25 years ago in *The Hidden Persuaders*. Commercials are mini-myths, the writer's and director's distillation of what he or she sees as the overriding concerns of the society at large. Their effectiveness lies in how well they can exploit those small but corrosive fears we have about our fullness as human beings.

The second group feeds off this exploitation in a particular way. American culture has traditions of communal living, radical resistance, and charitable giving in addition to the rapacious history of capitalism, but these traditions have values that must be denied by these often young, often well-schooled, often spoiled benefactors of the nation's wealth. This group needs to believe that the commercials' America is the America so that they can feel aboveand therefore not responsible for America. They need to deny so much of what America is so that they can justify their avarice - by the grander terms of entrepreneurism -

and buttress inflated claims of merit and entitlement. They need a bad America to make themselves look good. This is where they overlap with the third group, who see the crassness as a personal affront, having been taught to reduce "the world" to whatever happens to fall within their cataracted and geriatric vision.

Something should be becoming obvious. These three groups are all strung on one common thread: the world they describe, and as well as the world they inhabit, is a specialized one. There is no hunger in it, no disgruntled doctors, no snooping social workers, no leaky plumbing, no lead paint, no police harassment. It is specialized because, as small as it is, it dominates all perception of reality, determines all limits to discussion, directs all production of expenditure and wealth. "The world," the middle-class bourgeois world, like the sun crowds out all other light. What the commercials are beaming at us are messages to keep the faith, fight off the barbarians, indulge all whims, and believe that everyone wants to be like us. It is a call to maintain the fortress of class blindness and prejudice.

Really? Isn't this claim, well, a little radical, a little 60s-ish? Think about it. Yes, we have Orientals on commercials, Blacks, maybe Jews - and this is supposed to say to the viewer that because Blacks can now make fools of themselves just like whites, equality has finally been achieved, so don't worry, we are all brotherly in this country. *Lean Cuisine* and *Le Menu* tell us that food isn't a problem. Bowl cleaners liberate us from guilt, women as vice-presidents can be as surly as men, and the only real problem is choosing the right hair coloring. Things are getting along just fine.

But look at how and what is *not* included in the well-feeling panorama. No poor people, no working-class people, no homosexuals, nobody that might offend middle-class sensibilities. That's why I applauded the Anacin commercials when they first came out. Not only because they were well-made and elegantly simple, but because they depicted *real working people* on TV.

Yes, the people were actors, the commercials were somewhat sentimental, John Steinbeck doing TV hack work - but how many times, outside of a *Rolaids* commercial, have you been forced to see and hear simple people out of a Studs Terkel book?

But now even Anacin has fallen prey to the marketing strategy of facts and figures. Recently, they have inserted a jangling scientific report in the middle of the actor's monologue and it ruins the whole quiet integrity of the performance, as if they couldn't trust a viewer to pay attention for 30 seconds without some bells and whistles. (And now the people in the commercials are edging socially

upward, med students instead of welders.) Yet, for a moment, the television opened a crack in the myths and another world - reality - popped through.

That world, for many, is a frightening one. Statistics do not even come close to measuring it. A simple fact that poverty increased by 15% under Reagan (along with its attendant hunger, disease, and humiliation) and that Reagan's designate for the highest law official in the land can blithely say that there aren't hungry people in this country, should all make us pause in disgust and worry. That it usually doesn't is partly a measure of the commercial world's strength on our imaginations: what we don't see, we cannot know about; what we don't see does not exist.

It is also partly due to an unvoiced belief that somehow they *belong* down there, they *deserve* their poverty, because if they had the right (read: middle-class) attitudes (read: opportunities, luck, and contacts), they would work themselves up and be like us. This is "blaming the victim," as William Ryan called in a book by the same title written in 1971.

That there are poor and hungry in the U.S. is bad enough, but we compound the social and moral dishonor if we believe even for a second that people actively *want* the degradation and marginal survival that a life of poverty is all about. Some may say that even though we've thrown so many dollars at the problems, they still exist; it must therefore be the fault of the people themselves. Ryan, in his book, again and again shows that the money did not go to the people but into the pockets of bureaucrats who worked hard to keep the poor dependent and powerless to change their lives.

A world of pain and starvation, just underneath the commercials' veneer, just outside the fake walnut cabinet of the TV set, walks silently and angrily through the streets of the city. It is a world to which we will have to pay attention either by choice, and thus redeem our moral selves, or by force of circumstance, when the comfortable life is bought at a price too dear for those who do not have.

A Defense Of Liberalism

Liberalism is not in good odor today, which is unfortunate because it offers to us our only available route for enduring, generative, effective social change. (Of course, if you're against social change, then liberalism is in the right place.) Liberalism is often lampooned by Reaganites, neoconservatives, and even neoliberals as the political Pandora's Box that brought us high deficits (despite Reagan's gutting of the national treasury), illegitimate AFDC families (despite a history of insufficient welfare funding in the 20th century), and a general unraveling of moral fibers through permissiveness, secular humanism, and military flabbiness.

But this caricature only shows the insufficient clarity characterizing American political debate and political labels, not liberalism itself. Welfare relief, supposedly a "liberal" invention, exposes this lack of clarity very neatly. The conventional fable about liberalism goes that welfare was instituted by "bleeding heart liberals" whose compassion got the better of their fiscal common sense, and that it has been conservatives, most notably Reagan, who have kept the fort of sanity intact with their tough-minded belief in the work ethic.

Yet as Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward have shown in their books *Regulating The Poor* and *The New Class War*, welfare relief has most often been used to nullify revolutionary potential during economic distress; once stability has been achieved, the relief was cut back to insure a fluid labor supply for low-wage, low-level jobs, most often filled by the minority poor. This was done regardless if a Republican or a Democrat was in the White House.

Thus, conventional liberalism has often been as niggardly as conservatism, with FDR's "generosity" the most notable offender against the truly needy. What has passed for liberalism has really only been Pyramus to conservatism's Thisbe, what Gore Vidal called one of the two wings of the Bank Party, which really runs the country.

How, then, does this liberalism I think essential to our country's preservation differ from the "liberalism" served up as a staple of political menus in the 20th century? My liberalism has three interlaced elements.

Ortega y Gasset defines the first element: compassion. He said, "Liberalism... is the supreme form of generosity; it is the right which the majority concedes to the minorities and hence it is *the greatest cry* that has ever resounded in this

planet." The generosity Ortega y Gasset proclaims can vary from individual acts of kindness to a voluntary sharing of power and goods, but its source of essential energy is the irreducible demand that each individual human being be accorded the right and the means to a decent life. This generosity aims far beyond the pallid Lenny Skutnik variety of charity so cherished by Ronald Reagan, beyond *noblesse oblige*, beyond the Darwinian smugness that inequality is an inevitable, and desirable, conclusion to human history. Its target is to create those sharing activities which keep life open rather than closed, free rather than fated.

The second element, skepticism, has to be seen in the light of this compassion. It is not self-indulgent or coolly academic. It distrusts pronouncements about "the way things are" from those centers of the world that control the goods. It constantly battles against those who would wish to cement the world into "principles," who piously announce that there are "natural" limits to social mobility and expectations.

Perhaps the best articulation of this skepticism is Saul Alinsky's *Rules For Radicals*. Alinsky sells no radical ideology but instead proposes rules and strategies by which people can fight to break open the vaults of goods and influence jealously guarded by those who have. Skepticism, like compassion, tries to maintain a constant turmoil so that lines of status and avenues of mobility do not have a chance to ossify. But skepticism also extends compassion by giving it a pair of boxing gloves and common sense so that it may fight effectively and doggedly and not give in to martyrdom or nihilism.

Yet compassion and skepticism could just as easily adorn the philanthropist who gives money but not himself as it could be one of Alinksy's organizers. Liberalism's third element extends compassion and skepticism and denies them to those interested only in credentials, in static pedigree. True liberalism's quintessence is a desire to empower those who have no power. It demands action in the world, not residence in one's own goodness. And while the motive for action may vary, from religious conviction to simple outrage and anger, the goal is to keep the democratic ports of self-government and equal opportunity open, dredged, deep, and productive for *all* people.

Liberalism is not a political label, and as I've described it here, only dimly characterizes the Democratic party. Instead, it's a way of thinking about how the world is and the way it might be, without being so lost in idealism or cynicism as to forget the daily political battles necessary to keep dignity afloat and food on the table. Most important in liberalism is its capacity to renew us. It asks each of

us to fulfill America's democratic possibilities in our own lives by moving outside our own self- and class-interest and helping those who do not have power over their lives to gain it, exercise it, and prosper by it. If there is a "pure" constant in American society, it is liberalism's call to freedom and action, not the stinginess and false rationality of conservatism. We should renew that call in our political dialogue so that it may then renew us.

Bill Baird

November 5. Bill Baird is speaking at New Hampshire College on the right of a woman to choose to have an abortion. He had earlier in the day been quoted in a radio interview as saying that a Reagan victory might render him superfluous by rendering him illegal. A sobering thought.

As the lecture opened that night it was clear that the pro-lifers were not there to *debate* the issue but to *win* it, and the pro-choicers, afflicted with their own kind of arrogance, left in a huff, saying that "You can't talk to those people." That was a true statement for both sides; the two can't really talk to each other.

That, it seemed to me, was the crux of the whole problem. The issues about when a fetus becomes a person or whether a fetus has a soul or if abortion is good or bad *per se*, despite the artillery brought out on their behalf, are dangerous distractions. The fact that these two groups have no common language, no agreement upon definitions and syntax, fogs the entire debate and threatens to reduce it to the level of passionate sincerity, the last refuge of the mute and the desperate.

S.I. Hayakawa, in his *Language in Thought and Action*, has a term for this situation: "The Two-Valued Orientation." Two-valued orientation is, in his words, the "penchant to divide the world into two opposing forces...and to ignore or deny the existence of any middle ground." This allows people, as Aldous Huxley said of propaganda, to do in cold blood things that they could otherwise do only in the heat of passion. As Jerome Frank says, in one of the epigraphs to Hayakawa's chapter, "Once we have cast another group in the role of the enemy, we know that they are to be distrusted - that they are evil incarnate. We then twist all their communications to fit our belief."

The debate about abortion, more often than not, is two-valued. But not all two-valued thinking on the subject is alike. The essential weakness of the anti-abortion two-valued orientation, at least of the groups who were there that night, is its foundation in the Bible and faith in God's word and deeds. This makes the abortion issue not a matter of debate, but of war. (Witness the fire-bombing of a number of abortion clinics in the days before the election.) This war-vocabulary deafens the anti-abortionist and forces him to relegate all who oppose him to "the enemy."

Baird also seems to rely on a two-valued orientation: Having no choice is bad, having choice is good, but one with a subtly important difference. Baird never argued that choice has the "self-evidentness" ascribed to faith. Choice and no-choice are never simply stark postulates for him. His talk about choice is about choice *under what circumstances, with what information, with what degree of political and economic freedom*.

Thus it seems that part of the reason for the high pitch of the abortion debate, perhaps the sole reason for it, is that the opponents do not speak in the same tongue, with agreements about qualification and flexibility, what Hayakawa calls, in opposition to two-valued orientation, multi-valued orientation. Abortion, as a topic, as an act of language, is impervious to resolution because each side looks at the world with different words. There are no "multi-values" by which one can some bearings, no common language that can bring each side into the other's ken without creating fear or disgust.

Does that mean that the contention around abortion is irreconcilable? No. But the debate and its language must shift back to the common customs of political democracy, back to the *unum* that gives the *pluribus* its freedom. The real issue is the freedom of choice in a democratic society, not the divinity or "personness" of the fetus. It is an issue about finding a democratic language with which to articulate differences of opinion so that those differences do not result in sectarian warfare, political imposition, or cultural polarization.

Both sides must find that rationalism that Karl Popper said was "bound up with the idea that the other fellow has a right to be heard, and to defend his arguments." And both sides could begin their reconstruction of the democratic language with a large stiff dose of humility and a time-out for some much needed silent meditation.

Flea Markets

If conventions and trade shows are the signs of where capitalism is today, then flea markets are the signs of where capitalism had been. My wife and I one Sunday had a table at a local flea market held in the parking lot of a local dance hall. We took turns manning the table (tedious work, standing there dumb while thoroughly indifferent people scrutinize the equivalent of your dirty linen) and on my off-hours I wandered around the lot taking down notes about what and who I saw.

At first glance it all looks like junk. But that is deceiving, for there are subtle species here, delicate yet distinct gradations among the inhabitants, like Darwin's finches. One species is not really a flea marketer at all, if one understands by that tag a person who cleans out his basement to make a little extra money. He will offer new sets of tools, for instance, that will rival what the local hardware store has to offer in quality and price. Or stereo equipment. Or handmade furniture and gee-gaws. Or plaster statues. Or antiques.

These people are out for business, to make a living off the crowds. They have the same spot week to week (usually with the choicest shade, having made a deal with the owner), they arrive at the same time, and their wares are inevitably set out in the same pattern on the tables: sockets on one end, wrenches in the middle, the leaping panther towards the back, the ancient cog-wheeled hand mixer among the flat-irons and tarnished baby spoons.

These people aren't any fun. They're no different than going to a store or a shop at the mall, and they see the activity as a business, as something which, either by itself or in tandem with something else, will support their living habits. In this sense they violate what a true flea marketer really is. They want profit, not just a little extra money. It's that "little extra" that provides the motivation for the true flea marketer, that and a desire to carve out some more room in a crowded house or attic.

Flea marketers are not profiteers, or if they are, it is only in the merest sense of the word. They are more like rag-and-bone men who shuffle and trade amongst themselves the cast-offs of an industrial society. And in doing so they expose to the scrutiny of the world the vigorous foolishness that characterizes American manufacturing power. One can cry out in dismay at the tremendous waste on display here, the flotsam of a society that has more than it knows what to do with. Yet, if one is going to be honest, one also has to admire, while

laughing at, the raw vitality laid out in gaudy array on these tables, the outward signs of the American society's inner decision to be the biggest, best, fastest, and first when it comes to producing economic wealth.

And a gaudy array it is. Here is a partial listing: Howdy Doody rag dolls, tools (from exotic staple-pullers for fence posts to rust-pitted dredged-up-from-the-basement chisels), paperback books with the covers surgically removed, Michael Jackson pins, chains, gloves, and even a plaster bust. Dolls (babies, Barbies, frogs), muskets, lamps out of bottles and chains and plaster Virgin Marys, knives (pen, Bowie, hunting, butcher's), old *Playboy*s looking virginal, R2D2 piggy bank, string sculptures of ships, salt & pepper shakers of a thousand complexions, a checkerboard hassock, cherubim bird baths, pictures of Jesus among the lambs, flowerpot spinning wheels, plastic placemats with covered bridges, old glasses with no one's prescription, enough knick-knackery to be used for fill (Granite State ashtrays, Pekingese statuettes, an ashtray with a dog pissing on a hydrant, Liberty Bell saucers, swan-necked gravy boats), stickers (Love Is..., unicorns, pigs, hearts, rainbows, zodiac signs), National Geographics, ancient appliances with zebra-striped electrical cords, beer signs, platitude plaques (*Today is the first day*...), figures carved from coal, elongated poodles containing liquor.

Und so weiter, as the Germans would say.

I know people who would get angry at this, seeing in it a sign of corporate frivolousness and the endemic bad taste of the American people: "Children are going hungry and America is producing...." They have a point. One could wish that the corporations in this country would act with more social conscience and not produce such a tremendous sludge of useless articles. One could wish that people would "know better" and practice a little Yankee restraint and common sense.

But the risk, of course, in wishing for these things is that in one's effort to be moral and upright, one may end up simply being snobbishly undemocratic. For if a flea market is anything, it's a sign that American democracy still exists. First, these people, from different sections of the city, freely assemble on a Sunday to sell their goods (and bads).

True, they must pay $6 to the owner of the parking lot for the right to have a space, but if they were to have it in their backyards, they would've had to pay $4 to the city for a permit anyways. There is no restraint on what they can sell (as long as it's not outright salacious, I suppose) and they can display it in any manner they choose.

Second, these people aren't out to make a profit, they're out to make a few bucks. They aren't entrepreneurs, they're ordinary people scraping together a little extra money for a meal out here and there. Some of them engage in it more deliberately, buying up old stuff, fixing it up, and selling it again at a small profit, but even this shows an enterprising spirit that is missing from many of the stuffy bugbears of our American corporations. These are people who, for the most part, live along the margins. A small financial disaster, an illness, a car that needs fixing can often mean a severe strain. A few extra dollars rattling around in the pockets, while it doesn't provide that little boost up into security, makes life just that much easier.

And probably one of the most remarkable things is the easy camaraderie that exists between these people. Tocqueville mentioned this a hundred and fifty years ago, and it still holds true. To be sure, the friendliness is easily won. These are people who do not spend their lives together, do not owe one another anything, who really are just glancing bits of light in one another's lives.

Yet it is a fact that after eight hours of standing next to someone else, one talks of this and that, and while the exchange is never deathless and the person is pretty easily forgotten once everything is packed up, there is a congregational ease that comes about because there are no class barriers here, no sludge of caste that clogs the arteries of conversation.

And there is even something more here, something ultimately precious to democracy, which makes democracy, American-style, what it is. As you walk around the tables, if you're open to the experience, you'll go through several phases of thought. The first one might be that dislike I mentioned above of the industrial excess, especially in light of what needs to be done to make life better in this country. Yet, if you can put that to one side, you can also marvel at the extreme, nay, chaotic, inventiveness of American industry: thousands of people and millions of dollars out there somewhere engaged in producing ice cubes with naked ladies in them and coffee mugs shaped like pregnant mothers. The marvel you may feel is not approval; it's merely a pairing with that earlier distaste you have, saving your indignation from becoming snobbish self-righteousness.

The next level is seeing, really seeing, the ordinariness of these people, and this is what is most precious. As I walked around, looking, chatting, taking notes, I began to get a queer sensation of intimacy that went beyond simply exchanging a few halloos with people, discussing the weather, remarking on the sparseness of the crowd. Excepting the people there who I would call merchants, everyone,

to some degree, had their lives spread out on their tables. True, a distorted picture, much as one might get looking through a keyhole or catching a glimpse through a window.

Yet, if you look closely enough, you begin to make up stories, make connections between that fleur-de-lis trivet and the picture of the bleeding-heart Jesus that probably hung in the kitchen. Or the straw hat nailed by a plastic strawberry and the stiff-woven reed basket that might have accompanied a young woman on a walk through a field. Lives lived through whatever conjunctions of pain and pleasure get carelessly strewn under a hot afternoon sun, sold off for a few cents. Yet to eyes that are looking just right, the lives come back and offer an unutterably precious gift of insight, of being able to go beyond the plainly visible, the parsimony of time and place.

At bottom, this love of fictive experiences is the heart of democracy. "The love of the common people" can take on many meanings, and be liable to many distortions, but in the end it has to be some Whitmanian desire to *know* the very vibrancy that runs through peoples' lives, to incarnate into oneself all the ties that bind, all the broken and unbroken circles; in short, almost a cannibalistic desire to ingest all experience life has to offer in order to better participate in that life, (if we mean by "life" living done along the margins, without much cushion, open equally to both destruction and happiness, yet not bereft of hope or humor).

And life runs most clearly, if most painfully, through the common people. They produce the wealth in the factories, yet have to sell off bits and parts of their lives to enjoy that wealth. They spend the money that keeps the economy going, yet they are at the mercy of the whims of bankers and bureaucrats. They are the ballast that keeps the country stable (and provide the reason for keeping the country going at all), yet they are boiled down to such non-entities through polls, public opinion surveys, and advertising. To know them, then, is to know a good chunk about the life of the nation, and, more importantly, it saves them from an undeserved and dangerous reduction to pawns and masses.

Any hope for democracy's success, that is, any hope that the people who produce the wealth, spend it, and make the society stable will have a strong and loud voice in the running of the country, begins with flea markets and a sensitive listening to what they are saying about the qualities these people bring to our common life. A "love of the common people" should not be a deification. All their common sense is balanced, and sometimes overrun by venal behavior, bigotry,

and plain stupidity. And their common sense is sometimes indistinguishable from pure stubbornness. Yet if they are abandoned, then democracy is abandoned. Only insofar as their lives are bettered by the political policies of this country, and only insofar as they have a strong direct voice in the making of those policies will this country have a democracy worth the name. If democracy comes to reside in the corporate boardrooms and legislative halls, then it is no longer a democracy, or it is at least a democracy that no self-respecting person would want.

Such are the lessons of flea markets.

Thoreau: 1982 (or 1983 or 1984 or...)

One hundred and twenty calamitous years have passed since the death of Henry David Thoreau. The cantankerous son-of-a-bitch has survived the rude pryings of theorists and *illegitimati* who claimed his patron sainthood for causes he would have abhorred, and one suspects he will outdate the vulgarities of Ronald Reagan. A simple explanation for this: Truth certainly outlasts fashion, and one strong voice will silence all manner of faddish cacophonies.

I teach in an institution that may well be one of the few remaining reliquaries of puritanism, slightly adulterated (or perhaps updated) with a dash of Dale Carnegie and a pinch of ersatz Jamesian intellectuality. The Academy is certainly a place Thoreau would have warned healthy-minded people away from, if only for the fact, as he said of his dear Harvard College, that the "economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even sincerely professed." Yet because he is so ill-matched with the bastions of respectability, and because he has a piercing sense that cuts through and x-rays the "mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance," I teach him to children who have been taught exactly the opposite of his common sense, and, delighted, watch the clinquant doubt burst upon their horizons.

The Academy, at first glance, is not a propitious soil for the species *Thoreauviansis agitatus*. There is too much shade, too much brick and white wood, too much antlike bustle on the paths, too much lucubrating for the junkfood of a grade. There is very little opportunity to drink Nature's beauty in "through every pore," to catch "manna-wise" the turbid breath of spring or the arch silence of winter. The students have a hard time understanding and accepting quiet, are pricked by guilt or bustle whenever they stop, for a moment, to catch the ineffable sound of their own selves running. They feel kin to the man pushing his house and farm and animals and wife down the road, except for them it is a much more nebulous cargo, a fascicle of colleges and future jobs and a greased pig called happiness. In this they reflect the hebetude of the country itself, a depreciation of vision, a distrust of anything not monetarily negotiable, a scurrying chase of egotistical will-o'-the-wisps, a craving for fewer questions and more settling answers: "It's all so nice, what he says, but..."

But I tell them to trust the marrow of the literature. Thoreau is a powerful emetic, the sort that makes us chuck up the apple that Salinger's Teddy says we've all so unwittingly swallowed, the apple of logic and conformity and petty

vision. *Walden* is a skewed book in many ways, but always skewed toward celebration, hope, and a gleeful twitting of the norms. It helps unearth and rejuvenate from the midden of expectation the adolescent's right to rebel and question, and helps nourish the growth that takes one from *looking* to *seeing*. It is best read when the glands are at full production, the plain is unusually darkling, the verities are seen as vanities, doubt stalks the halls of the brain. I want my students to *think*, not merely *reason*, and Thoreau stirs up their expectations and archives as no other writer can.

To what end? Agreed, doubt for its own sake leads to nihilism, or, worse, a smug existentialism afraid to risk anything, what Stanley Kaufmann calls "New Slick." Thoreau advocates neither, for even as he totes up the debits of his fellows (and he does so, charmingly, in the wild inversion of their own Yankee terms of business), he hymns out the credits to be gained, the interest to be had, in the life surrounding us. Many people see *Walden* and his other writings as sermons; or as exercises in niggling mysticism; or primers on economics, social theory, natural history; or as pretensions and Gibranisms.

All of this misses the mark. He simple invited people with an urgent RSVP to enjoy as fully as possible the dance and banquet of life. He knew quite well how hard people worked to complicate the simple necessities of life, how "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths," and he honed his wit and his writing talent to slice through all the Gordian knots people tied themselves into.

He did this any way he could, never with spleen, never with righteousness or garlanded piety, but always with the full and budding knowledge that there was an available dawn in all of us if only we would gather our forces together and drive away the fog. Thoreau's questioning, his injunction to have "old deeds for old people, new deeds for new," his constant inversion of accepted understandings, his chanticleerian buffoonery, were all aimed to awaken the slumbering bear of our true self, and, by sloughing off the scales, help us move confidently in the direction of our dreams.

Heady stuff. But it corrects the image of Thoreau as a nay-sayer, a garbled idealist who ought to be read but not believed. He required that every thinker be able to give some true account of himself. This was not, as some of my students try to argue, oneupsmanship, the overly-proud pariah telling off the good citizen. It was a challenge, and an easy one at that: one could either do it or not do it. My students are upset by that challenge. They feel they have so little to account for. They begin to see where the reins are tied, have been tied all their lives, and

they discover the bit in their mouths. They resent the fact that so much has been hidden from them, that the world they've been groomed to inherit has done little to prepare them to be anything other than subservient caretakers. And perhaps for the first time in their "education" they seriously have to question the values and assumptions that have girdered their lives, and they are scared and uncentered by the task. Thoreau would commiserate, though he'd be cold comfort: each man to his own bean patch.

But he is not one to leave a job unfinished, to rest on metaphorical laurels. When we are in the most stygian depths of that infernal process called "growing up," this Yankee Oriental slips us the coins to make the voyage over to Elysium: "If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he had imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." An effervescent sentence, baldly stated and securely proven by his life experiment at Walden Pond.

My students complain that all the Waldens are gone, soon to be waste dumps for Watts' industrialization of the forests. But they soon also see that Walden Pond is an internal affair, a caravan going nowhere but closer to the oasis of the self, and that deep in the jungle of Times Square or a prep school classroom one can advance by a marvelously simple route: enjoy the world, dance as lustily as possible, and keep the family jewels safely guarded.

This agitation cannot be too welcomed by the teacher. Too often here, as in other education institutions, what are offered as *logia*, the pearls of wisdom, turn out to be *olivets*, imitation pearls meant to deceive. We are a bookish horde here; the only dirt that touches our hands is library dust. We are reserved spectators, prosecutors of split hairs. Into this dullish community rides Thoreau, the maverick who, in E.B. White's well-woven image, "rides into the subject at top speed, shooting in all directions....[One] is impressed chiefly by the courage of the writer and by how splendid it was that somebody should have ridden in there and raised all that ruckus."

Thoreau defined himself pre-eminently as a writer, and he shot off his ideas with tensile and jussive words that, he said, "should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement." He is a constant critic, never wishing for any moment of life to slip into academic prose because he knew quite first-handedly that a "writer who does not speak out of a full experience uses torpid words...which have a paralysis in their tails." We chair-sitters and table-banterers would do well to heed the paralysis in our head andtails and try to coin some new

advantage for ourselves. The agitation he incites is the agitation of a bursting flower or a leaping dolphin, of "contra-dictions" that harmonize in a usable truth, an injunction to co-ordinate the "bowels and the stars" so that we may never feel abandoned like motes in the glaze of sunlight.

So far, so good. They can see it, grasp it in the tentacles of their left brains, and even concede that Thoreau has something to say. But Thoreau is a testicular yeast, a pituitary gland, and he is not content to simply inhabit a brain cell or two. He knew very well that to "simplify, simplify, simplify" carried the battle right to the capitalist aorta of his society. For if a man declares a separate treaty with his government, if he requires that a government respect him before he respects the government, if he insists that any institutional approach is inevitably tainted morally, he is a danger, because a man with ideas is more threatening than a man with guns.

This strikes right to the core of the democratic ideology they took in with their Similac, the belief in the right of the majority, the social contract, the power of the vote. And it strikes right into their dorm rooms, dashes the papers and books from the shelves, and firmly asks, "What price will *you* pay for your freedom?" For Thoreau's thought is inseparable from action, and while part of that action may be a full life in Nature, part of it is also being a solid counter-friction to the machinery of conformity, economic dilution, and social propaganda. The enjoyable crank, the costermonger of mystic natural delights, is also a man who demands a hard eye cast on life and on death, a firm two-footed stand against all that is unjust and infirm and immoral.

Thoreau would find fertile abundance in Mr. Reagan's America for another *Walden*. But, as he would say, it's all been said before. Only now he would realize too that it must be said more loudly than before, that we are in too much danger of taking ourselves solemnly, and that, more than ever, we need to clear up the cataracts and get down to the business of living. He can only say that by proxy; we no longer have his shambling figure to consult. I hope my students fit some of that bill, that they molt out of their Academy drab plumage and, phoenix-like, rise to seek where a suitable ground for being might be. He is a good companion, regardless of how his hedgehog personality pricks our pieties, and his invitation still stands.

Standing In Line

Last week I had to register my truck. We had tried earlier in the week to do that but ran up against the ruling that we couldn't until we had produced our resident tax receipts from the town we had just moved from, even though now we were living in a new town. They couldn't make a phone call to verify - we had to send away and wait a week for the pieces of paper to come in. So we did. And so we waited.

The pieces of paper came and I planned to go and register the truck. One must plan such a thing. When we had gone down before, we had popped our head into the auto registration office and saw a line snaking around the room that smelled of a two-hour wait, at least. (This room was approximately 15 feet square, with at least 35 people in it, 6 chairs. That's a little over 6 square feet per person to stand in for 2 hours.) I have an aversion to waiting, something I'll talk about in a moment, so we decided that I would come back another day when it wasn't so crowded.

One of the annoying things about this whole venture was that much of the waiting we had to go through could have been avoided by some decent information willingly given by the people who work in these agencies. Christine had first called the DMV and asked about registering the truck. They simply said, Come on down. So we did. And when we got there the clerk told us that we had to have our residence tax verified at city hall. This after waiting fifteen minutes in line.

So we trotted on down to city hall and waited another fifteen minutes in line to be told that we couldn't register our truck that day because we didn't have little slips of paper from the other town hall, even though we were standing right there, willing to pay the city money. It seems that we had moved at the wrong time - the city could not officially indicate us as residents until a little later, when the tax rolls were ready to be sent out. Thus the economics of the place determined our legal status. Our desire to help ourselves out by paying money that in a sense we did not have to pay (our truck was still legally registered with the other town hall), just to buy a little smooth sailing, paled in front of the bureaucracy of motion. We retreated and waited.

So, as I said, we got our pieces of paper, and it became time to plan our strategy. I was going to have to take time off work in order to get there early enough to not have to wait. This wasn't really a problem because my schedule

was flexible and being a half-hour late to work would cause no flak. In fact, I was the first in line, getting there at 8:15. By 8:20, about twenty people were strung out behind me. I had brought a magazine with me to read, but the man behind me felt like talking, so we talked. He was a mechanic who normally started work at 7:00 a.m. and who had had to take time off to register his new motorcycle. The man behind him had just arrived from Florida and was taking time off work (losing pay, of course) to go through the rigmarole of transferring title to this state. Various people floated out behind him, like a string of styrofoam bobbers, and as the three of us talked, I looked at the all the people, wondering who they might be and what they had to give up to stand here in line.

Several things struck me as I stood in line. First, like the two men I was talking with, most of the people probably had to take time off to stand in line to get this done. Since everyone in the world has lunch breaks at pretty much the same time, a person can't do many errands that require waiting in line. So they had to find a time that would not make them wait long (and which probably meant most of them would have to work through their lunch to make it up). So here they were at 8:20.

In contrast to this were the city hall employees. As we stood in line the employees began filtering into the hall, and the immediate thing I noticed was how differently the people in the line and the people coming to worked dressed. My mechanic wore a grungy sweatshirt over a torn flannel shirt mottled with grease and whatnot, complete with cap, eight-day growth of beard, dirty fingernails, heavy workman-green pants, and boots crusted with oil and dirt and cracked with dryness. The guy from Florida was more simply dressed: jeans, a western shirt with that inevitably dull cross-hatch pattern, a denim jacket, a Fu Manchu moustache and hair that needed a slight trim. His wife was dressed pretty much the same, and they smoked long slim cigarettes with some floral design near the filter end. They looked like ordinary people, people who would feel uncomfortable dressing in suits, and who would, in any case, expose their origins by the lack of easiness with which the suit would ride on them. It's a funny thing in that regard, but one can tell a lot about a person by the ease with which that person wears the official costume of the middle class.

The employees, to a person, were dressed far more nicely than one would assume necessary for a desk job. In a sense they were dressed for work, and how they were dressed said much about the kind of work they did, or thought they did. The women were by far the most overdressed, swaddled in dresses

that hissed as they moved, with hair coiffed in neat layers or patterns, often with fingernails done in some glistering color of red, carrying purses that were either really underblown knapsacks or small kit bags capable of carrying nothing more than a handful of change and a driver's license.

The men usually had suits on (that is, the men who went upstairs to their desks; the workers who were doing some reconstruction work in the auto registration office wore jeans and a simple shirt and had drill shavings in their hair). Some wore the suits casually, their little-bit-too-large bellies pressing against the minor restraint of their belts. These generally were the older men, ones who had been in city hall from the day it had been erected and would be the cholesterol in the veins of any attempt to change the way things were done. The younger men also had suits on, but they were much more natty about it. Generally, they were also thinner, with pale moustaches (if any facial hair at all) or faces neatly scraped but who also looked underfed or at least too much deprived of sun.

These people breezed in, more and more of them as it got closer to 9 a.m., and walked by our increasing crowd without so much as a glance. One had the feeling that they in fact did not notice we were there, or, if they noticed, it was only to say to themselves that they were lucky not to have to wait in lines like that. One of the privileges of working for the city (which, presumably, would mean working for the *people* of the city) is not to have put up with the services the city offers, or doesn't offer, its people. Someone "downstairs" will get your registration done, and on your lunch hour you can go to DMV and get the whole thing validated. No time lost at all. While we were all workers, all of us, it was clear that there were workers, and then there were themselves, and one of the measures of status was whether one had to wait in line or not and lose time.

Then there were the workers in the office, whom I could see as I stood pressed against the door. I was told by the mechanic that the office used to be open 8 to 6, and on Thursday evenings as well, and that the hours had been steadily cut back over the years until it was now 9 to 4:15. That interested me. In the interest of saving money, the city had cut back on a service that was a service to most, if not all, people. I wondered how many top salaries they had cut back, how much they had spread the burden of saving money. And I knew the answer, of course: none.

As usual, the people who had to take the brunt of the changes, had to suffer an increasing number of little annoyances and inconveniences, were the people

who had little power to argue with the rulings. Now people (and here I have to say *working people*) have to lose doubly, both time from work and from shortened hours which makes life just a little more crowded and hurried.

And the workers in the office, of course, couldn't care less about that. They worked for the city - they believed they were different from the working class people they were really no different from. Just another little gradation, another little ersatz way to make a sense of difference, a feeling of minor superiority. "The public" was something they had to endure, not be part of. Their loyalty was vague, primarily to themselves. They did not see the suited people going upstairs as an enemy, and they saw those most like themselves as, at best, a nuisance, a way for them to get their paycheck, and, at worst, a lesser kind than themselves.

I was struck, though not necessarily surprised, by these divisions. It is not uncommon to have working class people suffer from decisions not taken with them in mind - look at the recent recession. They were the shock troops for that recession, the cannon fodder. They were sacrificed so that people who had, and now have, more money could keep it. And if workers now think that the economy is getting better and that Reagan is responsible for that, that only shows that the media have not done their job in educating the public and that workers still have yet to create a consciousness of themselves as a class of people fundamentally different from their bosses. They want too much to be like their bosses and have been convinced that the proper consciousness to have is to be patriotic and believe that they are above all Americans rooting for America.

(This kind of patriotism is a nice way to distract them from building their own sense of patriotism as loyalty to the people who actually produce the wealth of the nation.)

Other things struck me as well about these divisions, most strongly about the difference in expectations between working class people and the middle-class suited people who went upstairs (among whom I must classify myself - my magazine gave me away, and I was the only one in the line who had brought something to read - what is it that a person thinks about for two hours as he or she stands empty-handed in line?). The people in line, even though they were losing pay and having to waste time, never thought that anything was particularly wrong with that. Yes, they were inconvenienced, but that was just the way things were. Working class people wait - one of the Newtonian laws of the universe. They never thought that it might pay to complain in an organized fashion, collectively

use their voice. They would suffer the inconveniences as one would suffer bad weather.

My middle-class sensibilities were very different. I resented having to wait in line. I did not, and people of my class did not, expect to wait in line. We were used to getting things quickly and without too much fuss. We are used to privilege of a kind, and think nothing of demanding that that privilege be recognized. I didn't have to worry about losing money from work - I was on salary. And when I got to work and told people about the wait I had, I would find sympathy, not a foreman thinking I was lying so as to have a little time to myself outside the job.

Orwell points out just this kind of sensibility in *The Road To Wigan Pier*. He speaks at length about being middle-class and the set of assumptions about the world that that entails, one of which is, as he says, that one can demands things from the world and expect to be heard:

> It is very different for a member of the bourgeoisie, even such a down-at-heel member as I am. Even when I am on the verge of starvation I have certain rights attaching to my bourgeois status. I do not earn much more than a miner earns, but I do at least get it paid into my bank in a gentlemanly manner and can draw it out when I choose. And even when my account is exhausted the bank people are still passably polite.
>
> This business of petty inconvenience and indignity, of being kept waiting about, of having to do everything at other people's convenience, is inherent in working-class life. A thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a *passive* role....A person of bourgeois origin goes through life with some expectation of getting what he wants, within reasonable limits.... [They] are accustomed to a certain amount of deference and consequently have the cheek necessary to a commander. (49)

Such was my "day" waiting in line. I was the first to get my business done, and was back at work at 9:30. Such a small amount of time, but it showed me a lot, not only about how those who have the least power get the least service, but also about my own class prejudices and expectations. I do not want to give up my middle-classness - yet its power should be shared.

War And Peace: The Solutions Of William James

The vagaries of pregnancy being what they are, it now appears that America has successfully given birth to a fully-fleshed peace movement. Rallies like that of June 12 in New York City with over 700,000 in attendance are merely the outward sign of an inward melding that began with town meetings, prophetic and prophylactic articles in the *New Yorker*, congressional proposals, and brigades of words - both morally sincere and politically opportunistic - about the dangers of nuclear war. One can hope that this vital tide of popular and political sentiment stays on the flow. Regardless of its improprieties, pornography, and woolyheadedness, it is a movement that should be supported.

Yet the peace movement (if I can speak so generally of such a conglomeration of interests), for all its proclamatory good, has yet to answer some strong and fundamental philosophical questions: What exactly is the shape of the peace it strives to obtain? Does it wish to do away permanently with war? If so, how will it defuse the aggressive tendencies of our culture and politics? What will it put in war's place to restrain imperialistic powers like the Soviet Union? The questions could be multiplied, but the central query remains the same: what is peace and how can it be best maintained.

There exists an available Virgil through this metaphysical thicket: the philosopher William James. In his later writings, and most especially in his essay published in 1910, "The Moral Equivalent of War," he staked out very neatly the territory a pacifist has to travel in order not to end up abetting the devils of the world. The peace movement, and American society in general, would do well to pause and listen to his earnest cautions and considerations.

The thinking that prompted the writing of "The Moral Equivalent of War" sprang from a single powerful source: James' desire to secure American democracy against the poison of narrow-gauged thought and behavior. He perceived that the resilience of American democracy, the "civic genius" of the American people, flourished best when each individual was credited with personal responsibility for the social welfare of the country. This social consciousness required an exacting moral administration of the will, something which could only be done well through temperate debate and clear information. James thus committed himself to a "democracy stumbling through every error till its institutions glow with justice and its customs shine with beauty."

But James also knew the frailty of such resolve, how easily people can be convinced to forego the necessary discipline of making choices. In an enterprise conjured for the national good, such as a war, politicians ("schemers" in James' words) and newspapers mobilize to distort and dismember accurate information; in its absence the bellicose intolerance that James believed lurked in all men fractures the patina of social civility. He had ample evidence of this process, such as Cleveland's orations during the Venezuela crisis and the Hearst journalism of the Spanish-American War. With this abdication of the democratic process, "every kind of diseased sensationalism and insincerity" comes to roost and intolerance blooms. In a letter to F.W.H. Myers in 1896, James warned that the "whole wisdom of governors should be to avoid the direct appeals" to man's belligerent impulses because "fighting mob-hysteria…can at any time undo peace habits of a hundred years."

The brutality of this one-sided thinking, this "curious auto-intoxication," corroded democratic thought and action. And *any* group was liable to its contamination. As he warned, "we are all ready to be savage in *some* cause. The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of the cause." And, he might have added, the method of fighting for it. "The Moral Equivalent of War" not only came from an intense affirmation of democracy and a hatred of narrow-mindedness, but also from a conviction that the most powerful way to make a case for the end of war and the establishment of peace was through reasoned analysis and proportioned argument. Emotional ballyhoo, even in the cause of peace, could only adulterate the moral intentions. Sincerity and rightness were no barricade against, and certainly no defense of, appeals to base and ranting emotions. How one obtained peace was as important as the peace one obtained.

"The Moral Equivalent of War," then, is James' reasoned approach to the cause of world peace. He begins by artfully divining the heart of the argument for war: "War is the *strong* life; it is life *in extremis*." The possibility for romantic death and virile patriotism gave war a prospect of toughness and glory that "a world of clerks and teachers, of co-educational and zo-ophily, of 'consumer leagues' and 'associated charities', of industrialism unlimited, and feminism unabashed" could not possibly offer. And, equally important to James' point, war brought into play the martial virtues, such as fidelity, cohesiveness, contempt of softness, and obedience to command. These virtues worked to make men feel a part of some great enterprise and gave them a vision larger than their own single lives. The problem was that man had not been sufficiently creative to encourage

these virtues in any way *but* war. War was not the only possible form of a life filled with zest and purpose.

So far, so good. Anyone involved in the peace movement today can agree with James' analysis that "'peace' in military mouths today is a synonym for 'war expected'" and raise two cheers for his efforts. Yet he was unsparingly harsh on the peace movement of his day for what he saw as their failure "to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents." He chastised them for unimaginatively failing to propose a "substitute for war's disciplinary function" and further took them to task for the weakness and insipidity of a utopian literature that "tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense for life's bitter flavors."

Why this churlishness toward an apparent ally in his devout urge for "the reign of peace"? James patently did not believe that "peace either ought to be or will be permanent on this globe" unless nations "pacifically organized [to] preserve some of the elements of the old army-discipline." He chided the pacifists for their squeamish gentility in this regard. The only plans they had come up with for world order inevitably centered on a mild-mannered gradualist approach and a sense of shame about belonging to *any* collectivity that required strenuousness and ardent obedience. The peace of his day was, in his eyes, merely negative. Its members were primarily interested in subtracting the mechanics of war without substituting the means by which a person could, through struggle and achievement, make the world worth living in. Until they could see that the martial virtues, properly harnessed, were usable and necessary, the members of the peace movement were arguing beside the point. The gain of peace, the eradication of the war machine, would not solve the problems of the world, regardless of the peace movement's fervor in this matter.

What James proposed was a conscription of the country's youth for a term of service in an "army enlisted against *Nature*," similar to the Peace Corps or the Civilian Conservation Corps. The "energies and hardihoods" usually elicited by military service would now be informed by "the morals of civic honor." This army would work to smooth out the inequities in the existing social order that allowed too many people to be at the mercy of chance and poverty. In the process "our gilded youths [would] get the childishness knocked out of them, and come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas." He was very clear that the martial values would be the "enduring cement" of this army and believed that we would get "toughness without callousness, authority with as

little criminal cruelty as possible, and painful work done cheerily because the duty is temporary."

In this way he tried to reconcile the war-regime and the peace-regime by grafting the intentions of the latter onto the values of the former. And it is this peculiar hybrid that provides a test for the intentions and directions of today's peace movement. This movement, like peace movements of the past, is in part a negative movement: it seeks to do away with what it sees as impediments to peace. All well and good. But it has not in any real way substituted any vision beyond a call for the improvement of "social services," has offered no abiding articulation of its moral and political imperatives. It has not, for instance, addressed the rigor needed to maintain those services in terms of the political horsetrading that passes for process in American politics. It also hasn't, for all its moral appeals, formulated a philosophical buttressing for itself beyond the truism "peace is better than war." The peace movement must get metaphysical if it is to have the kind of nourishment that will sustain it beyond its purely subtractive efforts. James lays down a prickly gauntlet here: Will the peace movement be able, or even be motivated, to call for the style and reality of obligation and service that James described? If not, what does the movement to offer in its stead?

This last point can not be stressed too strongly: Can peace-loving Americans rise *at all* to the emulation of military virtues? Can they - will they - psychologically be able to dissociate these virtues from their military practice? I believe so *if* the people are educated to do so. But the peace movement to date has failed to educate its followers in the necessary duties of patriotism. If we scorn the television ads for the Armed Services, do we scorn the martial virtues or the physical restraints of service? If the latter, then there is little hope that *any* enterprise beyond pleasurable mass marches in Central Park can engage us. Our contentment to be free individuals renders us reluctant to give up a modicum of that freedom (which is often only a freedom of movement, not an independence of mind) to a collectivity that will further insure that freedom. In the calculus of many Americans, *obligation*, especially of the variety requested by the military and by James, is a subtraction of freedom, not an addition to its strength. If this be true, and much in our culture confirms this observation, the conviction that James calls for is unreachable and the moral energy of the peace movement is thus lessened.

A pertinent - if sour grapes - question may arise at this juncture: Do James' ideas in fact offer us anything useful? James was a self-proclaimed liberal, a member of a group he believed always to be in the minority because it was the temporizing intelligence of society. Even though he saw the fault of liberalism to be "its lack of speed and passion," and rued the fact that often a liberal's only audience was posterity, he unequivocally endorsed the "judicial and neutral attitude" of the liberal as a necessary counterbalance and antidote to the "red-blood" party, the party of "animal instinct, jingoism, fun, excitement, bigness." The lesson of "The Moral Equivalent of War" was offered from this liberal platform and was fired by an intense love of America, "for her youth, her greenness, her plasticity, innocence, good intentions, friends, everything." The force of James' intellect and patriotism alone suggests at least a cursory "yes" to the question.

More contemporary thought suggests a "yes" as well. Nothing in the last several decades has diluted the truth of what E.B. White said in two of his essays, "Sootfall and Fallout" (1956) and "Unity" (1960). In the former he states, in a paraphrase of Eisenhower, that, in relation to nuclear weapons, "'Strong we shall stay free, *provided we do not have to use our strength*'." In the latter he makes the prescient statement that "I doubt...whether the tension created by the existence of arms is as great as the tension that would arise if there were no arms, or too few." Until the human race evolves to a higher and surer trustfulness, weapons, nuclear and otherwise, are our first cousins. They can not be wished away, nor should they be.

White also suggests that disarmament is a "mirage." Even if every weapons and soldier were scrapped, the world would not be disarmed "if the original reasons for holding arms were still present." The world is still essentially as James saw it, full of the "original reasons" of chaos, indifference, social inequity, starvation, and the challenge of survival, making it quite clear that great energies still need to be marshaled to soften the severities, both human and natural, of this only partly hospitable globe. The peace movement has yet to do much more than articulate the apocalypse. To be truly effective, that is, truly interested in preserving an ongoing historical effort to make the world a better place in which to live, the peace movement must give at least a courteous nod to both the analysis and the solution James offers. Otherwise it may become a movement of dilettantes, politically active but historically irrelevant, a movement dedicated to the maintenance of pleasure, not the obliteration of pain.

James' "The Moral Philosopher and The Moral Life" ends with sober and heartening advice to people living in troubled times. Speaking about the tentativeness of any system of ethics, he warns that ethical people must bide their time and make what tacks are necessary to preserve their lives and integrity:

The ethical philosopher, therefore, whenever he ventures to say which course of action is the best, is on no essentially different level from the common man. "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, death and evil; therefore choose life that thou and thy seed may live," - when this challenge comes to us, it is simply our total character and personal genius that are on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that also are but revelations of our personal aptitude or incapacity for moral life....The solving word...is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

The peace movement is won or lost in the individual hearts of those who profess their beliefs and actions. It will be won if each person keeps his heart full of a love mixed with a gritty savvy about the imperfections of the world. It will be lost when the heart traces a party line with no thought for alternative patterns. James provides pencil, paper, and impulse for us to sketch out who we are and what compass point we follow in our perilous times.

Neil Postman: A Book Review

I teach English in a small village north of Ithaca, New York. It is a small place, composted mainly of farmers, recycled hippies, and professionals masquerading as weekend squires. The school district has about 1500 students, most of them bussed to class, almost all of them white, vaguely Protestant, thoroughly normal. Educational problems seem to occur somewhere else: in seething New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., but not here. School goes on in much the same fashion as the planting and harvesting. If there are problems it is with students tardy to class, smoking in the bathrooms, budget requests for new window shades. The village is a hotbed of educational normality. So, sequestered in this oasis, freed from the trauma of violent students and racial faction, I have an unalloyed chance to observe my charges and think considerately about them. What I see disturbs me, not so pure and not so simple, and I would like to share that.

Most people are aware of the calamity of public education in this country and there have been no dearth of Jeremiahs tolling the end of American civilization because of it. Yet, while all prophets speak some truth, it is not always a relevant truth. The "back to basics" people believe that if we turn the clock back, we'll turn the kids on; if we tinker with the system, we'll get the desired product. But there is something more profound going on here than the failure of a system to deliver the goods. What unsettles many people, including myself, is not just that children today, in some relative subjective sense, seem "dumber" than children of other generations, but that they lack some spark of curiosity, some ingredient of character, that would give them some presence.

The adolescents I see for the most part wear an armor of just "being there," a cultivated inviolability that will not open to ideas or hard work or sequential thought. Adolescence has always had a built-in blandness to it, a sort of tribal agreement not to be like the adults, but this goes beyond that. They are more like ciphers waiting to be filled rather than jealous guardians of secrets. It is strange to teach and hear no echo, ask for an idea and get silence. And the schools seem increasingly incapable of reaching them, of breaking the code. If this happens in my benign little village, what must be happening elsewhere? What, indeed, has happened?

Fortunately, two books exist that give some sort of Baedeker out of today's educational slough of despond. In 1969, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

wrote *Teaching As A Subversive Activity*, bracketing an era of intense social motion. Approximately a decade later, Neil Postman offers as an appropriate parentheses to the 1970s, *Teaching As A Conserving Activity*. Even though they are twelve years apart in time, they tailor Thomas Jefferson's dictum, that education must help people protect themselves from tyranny, to fit a world clothed in the polyester of a hyped media culture. Moreover, and most helpfully, the two books offer practical suggestions on how to teach children in a democratic fashion to live in a democratic society.

In 1969, Postman and Weingartner believed that the primary failure of the schools was to teach children to be "crap-detectors," good questioners who could ferret out and judge what was worth knowing and what wasn't. Instead, they stated, schools were so addicted to fragmented curricula and useless fact-knowledge that they produced anachronistic children in a culture fast moving out of their reach. It was as if, they said, a person was driving a multimillion dollar sports car screaming "Faster! Faster!" while peering fixedly into the rearview mirror.

Conserving appears in a different social context, which Postman artfully annotates in his Introduction. In 1969, people were fired with a zest for change; in 1981, Postman sees people battered by it, retreating to nostalgic dreams of certainty. *Subversive*'s effervescence has been replaced by a good measure of humility. But the problems still remain: children are no more literate or flexible questioners than they were in 1969. To Postman, the present problem of education is the result of an imbalance that schools have failed to correct. The outside culture, dominated as it is by the media, encourages a state of being that is nonanalytical, continuous in time yet isolated in space, discontinuous in content, and desirous of immediate gratification. So powerful is this media culture that schools find themselves like a wise spinster competing against the young girls: the spinster may have more brains but it is no real contest. And schools themselves are partly to blame for this imbalance because, like the old spinster, they've prettied themselves up with all the proper media cosmetics only to find that they are still foolish and inept. The victim in this charade is the child in the classroom. The child is partly victimized by the media culture; partly by social instability in the family; partly by schools that have not defined their purpose or program well.

There are, of course, inconsistencies in how the two books state the situation. Postman and Weingartner saw media studies and the inquiry

method as the breakthrough to the future. Postman now sees these things as the breakthrough to the past. Postman and Weingartner saw the child as the suppressed individual who, once the oppression was lifted, would discover the proper bearings and, like a pigeon, head for home. In *Conserving*, Postman sees the child not as suppressed but duped. But whether denied or deceived, the resultant child is the same: a person incapable or unwilling to share in the heritage of human knowledge and human endeavor. The children become like free-floating electrons trapped by any atom that needs them, unable to combat the attraction.

What, then, is the solution? In 1969, Postman and Weingartner told teachers that they must teach their charges how to ask questions, how to inquire about what it is they need to know. The only curriculum would be the person's own intellectual requirements. Media education was central to this, especially instruction on how the media structure one's view of reality. Out of this new education would come a "new kind of person...an actively inquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal personality."

Postman, in *Conserving*, is more modest but no less insistent. The schools must provide a thermostatic balance against the media culture so that children will have the "sane management of their information life." Schools should, as much as possible, become the conservers of everything the media culture disdains: subject matter, words, reason, hierarchy, coherence, quality. Schools, in short, should teach children not to bow to any tyranny, political or otherwise, and actually question the culture in which they reside, weighing for themselves the validity of what they see.

If this picture of the child's weakness is true, and I think it is, then this brings us to a question not often asked, or if asked, not clearly apprehended: What must the goals of a democratic mass education system be? Stated like this, the question is unanswerable. But there is another way to phrase the question. In a recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Richard Hawley said that the teacher's only sustaining motive for teaching is love of learners. Assuming that parents also feel that way about their children, what Postman and Weingartner offer is a way for this love to be institutionalized without its urgency being diluted or obscured.

If we act to make people good questioners, "crap-detectors," then we can subsume *all* of the usual educational concerns, such as grammar, spelling, testing, and so on, into a more coherent strategy aimed at girding a child to take

on a world in rapid flux. Teaching children to be questioners, to have balance and resource, will not make them atomized and isolated, morally or culturally, despite what many "back to basic" adherents believe. If anything, the children will truly *share* the values of the society instead of merely *receive* them at graduation because those values will be their own property, weighed and judge and evaluated. Both these books should be taken together, not because they provide blueprints, but because they provide a better question: not, What should the goals of the mass education system be?, but, How can the system best love its students? The answer to that question may open up our children.

Through A Glass Darkly

This essay was written to my students who had asked me
why I became an English teacher.

I am a teacher of English. Everyone I know has asked me, at least once, why I torture myself trying to teach the most indifferent, the least alive, the most yahoo-ish of people - high school adolescents. A good question.

My answer begins with the inspiration of a man who taught English and drama in my high school. The whole complex matrix of who I am as a teacher can be traced to the simple patience and conscientiousness of one man.

John Pearson was about thirty, of middling height, with straight peach-sandy hair, an oval face, slender like an egg's shell and seined with wrinkles, and a goatee that jutted out sharply. He spoke best with his hands - they tumbled the words over, set them up, partnered them - so that what he said was etched indelibly on the eyes, after-images of sound. That was John's greatest talent: making people see long after they had observed. He was kind without sentiment and gentle without condescension. And he was brutally murdered on July 3, 1971.

I met him when I was in his production of *West Side Story*. He had strung a rag-tag group of lumpish adolescents into a pearl necklace of a show. He showed us how to take pride in our work, to see in ourselves resources that we either denied or ignored. Later, through a fluke of casting, I was chosen for the lead role of El Gallo in *The Fantasticks*. I refined my edges for him for six grueling weeks until I stood, as I then thought, as an icon of what he wanted. He was my only audience, my only critic. And he performed magnificently. When I was accepted to college, he staged a barbecue for me and my friends in celebration. As we stood together watching the sun set, he turned to me and said, "When I die, I hope to go to heaven and do the technical direction for sunsets." The remark was private and undistilled; I would have conquered the world for him then.

I think he knew well what seeds he'd planted in my soul, but he left me to grow on my own, never in the pale light of his self. And then he left me. Or so it seemed. In circumstances as bizarre as they were brutal, John was stabbed twenty-one times in the head and chest by a hitchhiker he'd picked up. For all of us who had sat around and listened, doors and windows had been shut. Slowly, we made accommodations for his absence. The rest of the world sewed up the gap, and he passed away like an erratic heartbeat.

At first his death so numbed me that I did not feel his death. Only later could I feel the full pain of his silence, like heating coming to a cold house. I then set for myself the goal of realizing in my life what had been unrealized in his. I could not accept a world where John did not live, and even though I could acquiesce in the pain of his death, I could not give my assent to his silence. I began to wrestle with a ghost.

By this time I was a freshman at Harvard. I had struggled with this ghost for almost a year. I had begun to do some volunteer teaching in the community. Caught up in the waning politics of the time, I stepped into the breach of the world with my John-model of teacher perfection, ready, like Joan of Arc, to burn for the faith. Looking back on it, I can't say this time of virtuous illusion was wrong. I certified much of myself to the world and I felt a certain authenticity which I had never had before. But it was at this point that my sense of savior began to wane and, with it, the iconic edifice I'd built to John.

Only that lag between his death and my understanding of it could have helped me judiciously sort out the John who really was from the John who was tinged with myth. I realized that my competition with John happened because of the struggle we all go through when we look back at the tangled lace of our lives and try to unthread a particular memory, a particular influence. I learned that there is no such thing as pure memories; they are tainted by wishful thinking, blindness, and deceit. I found that if we cannot look honestly at our memories, then we must look at them dishonestly. There is no middle path. Either we recognize our deceit and correct it or live a lie with a straight face. Through John, I had gained insight into my ways, had come to know my deceptions, and in knowing them, had come a little closer to knowing my own self.

I also learned that inspiration does not lie in what a person does for us but in what a person makes us do for ourselves. The memory of a special person is deadened when we rely on the memory as a substitute for active engagement with the world, when we spend too much time remembering and not enough time doing. This requires honesty and humility, to face squarely our limitations and yet work against them every minute. It means a look into the mirror, not back over the shoulder.

So now I teach English. I still try to communicate the vitality of literature, but, a little chastened, I also strive to make my students capable of surviving a vague and vicious world. I want them to perceive themselves in new lights through reading and writing. I want them to be able to pierce through artifice, their own

no less than others', yet be sensitive enough to understand the need for illusion. I want them to know how fragile each individual human being is, and, at the same time, know the immense vaults of strength each human has. I want them to treasure their own innocence, yet not be trapped by their own naïveté. All of this indefinite, unproportional stream-of-thought answers the why of teaching. Like John, who showed me beyond his death, I want others to see long after they've observed. In life, there is no greater or more difficult enterprise; without it, then we truly die to the world. That is not what John taught; it is the reason I teach.

A Portrait Of The Teacher As A Young Man

A meditation given to the community as part of the Thursday speaker series.

I come to this lectern already in debt. Others have laid the foundation, others have nailed down a roof, and still others have lardered the pantries. I consider this talk, then, to be the living room of this house the previous speakers have built, the spot where the fire glows, people take their ease over the wine of good thought, and where a largeness of mind can find a local habitation.

Let me title this talk "A Portrait of the Teacher as a Young Man" and give you some notion of what education I am now undergoing, what gurus and tutors I have sought out, and what interest, so to speak, I am taking in on the capital of my life.

A major influence on my education in recent months has been Dr. Who. For those of you still benighted enough not to know who or what Dr. Who is, he inhabits the half-hour from 6:30 to 7:00 on PBS Channel 11. Dr. Who is a Time Lord and his mission is to make sure that all cultures in the universe for all time evolve as they are meant to evolve. Pure science fiction hokum, I'll admit. He joins company with such illustrious greats of literature as Doc Savage and Jack Armstrong. But he shouldn't be quite that easily dismissed. There are qualities about Dr. Who that attract me, qualities that present themselves as antidotes to the poisons we spread among ourselves. For one thing, he does not believe in any magic but instead in science, not the science of Frankenstein, which is parody, but of Einstein.

Dr. Who sees the exercise of reason as humankind's only salvation from its less controllable parts. He believes that the more a person eradicates superstition and the more a person accepts the humble solvent of his or her ignorance, the greater the chance that people will create a life-sustaining sense of proportion for themselves. For Dr. Who there are no insoluble problems, only bits of information we do not yet know. I find that a bracingly athletic way of looking at life, not only because it denies man the destructive fiction of his own intransigent uniqueness, but also because it forces upon us the imperative that we must take responsibility for ourselves and not foist our obligation for self-understanding off on superstition, god, or the nature of things. Dr. Who anesthetizes despair.

Yet he is not a dour moral Don Quixote. He eats jelly babies, wears a twelve-foot scarf that always, of its own accord, seems to get out of the way, inhabits

an overcoat that would have made Harpo Marx jealous, and exercises a wit only slightly less sharp than Zorro's blade. In each of his adventures he solves problems with grace, elegance, and humor. He is Einstein on Rocinante, surgeoning the problems of the universe with his Sherlock Holmesian macropadeic mind, all done with a refreshing sense of the absurd, as if Samuel Johnson had met Groucho Marx. I take heart from Dr. Who because his way is the only way we can follow if we wish to solve and control the forces within and without us: the solution of problems through a science nuanced by good cheer and a sense of delicate proportion, the useful fusion of poetry and the laboratory.

I admire Dr. Who's openness to experience. But I also have a closer and more solid source upon which to lavish that admiration: my nephew Benjamin. Or, as he will tell you if you ask him, Benjamin Abram Moses, as if he were a Trinity within himself. At the age of three he is a demon with language, a parroting computer who chews up language with the most delicious relish. He delights, I think, not only in the power words have for him, but also in the loll of his tongue against his teeth, the tickling of aspiration against his lips, a delight in the pure physical act of living.

You should not lose sight of this lesson. Ben does what pleases him as often as he can within the social constraints his growing-up imposes on him. He is not concerned about living up to social myths or the bogeyman of convention or the edicts of vague populations of theys who live just beyond the fringe of reason. His enjoyment is solely for the satisfaction of his own audience and he takes making himself happy as the serious business of his life. He upholds this mission in a variety of ways, one of which touches me deeply. At times, when he needs a boost, he will simply applaud himself, no matter where he happens to be. His face oxidizes into an enormous "U" of a smile, the hands pump together in a rattle of claps, and he lets out his own version of "Rah, rah, siss boom bah!." Sated, his soul momentarily refreshed, he goes back to whatever frequency he had been on before.

This touches me because of its contrast with my life and the lives of those I see around me. Most of us do not congratulate ourselves; instead, we pass out indictments that allow for little or no plea bargaining. We center our standards of judgment on the gaps and frozen moments in our lives and so end up sounding like a piano with most of its keys dead and most of its strings vandalized. And then, as if that were not enough, we redouble our efforts to cut ourselves in half by bemoaning the lopsided and deflowered music that comes out. We are

indentured to our deficiencies, slaves to our imperfections, migrant workers destined always to be harvesting bitter crops.

To protect ourselves we mask this neurosis in the garb of humility and common sense and the price of growing older. And that, to me, is neurotic in itself, a sign of capitulation. Benjamin, not yet infected with the vice of growing-up, his agenda not yet pressured by diminished expectations, is an emetic for my irascible poisons of intellect and mortality. Even if I haven't yet found the joy in living that he finds in himself, I can take vicarious satisfaction from his unfettered and wholly guileless "Yes," and that affirmation is enough to reverse for a time the narcotic of adult purpose and confinement. Like some kinetic fossil he preserves an energy impressed into the marrow of his bones, and it is in the marrow of us all if we would only fight for the time to extract it. He negates Samuel Butler's accurate accusation that every animal on this earth, except man, knows the business of life is to be happy.

Both Dr. Who and Benjamin remind me to retrieve the confidence I sometimes let slip away in the power and beauty of intellect and the cleansing sobriety of simply joy. My third educational sources is, in the words of Maxine Kumin, a retrieval system whereby I can further catch the Who-ness and Benjamin-ness of life. You may think it odd or futile for a man in his twenties to take up a second life as a dancer, but you could only think that if you've never felt yourself dance. Dance is an intersection between mind and matter, where the mind chisels out of the body through strokes of sweat, pulled tendons, bruised muscles and egos, and fickle pirouettes a physical pulsing ideogram of an ephemeral foxfire idea.

To me, dance is *the* art because it conjoins idea and form in a way no other artistic enterprise can. Even though dance is ultimately a humiliating experience because the body will never be able to completely conform to the demanding fluidity of the mind, it is still an affirmation of the glories of physical being, a reminder that our strengths lie in the fact that we are, after all, nothing more than the inhabitants of a planet spinning endlessly, aimlessly, through space and time. Dance reminds us that we house within ourselves the techniques of joy, that those techniques lie nowhere else, and that we are all we have.

If you've listened so far (and if you haven't I hope your thoughts have been pleasant), you will notice that the portrait has been confined to those qualities intractably human and inveterately physical: the grace and power of the scientific intellect, the definition of innocence by the smile of my nephew, the limited

corporeal beauty of dance. And this confinement is no accident or omission because it expresses the direction of my own intellectual journey.

The territory of this journey is better illustrated through a story. Alfred Russell Wallace is usually known in the history of biology as the noonday shadow of Charles Darwin, an also-ran who was beaten to the scientific punch on the theory of evolution. But Wallace is interesting for a more enlightening reason than a story about the vagaries of chance. Wallace, if anything, was a more strict constructionist of Darwinism than Darwin himself. He believed that each bit of morphology, each function of an organ, was an adaptation, a product of selection leading to a "better" organism. He and his followers held a deep belief in nature's "rightness," in, as Stephen Jay Gould puts it, "the exquisite fit of all creatures to their environments."

Yet when Wallace eventually came to contemplate the human brain, he abandoned the hypotheses he had spent his life trying to prove and reverted to an explanation of divine causality to account for the complexity of the human psyche. In his words:

> The inference I would draw from this class of phenomena [the studies of the human brain], is, that a superior intelligence had guided the development of man in a definite direction, and for a special purpose.

Wallace continued to assert this all his life. He, like many of his scientific contemporaries, contemplated the eventual destruction of life on earth. And he could not accept it. He could not accept that "all the slow growths of our race struggling towards a higher life…shall absolutely vanish." He opted for a conventional Christian solution, the eternity of spiritual life. As he said, "Beings… possessing latent faculties capable of such noble development, are surely destined for a higher and more permanent existence."

I empathize with Wallace's anguish; at times we all share it. But anguish, no matter how wrenching or heartfelt, is not proof. An invisible force, guiding the directions of the universe, does not exist simply because one wishes it to be so. What Wallace did was commit an epistemological derailment by erecting a picket fence around his own species, allocating to *Homo sapiens* some dispensation from the laws of nature that seemingly applied well enough to the rest of creation.

What he did was not invalid because he had a "loss of nerve," as he was accused. That argument avoids the point. His mistake is that in order for him to conclude that humans had a destiny, and to imply that some force existed

that would guide and inform that destiny, he had to deny the methods humans had created for themselves to ascertain truths about existence. And that is how it always is. To posit and believe in a supernatural, infinite, incorporeal force existing outside space and time, one must demean the intelligence and integrity of both human beings and the methods they have created to test the validity of their perceptions about the world.

As a teacher I can not hold a position that denies the worth and power of the intellect that I am committed to help shape and nurture. That is why this portrait of a young man's journey has been a recitative of the glories of the actual world we live in and which lives in us, and has contained no speculation upon an almost-world that may or may not exist beyond the ken of human knowledge. I am not interested in such speculation or in such a world. To me, the world we live in gains meaning and purpose the more we deny it any root in the supernatural.

We have stored within us the wit and logic of a Dr. Who, the unbuttoned capacity for joy of a Benjamin, the carnality of movement that incorporates our thoughts into fleshly translations. Purpose comes from an organic collision with the world, an indulgence in all its heavens and hells. It is not a deposit from an outside banker with interest in the system. Meaning takes form only when the person who desires meaning forms himself to find it, not before. As Pasteur said, fortune favors the prepared mind. What else do we really need?

Since I am a teacher I must end with a quote, this time from the French philosopher Henri Amiel: "He who asks of life nothing but the improvement of his own nature…is less liable than anyone else to miss and waste life." You have an obligation not to deflect your mind away from the world that surrounds and defines you. Lace your science with poetry, and tailor your finite life to the search for joy.

The Education Conference

I just returned from a conference in New York city sponsored by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). I was not a registered participant. My wife was chained to one of the book booths that sprout like fungi at these affairs and between the various food runs I made for her, I had a chance to dawdle at the workshops and exhibits and observe the conspirators who inhabited the New York Hilton at Rockefeller Center for that weekend.

There is something ensorceling about conferences. This apiary of a conference produced a honey of busyness that, from the outside, exuded an aroma of sweetly incisive investigation. People from all over hill and dale were being lavishly funded to bite the Big Apple, and they enjoyed that distilled spirit of business and pleasure that gives one the heady illusion of power. Of course they were there for important matters, there to fulfill the AERA's injunction to improve the educational process through scholarly inquiry, dissemination of the results, and practical application. From nine to five the lobbies and conferences and exhibits (and bars) bristled with people on a roll. Big things, it appeared, were getting done.

Or course, that is all ersatz, all illusion - very little substantive work ever gets done at educational conferences. But it is an illusion that can not ever be called, like a bluff hand in poker can. Packaging is important here: the conference must appear to be producing something, not only to justify the expenses but also to nourish the participants through incredibly boring, tendentious, and often valueless hours of workshops and book-looking.

The booksellers barnumize best of all. They glaze the mind by scholarly mesmerism, yet induce the conferees to believe they indeed walks among the honored. How else to explain the sheaves of money handed over for such educational salves as "Ideology, Commitment, and Curriculum" or "Parents, Interface, and the Politics of Calculators" or "Statistical Analyses of School Management Objectives" or "Education, Its Future: Troubled or Triumphant?" or "Interactive Reading Modules: The Case for Interventionist Behavior in the Pre-School Population."

Christian was not more beguiled at Vanity Fair, nor the sellers in the Temple more persuasive. Again, it appears as if things are really happening in this agora of ideas, and the conferees can take their baubles back along whatever spice

routes they came by with the conviction that they have indeed made the proper pilgrimage.

What is going on here? Has the knowledge that all these conferences have excreted trickled down through the cathedrals of schools and departments of education into the hearts and minds of actual teachers and helped make children more intelligent, more wise, more understanding, more proficient in life? Obviously not. So it seems that all the bluster, logistics, concentration, and money have gone for naught.

Well, not really for naught. Because something *is* going on here. What one observes at these three-ring festivals is a mutual admiration society given over to the continuance of a very profitable incestuous relationship. Most people who read the books or study the testing procedures do not realistically expect to ever apply that knowledge to the classroom: just reading the books would be a full-time job. No, these books will be fodder for *other* books and studies that will be marketed to other people who will go on and write *more* books, and so on, so that eventually everyone can own a piece of a very lucrative pie, while the rest of us try to cope with the excreta of their blindness. The industry sired here between educationists, the test companies, the book publishers, and, secondarily, hotels and airlines, is a thriving closed system in which the infinite images off facing mirrors assure the participants that their substance is indeed equally infinite.

Which would be all right if they were philosophers, for philosophers can arc through the stratosphere without any appreciable harm done to themselves or others, and they can be safely ignored. But not these people. When we think of the teachers and students who will ultimately be victimized by wrong-headed policies or abstruse directives, then the danger is urgent and evident.

And the danger is not from an advocacy of reductive or authoritarian measures. Exactly the opposite. We are threatened by a blandly toxic indifference to the aesthetic, economic, and political plagues of education. And the best indicator of this is the language. The linguistic narcotic of book titles and workshop names can so dilute a sense of urgency and moral conviction that a researcher could easily say that today's educational problems have nothing personally to do with him, they are simply an area of expertise. For instance (and this instance is merely representative: it is not singled out as the *only* culprit), Academic Press publishes *The Language of Children Reared in Poverty: Implications for Evaluation and Intervention* by Lynne Feagans and Dale Clark Farran. The book is the result of a conference about language and poverty in May 1980 at the

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The title proposes a topic fraught with emotion, urgency, and moral dimension. Yet the language betrays this neatly. No picture of poor children comes through in the jacket blurb: "In the 1960s, the reasons given for these problems [with poor children] were dominated by an emphasis on a 'deficit' model in which language development played an important role." No *voice* here, no sense of any *person* articulating these children's' concerns, just nice, safe, unenlightening exposition. And Dale Farran's final essay, "Intervention for Poverty Children: Alternative Approaches," does more than its share of acrobatics to avoid saying anything that might indicate moral judgment or an inclination to act politically. Note the conditionals:

> There are alternative approaches. One is to attempt to change the living conditions of the poor....One can argue that this alternative is not an actual one because it involves restructuring society. Perhaps that is true: it is not a likely alternative; however, it may still be the *best* alternative. [Emphasis original]

Orwell stated many years ago that corrupt language corrupts thought. That corruption has many colorations, and one of them is the employment of bland language in the service of "objectivity." The effort to be politically neutral ultimately ends in being politically neutered, and this is exactly what conferences like this prove. The minds that run the systems that train teachers and students show clearly that, as Richard Mitchell's new book, *The Graves of Academe*, states, intellectuals "have trained themselves to imagine that the dull business of public education has nothing to do with their high endeavors," such as chasing one another from conference to conference. When the neutered try to run the world, sterility is the only offspring. Where do we go from here?

Computers And Reform

My sister-in-law called the other day and announced she and her husband were going to buy a computer. "Not for us. For the kids."

"For the kids?" I asked. Mark is 2; Christopher, a ripe nine months.

"So they won't be behind."

Behind what? My sister-in-law clearly was afraid that her children would somehow be technological illiterates, a high-tech version of the Amish. Without the computer, her children would be saddled with the quaint but oh-so-out-of-date practice of perusing actual books instead of readouts, writing a letter on stationery instead of sending it electronically, playing marbles in the driveway instead of Space Invaders on a screen, and solving math problems with pencil and paper instead of with a program. Where does such a fear come from and is it valid?

I don't know much about computers beyond a first-level course in BASIC, but I do know about hype. If one watches enough computer commercials, one can begin to see the rootlets of my sister-in-law's fear. For one thing, computers are billed as the new mandarins of efficiency, electronic bureaucrats who don't take lunch breaks and who do "the job" simply and quickly, with streamlined no-nonsense.

You see this most often in the business commercials, where the computer single-handedly(?) saves the important conference with a client or helps increase sales for a trucking firm in Peoria. It's very hard not to be caught up the excitement and drama of these commercials, where the computer seems to be at the heart of momentous decisions, coolly dealing out the answers in contrast to the emotional instability of its human operators. Humans are clearly secondary here, flawed and ignorant. Technology has triumphed again.

There are any number of holes in this hype. Let's take the bogeyman of efficiency. What exactly do the commercials mean by efficiency? Speed, perhaps. Computers do work fast, and they can process certain kinds of requests far faster than any human clerk could: calling up names and addresses, inventories, prices, and so on. But this is mundane office work, simple record-keeping. The secretaries and counter-help who do this sort of work don't "know" the computer in any essential way; instead, they simply push buttons. The computers are efficient in this sense, but it's no great cause for alarm since it takes ten minutes

to learn the procedure. No child has to start at age two to get his clerkship skills in fine order.

And besides, all that efficiency is good mostly for businesses. How many of us need a constant up-dated inventory? Of toilet paper? Socks? Just look in the closet or the drawer. The usefulness of computers, at least as far as the hype goes, is not a usefulness most of need us or can use.

So speed is really beside the point. What about decision-making? Can't computers, because they're unemotional, make better decisions, and make them faster? There's a shift of mind here that has to be cleared up. Computers make decisions only in a very limited meaning of the phrase. They can only process information in the ways their programs dictate. They can't ever break out of that. Their sophistication depends upon the sophistication of the minds that programmed them. And these programs only ask computers to do what humans have always done: think and plan ahead, predict, shows trends, plot possibilities. They don't "make decisions" but follow the human brain patterns programmed into them. Humans still make the decisions, only one step removed. It's important to remember that the computer has no life separate from the humans who use and program it. If anything, humans need to be better at making decisions so that they make better programs.

But even if my sister-in-law can agree that computer efficiency and judgment are straw men, there is still education, and it's this, or more precisely the fear of being outdated, that drives her to the computer store. Computers can teach your children anything, so the hype goes. Computer makers had to go this route. Their first appeal, that of turning the family TV into an arcade, petered out when parents understandably became concerned about the amount of time (and the excessive number of dead aliens) their children wasted grinding joysticks and popping buttons. So the manufacturers added new programs, some of them quite interesting, to legitimize themselves as purveyors, not of games, but of that gloriously imprecise commodity, education. And it has obviously worked lucratively.

The question we have to ask ourselves is not whether the programs are good, but do they, in any vital way, teach? I would answer yes, but with an expensive, if hidden, price. Let me use the digital watch as an illustration. Assuming one can read numbers, one can read a digital watch. But in one way that "reading" is a senseless act; one is not really reading time at all. Reading a regular dial watch requires, on some level, an awareness of the relationship of seconds to minutes,

minutes to hours, hours to days. The design of a dial clock is the result of a long process of grappling with the intricacies of celestial motion, crop planting, scientific exploration, and so on. Thus, the shape and function of the modern-day dial clock tell us much about how we perceive time.

A digital watch, on the other hand (pardon the pun), hides all that, buries it under the bushel of efficiency and progress. A child learning to tell time using a digital watch learns only numbers, and does not learn how to extrapolate the relationship of symbols (numbers) to abstract information (time and place). The child has to make no effort that ties him or her concretely to the surrounding world; instead, the connection is to the watch alone.

The educational computer games strike me in the same way. A child who learns words from the machine, from colored lights and funny voices and swift printouts, is learning more about the machine than he is about phonics. He's learning to depend upon the machine, to "communicate" with it, to be drawn into it, and inevitably he will believe that his relation to the machine, to its efficiency and clarity (which are, as we've seen, mainly myths), is stronger and more necessary than his relation to people, their problems and their aspirations. He will also depend upon the machine as a source of unimpeachable information (which, as we've also seen, is only as good as its programmers) as opposed to the more sluggish and imprecise thoughts of his fellow humans. In these regards, he will become less, not more, educated, if we mean education's etymological sense, "e-ducere," to lead out of (presumably ignorance).

Moreover, these computer games not only maim a vigorous relationship between child and world, they devalue the parents' role as arbiters for the child of life's experience. These games don't do anything that reasonably intelligent parents can't do, but without the vital interpretation that parents provide for children, the games will only make the children encyclopedic, technologically literate but existentially illiterate. Humans, despite their glorious skill at technology, still haven't escaped certain necessary patterns of maturation and self-awareness. These demand the sensual, historical, emotional involvement of human with human. We become our best selves when we learn through these patterns.

So my sister-in-law need not worry. There will be an appropriate time for purchasing a computer, when it can be used as an adjunct to - rather than as a direct source of - learning. In the meantime her sons ought to get outside and play and she and her husband ought to read to them, to help tie their natural

creativity to a real world that is inevitably more complex, satisfying, challenging, and nourishing than any arrangement of blips, colors, dings, and funny squeaky voices.

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But we cannot limit ourselves to such common sense as this, because there are more insidious issues attached to the marriage of computers and education. The September issue of *Psychology Today* has a generally adulatory article about computers in schools and how they will, in the words of one MIT professor, "mediate relationships that are ultimately between person and person." Recent programs on PBS have been doing the same trumpeting. Computers, so it seems, then, are not only helpful aids; they are the latest in messiahs. Such messianic attitudes about computers must thus change the direction of the debate. No longer can we argue simply about the propriety of computers for individual families, but instead we must broaden our purview to include such questions as: For whom? In which schools? And, given the recent rash of computer break-ins by young kids, What about morality?

The *Psychology Today* article points out that the main recipients of this new technology are children. "Children" is a nice word, but not very accurate. Who, and most especially, where? The article is not too clear on this. Let me be clearer. The bulk of the 42 million schoolchildren in this country are in the cities. The horrors of urban education are well known, having been the subject of a barrage of reporting last summer. Yet, while this cannonade has dropped off in the past months, the facts don't change simply because the media doesn't report them. American schooling overall does not educate. And the millions of people who attend the schools are being handed diplomas worth, in the words of Phil Keisling, "the educational equivalent of worthless notes from the Weimar Republic."

Picture, then, the vast desert of a big city school system. Not all the schools in the system will be bad, but one can rest assured that the schools that are bad, overwhelmingly bad, are the ones with minority and poor students, the ones, it would seem, who most need the kind of computer education touted in the article. And will they get it? Of course not. Not only because the computer can't solve their problems, but also because the bias in our culture doesn't run their way. All one needs to do is listen to our President talk about civil rights and look at the erosion in the small gains minorities made in the 60s and 70s, and

one can readily agree that this culture does not value minorities, and has no intention of doing so.

No, the computer education will end up, not surprisingly, in schools housing people that look remarkably like the sons and daughters of the programmer and professor promoting the whole deal. That is because while most people believe computers are socially neutral, the fact is that computers are a middle-class technology, providing enjoyment and services that can only really be used by people making a certain amount of money and accepting certain presumptions about the way things are. Computers are a pet project of the middle-class.

This can be seen even more strongly in the way the computers are being used in the schools. Primarily, the computers will be used to teach "problem-solving skills," relying upon games and the elimination of failure through "intrinsic motivation." On the surface the games look very interesting. Most of the new educational software asks students to solve problems by manipulating a language to achieve the desired the result. Most solving is done as a game, and instead of looking for the "right" answer, the student instead dares to try new procedures.

But what are the problems students are asked to solve? Overwhelmingly they are problems only computers would be interested in, and, by extension, computer operators, i.e., children. In short, they are trivial problems in the long run because they are really unattached to life. Many of the boosters of computer education rebut by saying that the skills children learn are portable, but what skills are they talking about? The problems they are asked to solve are all amenable to the logic of the computer. One such game is Rocky's Boots, whose goal is to build working circuits that conform to the same logical laws that form the basis for computer. These are linear problems: One gets to the solution along a straight line. And an answer is always presumed available.

Yet most of the intractable problems of life are not linear, are not even circular, but often end nowhere, with no definite answer, such as the problems of poverty the minority students have to suffer. The kind of thinking being taught, even though under the auspices of a humanitarian Deweyesque belief in the child's welfare, is technocratic and far outside the traditional psychological and philosophical approaches to life. Children are being asked to immerse themselves into a fantasy world (fantasy is one of the seven essential elements of computer education) and use skills that are at best limited in their applicability to solving problems that, while perhaps building skills, have little pertinence to

the lives of real people. The success that these computer programs engender is a contrived and inbred success, a kind of success that can only lead inwardly, towards the computer rather than away from it.

But even more tragic, I think, is that students, are again being denied a useful place in the sun. Now they are playing games under the guise of learning, but they are really being pushed farther away from the kind of life that requires engagement and risk, and thus choice and commitment, and thus morality. The computer life they are being taught is so clean in contrast to the dirtiness of normal life. Morality becomes the logic necessary to solve a particular problem. And we have all seen the result of that sort of thinking in the Vietnam war, an example far more powerful than the glitz of *Wargames*. Where, then, is there room being made for morality?

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Newsweek recently had a cover story about "crackers," teenage computer jocks who break into other computer systems, mostly just for the fun of breaking the code. So far nothing disastrous has happened, such as bank records being wiped out, but that doesn't get around some troublesome questions in regard to "cracking." The teenagers (and not-so-teenagers - some are closer to thirty) who do this seem genuinely interested in simply breaking the code. In their statements, and even in their faces, one cannot really detect any traces of guile or maliciousness. To them, it's a technical question, not a moral one. To them, the other computer systems are challenges, obstacles in their personal path of satisfaction. Perhaps they can be excused on the basis of sheer high spirits and perhaps even gently praised for being so innovative.

And then again perhaps not. The shadings here get very grey. What might be innovative high spirits is, to others, breaking and entering. Do we then consider information, stored on silicon chips, the same as the family silver? If so, how do we then make distinctions between petty and grand larceny? These questions never occurred to the crackers, but they nevertheless exist for everyone else.

Other problems spin off from this. One of my students belonged to a club whose sole purpose for existing was to break the code of games on the market, make copies of the games, and pass them around for people to use. They were rightly called "pirates', and anyone paying attention to the papers knows the problems companies are having with the piracy of tapes, videos, and games, which deprive them of profit and market. This student also meets with other clubs from around the country so that he can build up, for a cost of $2 per disk, a

library of games that he would never have been able to afford had he had to pay for them. He contends that it is not stealing, that it is no different than making a cassette tape of an album for the car stereo.

Now, is he stealing? He says no. All he feels he's doing is using the intelligence and technology available to him to gain something for himself, showing, as he said, a sharp entrepreneurial spirit. He does not see the issue in moral terms at all. It is neither right nor wrong. The operative question is, Can it be done?

Are these kids wrong in what they do? The question they ask - Can it be done? - is not by itself an immoral question. But it is an amoral question, since it provides no criteria beyond technical facility by which to judge actions and results. And technical facility, as we have seen time and time again, when divorced from a union with morality, ends up as dangerous and sometimes terminal for human life. It is a utilitarian question, satisfied to settle on calculus rather than judgment. These kids are not so much innocent as ignorant because they have been lopsidedly trained in this technology. As technocrats they've not been forced to deal with the consequences of their own actions, the starting point for all morality. The fact that they think their cracking has no moral side to it at all only underscores this gap in their education. They cannot even conceive of morality, much less adhere to it.

Yes, my student was stealing, much as he may not want to hear it. And, yes, those crackers are breaking and entering. They may enjoy the thrill of success, but they should also suffer the agony of defeat, the defeat, that is, of their detachment from the questions all of us have to consider if we are to live in a society worth living in. They cannot remain absolved of the requirement to reflect upon possible consequences of their decisions; to deny them this would be to deny them a firm ground upon which to be a human being.

Does this sound too dire for the 20th century? Too unsophisticated? I don't think so. In fact, I don't think it sounds dire enough. Everyone knows about the problems of public schools in this country. But no matter how bad they get, the schools will always remain places where humans must confront humans. And while we may not like the kinds of confrontations that go on there, such dislike ought to spur us to spend the time and money to make sure good confrontations occur. To abdicate this responsibility to a computer is wrong because all it will encourage is isolation and amorality. When all decisions become logical rather than existential, technical rather than moral, we all lose in the end because we lose those actions that make us human: decision, reflection, choice.

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There are other reasons why computers won't reform schools, one of them generated by a specifically American attitude towards education. Americans have never been quite clear about what it is they want their schools to do. But underneath all the vagueness has been the powerful notion that the schools should somehow make democratic America more democratic, help preserve the blessings of our freedom. And Americans have tended to see this preservation in terms of what someone can do rather than how someone can be. That is why we have such a large emphasis in our history on practical accomplishment. With the tangible goods of a Panama Canal or a victory on VE Day we can somehow, we think, measure how much progress we have made in our preservation of democracy.

This same attitude is being used both to criticize and remedy the schools. Peter Brimelow, writing in the September 19 issue of *Fortune*, proposes that education's problems "will remain chronic until education is exposed to competition." Regardless of what "competition" means in an economic sense, Brimelow is being very American here. He wants the schools to produce something (obviously students good for American business) much as any industry would produce a product, and for them to create some tangible tie between cause (money spent) and effect (literate student), as if the whole educational venture were amenable to cost-benefit analysis.

Brimelow, and others who follow his lead, such as those advocating tax credits and vouchers, do not like to deal with the messiness of human nature; they want man to be economic man, making rational choices based upon a clear reading of needs and desires. Unfortunately, schools don't work like this, or, to put it more negatively, if they did work like that, they would not be places to which people would want to send their children.

Computers are being proposed as educational panaceas for the same motivations. Computers get children to do something. They are pushing buttons and laughing at the funny games and apparently having a good time as they learn how to manipulate logic. But it is an ersatz logic, one that may be internally consistent but is existentially irrelevant, unattached as it is to the normal problems that confront human beings. Computers will not solve education's problems, and Americans will not get the quick fix that they want in the schools, because those problems begin outside the school, far before any child walks into

a classroom. And this is not anything a cost-benefit analysis or economic analogy can remedy because it is outside the effective range of such approaches to life.

The motivation for learning begins in the family and in the daily interactions of the child with the world. The families have to get their act together, but many can't, such as poor black families. 41% of black families are headed by women without husbands present, the divorce rate among blacks has more than doubled in a decade, and 49% of black children live in one-parent homes. Rampant teenage pregnancy is also taking its toll, and not only among poor blacks.

And if the urban public schools are increasingly becoming the place of last resort for poor children, while more able parents send their children to private schools, these poor children come to that school divested of the basic essential intellectual tools to learn because the families they come from won't have provided them. If the government is seriously interested in the schools, then it had better look to ways to better families.

Increasing poverty, demographic shifts, changing job patterns, a titillating advertising culture - all these, and more, impinge on the performance of the schools, yet none of these can be demonstrably affected by the mainstream solutions to the dilemma. The solutions must be broadened, and they must in some way center on those people offering the present anemic solutions. Reformers, most especially people in government and business, have to ask themselves what they have done and can do to improve the moral and intellectual quality of our culture. If children are no longer voracious readers, to what extent are advertising executive responsible? If children come to school ill-fed and ill-prepared, to what extent are government economic policies to blame? These questions, and questions like these, must be asked before we can have any responsible or interesting unraveling of the Gordian knot.

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The problem with much of the talk about school reform is that everyone is talking about means without talking about ends. President Reagan and others are talking about merit pay, performance evaluations, more homework, longer days and years, tougher discipline (which usually means more punishment) without acknowledging that to speak about these means as ends is to avoid the more intangible but certainly more important issue of attitudes and beliefs. What, after all, is the end of the educational enterprise? Or rather, the ends, since no single end can encompass the diversity of the school population. Is it to

teach people simply to read and write? If that be true, then it would be best to do that at a young age and put the money in good libraries so that the person could pursue an education according to his or her wishes. We don't need multibillion dollar institutions to teach the rather simple and natural tasks of reading and writing. Is it to create Jefferson's informed citizenry? A nice bit of rhetoric, of course, but what is "informed"? Knowing the capitals of the fifty states? Being informed means being involved, and how can students be involved if they are secreted away in institutions and kept busy doing busy work? These are hard questions because they are philosophical, not technical, and cannot be "solved" by the advocacy of any particular means. In fact, they are not questions that can be solved at all, but must be continually asked as a way of checking the solvency of our thinking and the goodness of our actions. I would like to offer some ways to think about these questions, some ways to get at the understanding of what education could be doing.

Formal schooling in any democratic society has a double burden. On the one hand, it works to promote the individuality of the student. On the other hand, it tries to curb that individuality so that the student fits into the society. The latter is always easier, though more destructive in the long run, than the patience and intelligence it takes to sit, listen, guide, and allow for differences. I think we first need to think about how these two intentions can be balanced. Do we teach much about democratic responsibility and personal self-government by forcing young children to attend schools, under the penalty of law? Do we teach much about the need to make personal choices with as much information as possible by not allowing students a say in how they are educated? The answer is no.

One way to think about school reform is to think about how to better make students a functioning part of the system, and not just the passive recipients of whatever teachers want to hand out. This will encourage a sense of responsibility and pride in self and institution, in addition to teaching what it means to participate and volunteer (a cause dear to the hearts of libertarians and neoliberals alike).

Another area to think about is curriculum. Many of the reformers today are talking about more homework. It is true that people learn more when they spend more time "on task," which is only common sense. But a question should also be raised about what it is they are supposed to be spending more time on. Are teachers simply going to give an absolute amount, pile it on, in other words? This is closer to burying students than it is to encouraging independent thinking. What,

after all, is homework? What's it for? The reason more homework and stricter discipline won't work is because it only further divides a divided curriculum. Doesn't science, for instance, have anything to do with history? Doesn't English has something to do with art? Schools, for the sake of an apparent bureaucratic efficiency, have always divided up learning into discrete units, into departments, and very few programs exist where these departments admit that knowledge overlaps, that how Melville wrote had something to do with the history of his times. This way of integrating knowledge, of making connections, should be the reason for a curriculum; and homework should spin off this. Only then will the homework have a logical reason for being heavy, insistent, and constant. And it may get done by students who are delighted to find connections. After all, students suffer from a debilitating sense of unconnectedness as it is, and humans generally don't like to feel isolated. Changing the curriculum can make students feel more involved while tying them closer to the concerns of the society around them.

Other notions that might be questioned include, Why should students spend all day in school? What, after all, is the purpose of making school what they do with their lives, what they do for a living? Longer school days and years, especially if it means increased burdens of homework, will cure nothing. School should be combined with work programs or apprenticeships, and most especially for those students in college tracks who never get to take auto mechanics.

This will have several results. One would be to cut out the harmful and unneeded division of school society into the college-bound students and the voc-tech students, which manifests our society's bias against manual labor and gives an unearned value to white-collar bureaucratic attitudes and practices. Second, people would learn a useful trade. Schooling by itself is not a marketable skill. Right now it cannot be exchanged for anything but more schooling, until one gets the magic degree that supposedly allows entrance into the professional work force. This is an absurd waste of time and talent. Students should be learning all along what it is they might like to do with their lives, with the opportunity and encouragement to try out several options instead of being restricted to one supposedly lucrative economic enterprise.

Computers and the "way we have always done it" syndrome suffer from the same insufficiency of vision. Deliberating about school reform must go beyond machines and machine-like responses. Thinking about school reform will require

an openness to fresh thoughts and a willingness to try radical experiments and innovations. It is time for the six blind men to confer about the elephant.

Mosquito

A couple of nights ago I was at the library late. I didn't feel like coming right back to the apartment, so I decided to treat myself to a freeze at Dairy Queen, since I had never one there and had yet to find a place in city that could make a decent freeze.

So I drove down there, and of course it was crowded, as it would be on a summer night with the softball teams just down the street at the park. I had to wait, which I did not care to do because I had had my fill of people that day. And, to top it off, the window people were abominably slow. But I waited anyway, in that sort of situation that about the time you've decided waiting is a pain in the ass, you've already waited so long that to get out of line would be a worse instance of stupidity than to stay there.

In front of me was an elderly man (indeterminate age: his face was wrinkled and hair sparse, but he did not seem to be decrepit). He had thick hands, as a life-long worker might, and his pants drooped and he had stubble on his cheeks and his shirt just hung from the shoulder. I imagined paps hanging slightly, the skin slack around his stomach. He ordered three of something; the girl took the money, rang it up, then proceeded to do whatever machinations she did that took her so long to do. The place was crowded, mostly with adolescents. A boyfriend of one of the girls working tapped continually on the glass partition to get her attention; his friends made fun of him. The neon lights buzzed outside, flanked by a million bugs. Cars screamed by on the road. A typical ice-cream joint summer night.

While he waited and waited to get his ice cream, a mosquito landed on his upper lip. I waited for him to brush it off. The place was swarming with mosquitoes, attracted by the lights and the mobile supply of blood. But he didn't. I watched in a kind of sick fascination as the mosquito (I imagined all this, not being able to see the whole operation) sunk his drill into the man's skin and began extracting the crude. I could see the mosquito's abdomen swell visibly, and yet he stood there insensate to the exchange.

I don't know why, but a wave of something like sickened remorse rolled over me. (It stills touches me as I think about the scene.) I didn't want to look at the man, couldn't help but look at him. I wanted to nudge him, tell him to wipe the damn parasite off his lip, wipe the thing off myself. But I couldn't. That sort of intimacy was not available. I felt sorry for a man who couldn't feel in his skin the

prick of the insect, who had lost that much feeling. (I speculated as to the life that had made him that way, but that was the novelist talking: how I could I know anything about that?)

Finally, the girl came and he went away and saved me. I ordered my drink (which was vile) and went away. But that scene still haunts me. On the one hand I felt remorse, as I said above, just pity for the man. (This is a dangerous thing to do - I can't read into his life.) But, oddly enough, I felt angry at him, at what I saw as his stupidity. In my job I am finding that people who do not have a good grasp of language, who don't know how to manipulate language to their benefit, end up endlessly repeating their woes.

So many times as people have outlined to me the major and minor tragedies in their lives, and I hear it for the third or fourth time, I have wanted to just shout at them, "Look, I heard it the first time and I am not interested, beyond a professional interest, in hearing about your lives!" There seems to be a need in people who are not good users of language to repeat what they've just said because they have no other resources to draw on. They can't edge around and see things from another linguistic angle, so they just walk the same path.

I understand the need some people have to make sure that someone in a position of power understands all that they have to put up with. I understand it, but I don't share it, and that makes it hard for me to be patient when someone, for whatever reason, is plying me with tragedy. I do not understand their almost automatic propensity to spill out bits of information that I don't have the slightest interest in, parts of their lives that I just don't care to carry around with me. (Alcoholism is a big thing at our school, especially among the women. They almost wear their former dependency as a badge of honor, and I suppose it is for them, a spiritual and physical test won through as tough, I suppose, as any saint wrestling angels.)

I have a hard enough time dealing with the school's propensity to raise personal suffering to tragic dimensions, as if that were the only source of raised consciousness. Marx made the same mistake, believing that oppression would teach the working classes how to be human. (Part of my disinclination here is because I don't think I've suffered all that much in my life, though I too am burdened with a father I don't understand or like, a divorce, a race with death I don't comprehend. Why do I not feel an equal urge to trace this out with everyone I meet? Because I don't do it, I expect them not to as well, and they contravene my expectations at every turn.)

But it's the repetitiveness of the talking that gets to me most. It's not even talk, really, if by talk I mean conversation wending its way to a point. It's a tic, a spasm. Don't they hear themselves? It's all I can do sometimes to be polite enough to bear the aural burden. I am finding more and more (and perhaps this is a function of the heat in August and the need for a day off) that the people in our program I like are the ones who actually are like adults. That means no mistaking confession as intimacy, who have a reasonably sound distance on things and a sense of humor. I hate the policemen most because they carry no sense of humor with them. And the lack of sophistication that many of our students have bothers me. I would like them to be more like real college students (or at least college students at Harvard who, when I was there, for the most part were dedicated learners, though there were a good contingent of fuck-offs too).

I find in most of our students, who are billed as working class people, no repository of wisdom. Partly this is because I am finding more confidence in myself in doing my job there, which is leading to a kind of snobbishness that feels very comfortable. As I feel stronger about what I do and know, the less I need to turn to their more raw experience for the "low-down." I used to feel that because I was middle-class, white, male I had no lease on life, no knowledge that I could dignify as "real." If anyone had what life was all about, it was people who worked with their hands, who had to go and earn a living and muck about in the lower depths of life and society.

I no longer believe that. Instead of wise, with a kind of folk wisdom or native common sense, I see people with limited minds, stuck with a language made out of the most banal vocabularies our society offers, who have so little perspective on life that they believe their experiences define the entire nature of experience. I am sounding snobbish, but I think I mean to, if only to make clear my anger at these people, an anger not generated by anything other than discovering that they are what they are, and that they are not what I am.

"The Still, Sad Music Of Humanity"

Thoreau wrote, at the beginning of *Walden,* "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning." We applaud that attitude of ruddy good mental health, his reason awake to all the influences of the world. I try to echo that call to bright-eyed common sense whenever I write.

Yet we all have known times when that chanticleer has died, killed off by what Keats called the "wakeful anguish of the soul." We have all tasted bitterness when our reason or will or self-discipline has been unable to heal the abyss gouged out of our hearts by the certainty of our own deaths. Most times we can agree with Alan Watts when he says that death "is the natural and necessary end of human life - as natural as leaves falling in the autumn." *Reason* supports us in this, and so we conclude that death, when it comes at the end of a well-lived life, should cause no fear.

Yet doesn't William James cut closer when he says that no matter how much "sanguine healthy-mindedness does its best" to keep us "living in the moment," the "skull [grinning] in at the banquet" remains our most enduring companion? Shelley tried to freeze the skull in an iambic snare, only to be mocked by the attempt, for he learned it did not matter if we feel, reason laugh, or weep:

> Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away
> [for] it is the same!....Nought may endure but
> Mutability.

Such doubts raised by our mortality can not be solved, puzzle-like, by reason. They can not be erased by good premises and conclusions, for they become an atmosphere we breathe, haunting the "sullied flesh" we must inhabit. And, perhaps inevitably, they force us to want, if not to seek, for something beyond ourselves that will relieve us of the burden of too-close company with mortality.

Thus does the "need" for religion begin, in a terror and longing common to us all. What power can reason have against such ghostly yet adamant foundations of the self? We freethinkers can champion reason against the children of these urges, shine light upon the abuses caused by superstition, guile, and fraud. Yet, much as it may nag our sense of right, some redoubt exists called the "heart" or "spirit." There we suffer, in all their sharp rapaciousness, those uncertainties that sap our strength and cast our will to the side, a redoubt which can not be breached by the siege guns of common sense.

Before any of us reject such "transcendental notions," think what is evoked by fine poetry, by Hamlet's soliloquy, by Beethoven's Ninth. We must acknowledge, if we wish to be true to ourselves, that feelings boil within us which can not and should not be denied life. If every wish for greater certainty earns our scorn, if every urge for continuity provokes our laughter, then we inevitably forfeit that part of our humanity which gives our vaunted reason any legitimacy and warrant for action.

Freethinkers, if they wish to be true freethinkers, must necessarily make a treaty with their "religious" intuitions, if by religious we mean the longing for doubt to be done with. I say "true freethinkers" because one who places his chips on reason alone has closed himself off from indelible sources of inspiration and knowledge. He has, instead, taken on a dry and dusty companion, a rarefied Sancho Panza who can only comment upon cause and effect and watch the passing show with arid attention. To think freely means to think as John Donne observed, with the entire body and not just the brain, else we get a "squint left-handedness" that denies the fullness of our being.

No one can be an entirely reasonable creature, and no system of beliefs, if based on reason, can be entirely trusted. We must, of course, work hard to purge the world of the fraudulence and perversity engendered by superstition. But we must not become so proud in this mission that we poison the "humanness" we are trying to preserve. Nothing human should be alien to the freethinker, most especially the fears and desires that inform those human actions the freethinker hates most. We must make sure that we don't suffer from a righteousness of reason, which is really a loss of love. As David Hume has rightly said, "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions." "Passions," because they include every conceivable motive for action, give life a piquant complexity that cannot be reasoned away.

Reason, in the guise of the dictum that "every cause and solution lies within each of us," does not recognize the burden of loneliness it brings, nor the limits of its power. While a clear mind may shine more strongly than a befuddled one, it should never shine so clear as to banish those inevitable wisps of doubt about what the candle is worth. While we choose the more reasonable paths, we should not forget our shadows, those bodiless reminders of depths into which reason's light is only swallowed and lost. For within that gloom and silence hides a poetry about us far stronger than any smoothly-planed argument, a poetry of

need so common to us all that, save for a chance twist of time and space, we might well have found ourselves in the other camp.

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) - Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) - Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

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