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THE HUMAN UNDERTAKING

IN a period of historical decline such as the present, it is characteristic of thoughtful human beings to look for the ideal human life within themselves. The rule of the Greek poet, Pindar, is taken as the injunction to which they hearken: "Become what you are." In our time, this idea was reborn as an essential element in the psychology of health proposed by A. H. Maslow. The term he used for "becoming what you are" is self-actualization. In his last, posthumously published book, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Viking, 1971), he wrote:

> What do we really mean by self-actualization? What are the psychological characteristics that we are hoping to produce in our ideal educational system? The self-actualized person is in a state of good psychological health; his basic needs are satisfied so what is it that motivates him to become such a busy and capable person? For one thing, all self-actualized people have a cause they believe in, a vocation they are devoted to. When they say, "my work," they mean their mission in life. If you ask a self-actualized lawyer why he entered the field of law, what compensates for all the routine and trivia, he will eventually say something like "Well, I just get mad when I see somebody taking advantage of somebody else. It isn't fair." Fairness to him is an ultimate value; he can't tell you *why* he values fairness any more than an artist can tell you why he values beauty. Self-actualizing people, in other words, seem to do what they do for the sake of ultimate, final values, which is for the sake of principles which seem *intrinsically worthwhile:* They protect and love these values, and if the values are threatened, they will be aroused to indignation, action, and often self-sacrifice. These values are not abstract to the self-actualizing person; they are as much a part of them as their bones and arteries. Self-actualizing people are motivated by the eternal verities, . . . by pure truth and beauty in perfection. They go beyond polarities and try to see the underlying oneness; they try to integrate everything and make it more comprehensive.

Maslow combined a natural modesty with an extraordinary capacity to appreciate the insight of others. Early in this book he wrote:

> It has been my experience through a long line of exploratory investigations going back to the thirties that the healthiest people (or the most creative, or the strongest, or the wisest, or the saintliest) can be used as biological assays, or perhaps I could say, as advanced scouts, or more sensitive perceivers, to tell us less sensitive ones what it is we value. What I mean is something like this: It is easy enough to select out, for instance, persons who are aesthetically sensitive to colors and forms and then learn to submit ourselves or to defer to their judgment about colors, forms, fabrics, furniture, and the like. My experience is that if I get out of the way and do not intrude upon the superior perceivers, I can confidently predict that what they like immediately, I will slowly get to like in perhaps a month or two. It is as if they were I, only more sensitized, with less doubt, confusion, and uncertainty. I can use them, so to speak, as my experts, just as art collectors will hire art experts to help them with their buying. . . . Now in the same way I have found that if I select psychologically healthy humans what they like is what human beings *will* come to like. Aristotle is pertinent here: "What the superior man thinks is good, that is what is *really* good."

"Thinking along these same lines in his essay, "The Self and the Other," Ortega y Gasset wrote:

> . . . unlike all the other beings in the universe, man is never surely *man;* on the contrary, *being man* signifies precisely being always on the point of not being man, being a living problem, an absolute and hazardous adventure, or, as I am wont to say: being, in essence, drama! Because there is drama only when we do not know what is going to happen, so that every instant is pure peril and shuddering risk. While the tiger cannot cease being a tiger, cannot be detigered, man lives in perpetual risk of being dehumanized. With him, not only is it problematic and contingent, whether this or that will happen to him, as it is with other animals, but at times what happens to man is nothing less than *ceasing to be man.* And this is true not only abstractly and generically but it holds for our own individuality.

> Each one of us is always in peril of not being the unique and untransferable *self* which he is. The majority of men perpetually betray this *self* which is waiting to be; and to tell the whole truth our personal individuality is a personage which is never completely realized, a stimulating Utopia, a secret legend, which each of us guards in the bottom of his heart.

Yet we must add, here, that this is an idealized account. Not all humans are aware of carrying this legend of the fully human self and guarding it in the bottom of their hearts. There are those who have stopped aspiring in this way, or who have never felt the quickening of the spirit that it represents for those who have had moments of awakening. In a sense, both Ortega and Maslow wrote for awakened or awakening souls. What else could they do? They were themselves awakened, and felt in themselves the drive to speak of the feeling that would come over them when they wondered about themselves and the human race in general. They knew, so to say, what it meant to feel themselves "on top of things," to be equal to the demands of life. They had no final certainties but had somehow developed the assurance of how to live amid uncertainties, how to "cope" in a world defined more by our ignorance than any sure knowledge.

When one has reached this condition, how does one brood? Ortega begins a passage by saying: "thought is not a gift to man but a laborious, precarious and volatile acquisition."

> With this idea in mind, you will understand that I see an element of absurdity in the definition of man put forward by Linnaeus and the eighteenth century: *homo sapiens*. Because if we take this expression in good faith, it can only mean that man, in effect, knows—in other words, that he knows all that he needs to know. Now nothing is further from the reality. Man has never known what he needed to know. But if we understand *homo sapiens* in the sense that man knows some things, a very few things, but does not know the remainder, it would seem to me more appropriate to define him as *homo insciens, insipiens*, as man the unknowing. And certainly, if we were not now in such a hurry, we could see the good judgment with which Plato defines man precisely by his ignorance. Ignorance is, in fact, man's privilege. Neither God nor beast is ignorant—the former because he possesses all knowledge, the latter because he needs none.

Today, the time has come to learn how to be respectful of ignorance, our constant condition, as we are now learning from experience. Our goals, when realized, teach us this, by becoming complex failures. When we obtain the courage to face this reality, we shall have to begin all over again, starting with ourselves and with what we now suppose to be education.

We might find guidance in the wisdom of another culture, almost a lost culture, yet of which there are many records and a few teachers who remember what they say. We are thinking here of an article titled "Education or Manipulation" by Vinoba Bhave, who died a few years ago in India. This article was published in *Resurgence* for January 1974, and was reprinted in the fine collection of *Resurgence* articles, *Time Running Out*. In reading what Vinoba says, it would be well to keep in mind that he is writing for people who have some grasp of the fact that ignorance, as Ortega suggested, is our natural condition. He speaks of education in the ancient Indian tradition:

> Teaching must take place in the context of real life. Set the children to work in the fields, and when a problem arises there give them whatever knowledge of cosmogony, or physics, or any other science, is needed to solve it. Set them to cook a meal, and as need arises teach them chemistry. In one word, let them live. The children should have someone with them, but that someone should not belong to a special category called teacher, he should be a man living an ordinary life in the practical world. The man who is to guide children should conduct his life intelligently and be capable of explaining the processes of life and work to the children as opportunity arises. It is not education to fill students' heads with information, but to arouse their thirst for knowledge. Teacher and pupil both learn by their contact with each other. Both are students. True education is that which is experienced, tested, digested. What can be counted and recorded is not education. Education cannot be doled out, it cannot be weighed and measured.

This is *wisdom* about education. It emerges wherever individuals think seriously about the

subject. The above, for example, is exactly what John Holt distilled from a lifetime of working with children, and what fathers and mothers discovered by taking Holt's advice. In the last chapter of *How Children Learn* (1967), Holt said:

> After many years, I think that at most I may know something about a very small part of what goes on in my own head. How preposterous to imagine that I can know what goes on in someone else's. . . .
>
> What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and the classroom, give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.

Readers of the paper Holt founded, *Growing Without Schooling*, know from the letters from parents who are teaching their own children that chemistry can indeed be taught through cooking, and that the method proposed by Vinoba is the best, whenever it can be applied.

Vinoba also speaks directly of ignorance, as Holt does, as Ortega does; he says:

> In the *Upanishads*, the praises of ignorance are sung side by side with the praises of knowledge. Man needs not only knowledge but ignorance too. Knowledge alone, or ignorance alone, leads him into darkness. But the union of fitting knowledge with fitting ignorance is the nectar of eternity. The world is so filled with the matter of knowledge that men would go mad if they were to attempt to cram all of it into their heads. The ability to forget is just as necessary to us as the ability to remember.

He also comments on the ignorance that does not fit in with what knowledge we have:

> The "knowledge" which is purchased for money is no knowledge at all, knowledge bought for cash is ignorance. True knowledge can only be had for love and service, it cannot be bought for money. So when a wise man, travelling from place to place, arrives at a village, let the people lovingly invite him to remain a few days, treat him with reverence, and receive from him whatever knowledge he has to give. This is quite a feasible plan. Just as a river flows of itself from village to village, serving the people; just as cows graze in the jungle and return of themselves with full udders to give the children milk; so will wise men travel of themselves from place to place. We must re-establish this institution of the wandering teacher. In this way every village can have its university, and all the knowledge of the world can find its way into the villages.

What Vinoba says about education has been said in other words by a great many thoughtful people in the West, yet we do not know how to put their wisdom to work. Holt found a way for some—the parents able and willing to teach their children at home—and there is no use in complaining that this would be for only a small percentage of the population. Every fundamental change in culture and society begins with the devotion and practice of small minorities. Our democratic rules, which may have wide application, are not the way history actually works. We set down here more of what Vinoba says about education in his article:

> Education is to be had only from living deeds. When some separate activity, unconnected with the work of life, is given the name of education, this "education" has a poisonous and unhealthy influence on the mind, just as some foreign substance entering the body usually has evil consequences. Unless we are exercised in work we have no hunger for learning, and when learning is forced artificially upon a man who has no appetite for it, the digestive organs have no power to digest it. If wisdom were to be had by cramming books, the library cupboards would be wise indeed. But learning which is forcibly crammed in is not digested. Mental dysentery sets in and the intellectual powers are atrophied and die. Let us therefore define education as "that which, without method, builds itself up into a methodical and ordered whole, that which no *guru* can give and which nevertheless can be given."
>
> The true teacher does not teach, yet one may educate oneself at his side. The sun itself gives its light to no one, yet all, in the most natural and easy way, receive its light.

Ortega repeats in his own words this fundamental wisdom in the first chapter of his book, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* (Norton, 1969):

> We find ourselves faced with the fact that the student is a human being, male or female, on whom life imposes the need to study sciences for which he

> has felt no immediate, genuine need. . . . Leaving aside the cases that are exceptional, we recognize that in the best of cases the student feels a sincere, if somewhat vague, need to study "something," thus *in genere* "to know," to be instructed. But the vagueness of this wish testifies to its slender stock of authenticity. It is evident that such a state of mind has never led to the creation of any real knowledge, because such knowledge is always concrete, a matter of precise knowing of this or that; and, according to the law (at which I have barely hinted) of the functional relationship between seeking and finding, need and satisfaction, those who create knowledge felt no vague desire for knowing, but a most concrete and specific desire to find out this or that specific thing. . . .
>
> Meanwhile, generation after generation, the frightening mass of human knowledge which the student must assimilate piles up. And in proportion, as knowledge grows, is enriched, and becomes specialized, the student will move farther and farther away from feeling any immediate and genuine need for it. Each time, there will be less congruence between the sad human activity which is studying, and the admirable human occupation which is true knowing. And so the terrible gap which began at least a century ago continues to grow, the gap between living culture, genuine knowledge and the ordinary man. . . .
>
> The solution to so crude a two-horned problem may be inferred from what I have said; it does not consist of decreeing that one not study, but of a deep reform of that human activity called studying and, hence, of the student's being. In order to achieve this, one must turn teaching completely around, and say that primarily and fundamentally teaching is only the teaching of a need for the science and *not* the teaching of the science itself whose need the student does not feel.

We began this discussion by saying that we are in a period of decline. It is a decline in cultural understanding, in grasp of the human enterprise, and, lately, in the economic condition of the world, the so-called "advanced" societies as well as the countries called "under-developed." We are beginning now to see that the claim of being "advanced" must now be called into question, and also the supposition that "development" in other countries should be a form of imitation of what the industrialized nations have done. This simply does not work, as thoughtful observers in the less developed countries are repeatedly pointing out.

What can be done about this? For a beginning, all who understand what has happened should explain as well as they can both the moral and practical mistakes that have been made, and point to such remedies as are beginning to be available. There are in the world men of both vision and moral responsibility. We need to do what we can to strengthen their voices, describe their example, and support their efforts. In this country there are men like Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, Peter Berg, and others who are applying the wisdom that is evident in the writers we have quoted in this week's discussion. Anil Agarwal, quoted at length in MANAS for Oct. 21, 1987, is an Indian writer with the same penetrating understanding. It is time to take such founders of tomorrow's civilization seriously. This means using one's imagination to find means of applying, in whatever ways possible, what they are saying. This may be difficult, but it is not impossible. John Holt is a good example of a man who began to act on what he had learned from experience. See his books, all of them, to recognize how much an individual grows up and begins to do what he sees to be right.

The individual capacity to understand what is wrong with the modern world is sufficient evidence that there are people who know what to do and have the vision to start doing it. There are various ways to speak of this, but one way, completely reasonable, is that there is a spark of divinity which has been fanned to a flame in such individuals. This idea was once the inspiration of the ancient culture of India, for which Vinoba Bhave spoke, and it now needs nurturing in the West. Divinity cannot simply say to the world, "Presto, Change," but it can go to work on the ways to change it, and not give up. For the world will not change until that spark awakens in enough individuals to make the beginnings of change into a strong current powered by invincible resolve.

REVIEW
ALDO LEOPOLD

ALDO LEOPOLD, who was born in 1887 in Burlington, Iowa, and who died in 1948, was author of *A Sand County Almanac*, for which he is mainly remembered, although he wrote much more. *A Sand County Almanac* was first published in 1949 by Oxford University Press, with a later edition with other material added in a Ballantine paperback. The last section in both books is titled "The Land Ethic," and has been through the years the most influential of Leopold's writings. If you read it you will see why.

We now have for review a new book about Aldo Leopold and his work—*Aldo Leopold: The Man and His Legacy*, edited by Thomas Tanner and putlished at $10 in paperback by the Soil Conservation Society of America (7415 N.E. Ankeny Road, Ankeny, Iowa 50021-9764). All admirers and lovers of Aldo Leopold (a growing body) will enjoy and want to have this book, which tells the story of the writer's development. For a beginning or introduction, we quote here a passage from "The Land Ethic":

> It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophic sense.
>
> Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land. Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow. . . .
>
> The "key-log" which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking about decent land use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

It should be added that the impact of what Leopold says about the Land Ethic depends largely upon having read all of his books, which gives depth and strength to his ideas. We turn now, to the book under review and quote from its foreword by Stewart Udall:

> In 1973, exactly a quarter of a century after Leopold's death the editors of *Not Man Apart*, published by Friends of the Earth, asked various authors, scientists, politicians, philosophers, and environmental activists to list the five books they thought should be enshrined in an "Environmental Books Hall of Fame." The biggest vote-getters by far were *A Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Historian Wallace Stegner later validated this assessment by predicting that when the record of ". . . the physical and spiritual pilgrimage of the American people" is compiled, Leopold's book will be "one of the prophetic books, the utterance of an American Isaiah."

The first contribution to the book, in some ways the most valuable, is Susan Flader's "Aldo Leopold and the Evolution of a Land Ethic." It is valuable because Leopold's conceptions on the subject, reached during the last years of his life, were indeed an evolution. As a graduate of the Yale Forestry School, he went to work for the U.S. Forest Service under Gifford Pinchot, being assigned to the Southwestern District embracing Arizona and New Mexico territories. He began with more or less conventional ideas on conservation. "Extermination of wolves, mountain lions, and other predatory species was a key element in his early program, one that he would live to regret," Susan Flader says. While as a youth he was filled with appreciation of wildlife, this attitude seemed bypassed or suppressed during his mid-career, when he was seeking to develop "a science and profession of wildlife management." Susan Flader finds this ironic, adding:

> The irony is compounded when one notes the extent to which he was pushing beyond traditional modes of thought in his understanding of the dynamics of southwestern watersheds by the early

1920s, developing an interpretation of the functional inter-relatedness of virtually all elements of the system save wildlife. It was as if his effort to achieve parity for game animals within the Forest Service model of professional management limited his ken at the same time that he felt less constrained about challenging orthodoxy on larger issues. Thus, it is to his thinking about watersheds and soil erosion that we must turn if we would understand the evolution of his concept of a land ethic—his capacity to think about the system as a whole.

In a paper written in 1923, but never published, "Some Fundamentals of Conservation in the Southwest," he pointed out that the degradation of the "carrying capacity" of the southwestern ranges was largely due to human exploitation. He saw this as a result of his studies of the condition of the land:

> Overgrazing, resulting from overstocking without regard to recurring drought, was the outstanding factor in upsetting the equilibrium, in his view. This conclusion that human beings bore responsibility for unwise land use led him to a philosophical discussion under the subtitle "Conservation as a Moral Issue." . . . Leopold found support for his own intuitive feeling that there existed between man and earth a deeper relation than would follow from a mechanistic conception of nature in the organicism of the Russian philosopher, P.D. Ouspensky, who regarded the whole earth and its parts as possessed of soul or consciousness. "Possibly, in our intuitive perception, which may be truer than our science and less impeded by words than our philosophies," Leopold suggested, "we realize the indivisibility of the earth—its soil, mountains, rivers, forests, climate, plants, and animals, and respect it collectively not only as a useful servant but as a living being."

Susan Flader comments:

> Even granting that the earth is for man, there was still a question: "What man?" Four cultures had flourished in the Southwest without degrading it. What would be said about the present one?
>
> If there be, indeed, a special nobility inherent in the human race—a special cosmic value, distinctive from and superior to all other life—by what token shall it be manifest? By a society decently respectful of its own and all other life, capable of inhabiting the earth without defiling it? Or by a society like that of John Burroughs' potato bug, which exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself?

From his close study of nature and natural processes, Leopold began to differ from conventional Forest Service doctrine. As Susan Flader says:

> . . . Leopold found evidence that fire, far from being an unmitigated evil, was natural and even beneficial, and that grass was a much better conserver of watersheds than were trees or brush. While the Forest Service was willing to acquiesce in some overgrazing and erosion in order to reduce the fire hazard, Leopold was willing to take an added risk of fire in order to maintain the integrity of the watersheds. The Forest Service was thinking of the commodity values of cattle and timber. Leopold was thinking of the whole system.

The following is an important passage:

> The Sierra Madre—just south of the border from the Southwest Leopold had struggled so long to understand, but protected from overgrazing by Apache Indians, bandits, depression, and unstable administration—still retained the virgin stability of its soils and the integrity of its flora and fauna. The Gavilan River still ran dear between mossy, tree-lined banks. Fires burned periodically without any apparent damage, and deer thrived in the midst of their natural predators, wolves and mountain lions. "It was here," Leopold reflected years later, "that I first clearly realized that land is an organism, that all my life I had seen only sick land, whereas here was a biota still in perfect aboriginal health." The vital new idea for Leopold was the concept of biotic health. It was that idea that finally gave him a model, a way of conceptualizing the system, that could become the basis for his mature philosophy.

Speaking of *A Sand County Almanac* toward the end of her chapter, Susan Flader gives an explanation of the power of Leopold's prose:

> These essays had a purpose with respect to Leopold's notion of the evolution of an ethic. Their purpose was to inspire respect and love for the land community, grounded in an understanding of its ecological functioning. Leopold would motivate that understanding of the whole by focusing the reader's attention on the subtle drama inherent in the roles of wolf, crane, grebe, parrot, even atom, in the scheme of things. The essays were Leopold's attempt to develop a metaphysic, or an esthetic—to stimulate

> perception that might lead people to the transformation of values required for a land ethic. He would motivate not by inciting fear of ecological catastrophe or indignation about abused watersheds but rather by leading people from esthetic appreciation through ecological understanding to love and respect.

We have said nothing about the other contributions in this book, not because they are not good, or second rate, but because concentrating on Susan Flader's paper seemed most useful to the general reader. There are in all thirteen essays, all of them deepening our understanding and appreciation of Leopold's work. Especially interesting are the contributions of Leopold's family, about what their father was like. We urge a reading of this book.

COMMENTARY
HOW PEOPLE "GROW UP"

ONE of the things that become evident from the material in this issue is the fact that people "grow up" by different means and in different ways. There is no reliable formula for reaching maturity, no plan that can be institutionalized and put into a curriculum. Aldo Leopold, for example, showed his real maturity when, as Susan Flader says, he began to differ from conventional Forest Service doctrine. He gave evidence of being grown up when he spoke of finally realizing that "land is an organism, that all my life I had seen only sick land, whereas here was a biota still in perfect aboriginal health."

You could say that John Holt, mentioned on page two of this issue, achieved maturity when he reached the conclusion that it was hopeless to try to reform the schools—that the best thing to do would be to ignore them and figure out how to teach children at home. Now obviously, this will not work for everyone, and Holt never claimed that it would, but only that for parents who saw the advantage of getting away from the processes of institutionalized learning, it was the right thing to do. After seeing this, he left the project of improving the schools to others since for him it seemed a waste of time.

Then, for another example of what we might call radical maturity, there is the wisdom in what is quoted from *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* by Ortega on page seven. An institutionalized society could not possibly profit from what he says, yet the intelligent reader will recognize that he is absolutely right. Don't teach the science, he says, but try to generate the sense of need for the science. Those who are affected by this effort will sooner or later teach themselves.

The mature members of any society are precisely those who do what they can to free people from the illusion that a formula can be used in education. But for the managers of the institutions of a society, such individuals will be regarded as wreckers of the social structure, as indeed in a sense they are. After all, they are among those who have fully recognized the truth behind Susan Flader's question:

> Four cultures had flourished in the Southwest without degrading it. What would be said about the present one?
>
> If there be, indeed, a special nobility inherent in the human race—a special cosmic value, distinctive from and superior to all other life—by what token shall it be manifest? By a society decently respectful of its own and all other life, capable of inhabiting the earth without defiling it? Or by a society like that of John Burroughs potato bug, which exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself?

One sees in the observations of Vinoba (quoted on page two) the same sort of maturity that Ortega reveals. Vinoba wrote:

> The man who is to guide children should conduct his life intelligently and be capable of explaining the processes of life and work to the children as opportunity arises. It is not education to fill students' heads with information, but to arouse their thirst for knowledge. Teacher and pupil both learn by their contact with each other. Both are students. True education is that which is experienced, tested, digested. What can be counted and recorded is not education. Education cannot be doled out; it cannot be weighed and measured.

Finally, we might say that all that A. H. Maslow says about self-actualization is concerned with authentic human maturity. We need the detail that he provides, yet the essence of his meaning is in his statement that "Self-actualizing people are motivated by the eternal verities, . . . by pure truth and beauty in perfection. They go beyond polarities and try to see the underlying oneness; they try to integrate everything and make it more comprehensive."

Still another perspective on maturity is provided by an article in *Maclean's*, the Canadian journal, for Dec. 21, by Fred Bruning, on James Baldwin, the black writer who died in France last December. Bruning says:

> It was his notion that writers were not born but created by common need. The artist, he said, must

> "bear witness to and for the people who produced him. The thought saves me from the nightmare of show business, of thinking that my talent belongs to me. It doesn't. That's why it is called a gift." In what way did the author bestow his gift? How did Baldwin serve the constituency that called him to service? "What I tried to do or to interpret and make clear was that no society can smash the social contract and be exempt from the consequences, and the consequences are chaos for everybody in the society." . . .
>
> For blacks, Baldwin said, the ultimate tragedy would be to embrace the notion of worthlessness thrust upon them—to annihilate their own hopes and dreams and dignity. "It was not pleasant to hear that, as black Americans, we had internalized white society's hatred and turned it against ourselves," wrote black novelist Gloria Naylor following Baldwin's death. If they were to endure, Baldwin said, blacks had to keep the covenant with their own precious heritage. Salvation was within their power, calamity awaited only if blacks struggled not to be black, but white.

The best thing to remember about James Baldwin may be this: "I love America more than any other country in the world," he wrote in *Notes of a Native Son*, "and exactly for that reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE ROLE OF PLAY

PLAY, declares Joan Cass, in her book on the subject—*Helping Children Grow Through Play* (Schocken, 1973)—"is as necessary and important to a child as the food he eats, for it is the very breath of life to him, the reason for his existence and his assurance of immortality." A woman of long experience in nursery school and a lecturer on child development at the Institute of Education in London University, Joan Cass remarks that adults sometimes think of play as a form of self-indulgence, and quotes John Bowlby (an eminent psychiatrist) against this view:

> Yet play uses every ounce of a child's energy. It encourages his imagination. It develops skills of both body and mind. It brings about understanding, warmth, and sympathy towards others.
>
> How to compete, how to take hard knocks, how to win gracefully; when to assert oneself and when to forget self-interest are all learned through play. Perseverance, how to struggle through to a desired end, is as much a part of play as it is of work.
>
> Play offers healing for hurts and sadness. It breaks down tension and releases pent-up urges towards self-expression. Play is the working partner of growth, for activity is as vital to growth as food and sleep.
>
> The far-reaching significance of children's play has only lately been understood. Unless the deep-lying impulses satisfied by play are allowed to express themselves in childhood, adult life suffers.
>
> Some men and women are never able to take part freely in the life around them; they are stiff and lonely because they don't know how to mix with others. They cannot lose themselves in spontaneous fun.
>
> Somehow or other their urges towards expression in play were denied the chance to come to the surface in childhood.

Joan Cass gives some of the reasons for the importance of play:

> Children unaccustomed to freedom, independence, to making decisions for themselves, can be bewildered, frightened and stampeded into foolish behavior when suddenly faced with situations which are new and unexpected.
>
> Children in their day-to-day living need practice in learning to be independent and to make decisions. This can be done largely, in the early stages, through their play. They choose what they will play with and how long they will continue, how to arrange, organize and plan what they are doing, whom they will play with, where they will play, and so on.
>
> This may appear very simple as far as we are concerned for to us these are often unimportant matters; to a child they can be momentous because to him play is the whole object of his life. He may at times ask and welcome our help or even share his play with us and we on our part can often enrich his activities by what we provide materially, or the ideas we can bring or the questions we can answer. We should not, however, take over and organize *what* he is doing, for that is for him to do.
>
> It is not surprising perhaps that life is often a difficult and complicated affair for most children, with problems enough without our inventing more through lack of understanding and wisdom. Most of us, too, are well aware of the growth tasks that still face us and the difficulties we also experience in coming to terms with them.

Discussing imaginative and dramatic play, Joan Cass points out that in a sense all play is dramatic. The child "plays out past experiences and present problems and in putting them outside himself he is able to see them more clearly and so lessen some of the anxieties and tensions within himself."

> Older children often find playing with puppets or masks and spontaneous acting a safe outlet for their feelings; puppets can be made to say and do things that would be unacceptable in day-to-day behavior. Behind a mask a child can hide his identity and in dressing up and acting out scenes he can take over the personality of some quite objectionable character and behave in a completely anti-social way without feeling guilty.
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> A child can even act out and talk about a physical handicap which he is both sensitive about and even ashamed of. Dressing up and playing a part often help him to accept this handicap more easily. It

> may be remembered that when the Brontë children were very young and their father wanted to discover how much they knew by questioning, he provided each child with a mask so that they felt less inhibited and freer to say what they really thought. . . .
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> Dressing-up clothes can often stimulate dramatic play and add to the fun of being a fireman, a nurse or a bride. Play becomes more realistic and richer in content as children remember how these characters behave, adding, of course ideas of their own. If there are only dressing-up garments which are going to appeal mainly to girls, boys will not have that extra incentive and stimulation that masculine attire can provide. If suitable things are there they will seize them with delight and use them to enrich their play.

"The dramatization and acting out of fears," Joan Cass says, "enable children to understand them and come to terms with them more easily. On the whole adults are able to talk about their problems, but young children find this very difficult for they have neither the vocabulary nor the command of language which makes this possible or satisfying."

> During the war (1939-45) many children who spent the night in shelters listening to the crash of falling bombs also spent a lot of their play in acting out these scenes. They would build imaginary air-raid shelters with tables and blankets, then hurry everyone into them, shouting that the bombs were falling. They would play endless shooting and bombing games accompanying them with as many appropriate sounds as possible.
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> While their parents put into words their latest and most harrowing bomb story the children put it into their play. . . . War games of this kind disappeared almost overnight when the real war came to an end and it was no longer a present, living anxiety and fear in the children's mind.

On children's capacity for invention, she says:

> Round about the age of three some children invent an imaginary companion to whom they will give a very special name. This imaginary companion can represent all sorts of things, often the bad bits of the child himself. It is not he who pinches the new baby or eats the sweets, but his imaginary companion. Such companions are often so real they must be given a place at table and taken for walks. . . . Just to possess an imaginary companion helps a child to feel that he is not alone in his goodness or badness, so in play to pretend to be one of the clever, powerful grownups who do so many wonderful things (drive trains, build houses, do the shopping, cook the dinner) helps to compensate for his feeling of smallness and inferiority. The world is full of large people and immense animals with everything geared, in fact, to an environment of giants.

Since children live so largely in their imagination, its use in play is formative of future capacities. Children "add their own drama to what they discover, taking from an experience what they are ready for and able to absorb." All this is therefore of vital importance to the future life of the child.

> Every creative achievement is born in the imagination and in form will depend on the individual who brings it to fruition. Shelley speaks of the imagination as being "The greatest instrument for moral good." So, if children are to understand the feelings and needs of others, they must be able to share imaginatively in their lives. In so doing they will not be content to stand back and do nothing if active help and comfort is needed.

This book is full of practical suggestions on how to help children with their play without interfering. It will help parents and teachers to become far more resourceful, even finding in play a diagnostic tool.

FRONTIERS

Over-Grazing—A Threat to the Land

ACCORDING to *Earth Island Journal* (*Summer,* 1987) the public lands of the United States are suffering serious over-grazing, with the virtual collaboration of the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service. Information concerning this land abuse was recently put together by Lynn Jacobs, who became outraged by the environmental damage caused by livestock grazing on public lands. Justin Lowe, the *Earth Island* writer says:

> By far the most blatant and unjust expense to US citizens is the grossly unfair grazing fee system established by government agencies. This fee arrangement is based on an "ability to pay" formula—a sliding scale, that weighs the ranchers' needs more heavily than the actual value of the land and the forage on it. . . . The amount of money the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service collect every year in grazing fees is only a fraction of the total cost to the agencies and the taxpayers of maintaining these lands. While the US collects only one dollar for every ten dollars spent on range programs, it collects $3 for each dollar spent on other commercial land uses. The US Treasury netted $9.2 million from all grazing fees in 1985, while government expenditures on public grazing lands were equivalent to "hundreds of millions of dollars," according to Jacobs. . . .
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> The 752,948,000 acres of public lands stretching across eleven western states constitute a common heritage held by all the American people. But, beyond that, Jacobs argues, these lands also have an independent, intrinsic right to exist in a natural state—a right that was violated by the first white immigrants drawn to the region by "get rich quick" schemes, many of which focused on acquiring and exploiting the land.
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> "By far most of the land (and power) was seized by incoming stockmen," Jacobs says. This de facto hegemony is still tolerated by the American people, in part due to our overly romanticized image of the western rancher/cowboy as an honest, hard-working, conservation-minded, though beleaguered, rugged individualist deserving our support.

This seems a little harsh on the men and families who went West in the nineteenth century, who were more interested in survival than exploitation, but the fact is that today the land is being worn out by over-grazing.

> More than 90 per cent of BLM land in the west is grazed, and a 1975 survey by that agency estimated that 83 per cent of its rangeland was in an unsatisfactory state. Sixty-eight per cent of private range also was rated fair to poor. The BLM concluded in this report that the condition of America's public rangelands "will continue to deterioriate."
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> Many people may not be familiar with the effects of grazing on our public lands because these areas are either remote or unfamiliar and because livestock grazing appears to be such a harmless, even beneficial activity. However, to the sensitive eye, the negative impacts of grazing are obvious and widespread. . . .
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> Overgrazing contributes to erosion and desertification in the arid west, where much of the soil is thin and fragile because of low annual precipitation and minimal ground cover. As much as ten per cent of US land, all in the west, is severely eroded or desertified, including the 40 per cent of BLM land that the agency admits is in bad condition.

In Jacobs' report, "Free Our Public Lands" (available free from Lynn Jacobs, P.O. Box 2203, Cottonwood, Ariz. 86326), he says that there are ranchers "who think the government should destroy entire forests so they will have more land to graze."

> In the crusades to make the west safe for livestock, many native animals have been targeted for extermination. The impact of these practices has been greatest on predator species, which traditionally have been perceived as a threat to stock animals even though they actually account for only a small percentage of kills. "Predator control" has resulted in the drastic reduction of grizzly, grey wolf, and mountain lion populations, as well as those of smaller animals. This reduction in turn has loosened the biological restraints on smaller animals and insects, leading to population explosions that must then be controlled by trapping and poisoning.

Better remedies, however, are available.

> Jacobs offers a range of alternatives to correct the current inequities of public lands grazing. An obvious first step would be to make the costs of

> grazing on public land competitive with private land costs by raising the grazing fee, thereby covering more of the costs to government agencies and the taxpayers. These agencies should also establish competitive bidding practices for grazing allotments—routine policy for leasing other natural resources on public lands. Another reasonable step would be to significantly reduce and limit the number of livestock allowed to graze on public lands.
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> In a more drastic vein, Jacobs argues that the US government should completely eliminate grazing on public lands by buying out all the grazing permitees and returning the land to non-grazing uses and native wildlife. Ultimately, Jacobs asserts, "The most realistic solution to the problems caused by the public lands grazing industry is to permanently cancel all permits, remove all commercial livestock, and prohibit all future commercial grazing on public lands."

The key to reform, Justin Lowe says, is public involvement. All Americans are affected by such policies and the more they understand of what is happening, the more likely they are to want to take a hand in the decisions that are made. The value of wildlife in the natural maintenance of forests and land is a factor that will take time to understand. Meanwhile, as Justin Lowe says:

> Cattle and sheep are exotic species in the west, but with the help of humans they have become successful competitors with native animals. The BLM and USFS generally manage their land for only one per cent as many deer, elk, bighorn sheep, or antelope as cows and sheep.

This article by Justin Lowe is but one of a number of useful discussions and reports that will be found in each quarterly issue of *Earth Island Journal,* identified as an international news magazine. Subscription is $3. The address is 300 Broadway, Suite 28, San Francisco, Calif. 94133