VOLUME XLI, NO. 10
MARCH 9, 1988

A JOHN MUIR, A JANE ADDAMS

EIGHTEEN years ago, Paul Goodman published *Growing Up Absurd,* a book in which he pointed out that boys in America were becoming young men in a country that offered them almost nothing worth doing, no jobs worth having, no goals worth striving for.

> It is not [he wrote] a "psychological" question of poor influences and bad attitudes, but an objective question of real opportunities for worthwhile experience. . . . For it can be shown—I intend to show—that with all the harmonious belonging and all the tidying up of background conditions that you please, our abundant society is at present simply deficient in many of the most elementary objective opportunities and worth-while goals that could make growing up possible. It is lacking in enough man's work. It is lacking in honest public speech, and people are not taken seriously. It is lacking in the opportunity to be useful. It thwarts aptitude and creates stupidity. It corrupts ingenuous patriotism. It corrupts the fine arts. It shackles science. It dampens animal ardor. It discourages the religious convictions of Justification and Vocation and it dims the sense that there is a Creation. It has no Honor. It has no Community.

That is in his first chapter and it seems about right. But if you turn back a few pages, to his preface, you find, at the end, a kind of optimism that now seems inexplicable. After all, nothing has changed, and a lot of things are worse. How does he put it?

> It is my belief that we are going to have a change. And once the Americans can recover from their mesmerized condition and its astounding political apathy, our country will be in a most fortunate situation. . . . For instance, since we have a vast surplus productivity, we can turn to finding jobs that will bring out a youth's capacity, and so really conserve resources. We can find ways to restore to the worker a say in his production, and so really do something for manly independence. Since we have a problem of what to do with leisure, we can begin to think of necessary community enterprises that want doing, and that people can enthusiastically and spontaneously throw themselves into, and be proud of the results (e.g. beautifying our hideous small towns). And perhaps thereby create us a culture again. . . . One has the persistent thought that if ten thousand people in all walks of life will stand up on their two feet and talk out and insist, we shall get back our country.

This is—or was—encouraging and plausible optimism, but is no longer persuasive. Here, perhaps, Goodman was not being merely conventional, hoping for the best, but really thinking that by some magic ten thousand people might be stirred to get up on their hind legs and "talk out." Yet we have to forgive him his optimistic foible. After all, maybe, right now, there are ten thousand bioregionalists who are trying to do what Goodman recommended in their way—the two are not so far apart, although Goodman did not have in mind the far-reaching changes that the bioregionalists are undertaking.

Meanwhile, the question asked by A. H. Maslow in *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* is still a pertinent one. Speaking of the university education offered to the young, he said:

> Certainly the young student coming to the study of the arts and the humanities will find therein no inspiring certainties. What criterion of selection does he have between, let us say, Tolstoy and Kafka, between Renoir and DeKooning, or between Brahms and Cage? And which well-known artists or writers today are trying to teach, to inspire, to conduce to virtue? Which of them could even use this word "virtue" without gagging? Upon which of them can an "idealistic" young man model himself?

We have from the library a book that may offer one answer to this question. It is *The Wilderness World of John Muir,* edited by Edwin Way Teale, brought out in 1954 by Houghton Mifflin. It has extracts from all ten of the books Muir wrote. In one passage toward the end Muir tells about a time in San Francisco:

> After I had lived many years in the mountains, I spent my first winter in San Francisco, writing up notes. I used to run out on short excursions to Mount Tamalpais, or the hills across the bay, for rest and exercise, and I always brought back a lot of flowers—as many as I could carry—and it was most touching to see the quick natural enthusiasm in the hearts of the ragged, neglected, defrauded, dirty little wretches of the Tar Flat water-front of the city I used to pass through on my way home. As soon as they caught sight of my wild bouquet, they quit their pitiful attempts at amusement in the miserable dirty streets and ran after me begging a flower. "Please, Mister, give me a flower—give me a flower, Mister," in a humble begging tone as if expecting to be refused. And when I stopped and distributed the treasures, giving each a lily or a daisy or calachortus, anemone, gillia, flowering Dogwood, spray of Cenothus, Manzanita, or a branch of Redwood, the dirty faces fairly glowed with enthusiasm while they gazed at them and fondled them reverently as if looking into the faces of angels from heaven. It was a hopeful sign, and made me say: "No matter into what depths of degradation humanity may sink, I will never despair while the lowest love the pure and the beautiful and know it when they see it."

What sort of man was John Muir? He was born in 1838 in Dunbar, Scotland. The surname Muir, Teale tells us, means in Scottish a "wild stretch of wasteland." He came with his father to America in 1849 and they settled in Wisconsin, on the Fox River, northeast of Portage. His youth was not a happy time. His father was a bigot and "used to thrash him soundly every evening in his boyhood," on the theory that he sinned daily whether the father knew it or not. "Muir," Teale says, "never forgot or forgave his father's harsh treatment during his youth." At twenty-one Muir was a talented inventor. He found work in a machine shop but an accident damaging one of his eyes put an end to this work. In his late twenties he attended the University of Wisconsin, living on scraps with expenses often of only fifty cents a week. He never shaved. For the four years at the university, he worked harvesting on farms during the summer, earning enough to buy his textbooks. When he left, as he later said, he was only "leaving one University for another, the Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness." In 1867 he set out upon his *Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, keeping notes that were published in book form after his death in 1914.

After this long walk he went to New York, where he embarked for California. He reached San Francisco in 1868 and soon took off for the Yosemite Valley. Muir, at thirty-one, became a sheep-herder, leading his animals through mountain pastures, drinking in the beauty, calm, and splendor of the Sierras.

Again, what sort of man was John Muir? Edwin Teale begins the introductory chapter of his book:

> Among the rare books at the Yale University Library there is a rusty-brown volume with penciled notations running along the margins and spilling over onto the flyleaves at the back. The book is Volume I of *The Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, published in 1870. . . . It was this book that John Muir carried with him, read and reread during his mountain days in the high Sierra.
>
> Emerson was one of the great admirations of Muir's life. The Concord philosopher replied in kind for when, in his old age, he set down his list of "My Men," the ones who had influenced him most, he began it with Thomas Carlyle and ended it with John Muir.

For more on how Muir thought we go to the concluding portion of Teale's book titled "The Philosophy of John Muir." The following are extracts from this material:

> Plants are credited with but dim and uncertain sensation, and minerals with positively none at all. But why may not even a mineral arrangement of matter be endowed with sensation of a kind that we in our blind exclusive perfection can have no manner of communication with? . . .
>
> One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of Nature—inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that

melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.

These temple-destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetchy Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man. . . .

How infinitely superior to our physical senses are those of the mind! The spiritual eye sees not only rivers of water but of air. It sees the crystals of the rock in rapid sympathetic motion, giving enthusiastic obedience to the sun's rays, then sinking back to rest in the night. The whole world is in motion to the center. So also sounds. We hear only woodpeckers and squirrels and the rush of turbulent streams. But imagination gives us the sweet music of tiniest insect wings, enables us to hear all around the world, the vibration of every needle, the waving of every bole and branch, the sound of stars in circulation like particles of blood. . . .

The rugged old Norsemen spoke of death as *Heimgang*—home-going. So the snow-flowers go when they melt and flow to sea, and the rock-ferns, after unrolling their fronds to the light and beautifying the rocks, roll them up close again in the autumn and blend with the soil. Myriads of rejoicing living creatures, daily, hourly, perhaps every moment sink into death's arms, dust to dust, spirit to spirit—waited on, watched over, noticed only by their Maker, each arriving at its own Heaven-dealt destiny. All the merry dwellers of the trees and streams, and the myriad swarms of the air, called into life by the sunbeam of a summer morning, go home through death, wings folded perhaps in the last red rays of sunset of the day they were first tried. Trees towering the sky, braving storms of centuries, flowers turning faces to the light for a single day or hour, having enjoyed their share of life's feast—all alike pass on and away under the law of death and love. Yet all are our brothers and they enjoy life as we do, share Heaven's blessings with us, die and are buried in hallowed ground, come with us out of eternity and return to eternity. "Our lives are rounded with a sleep."

While Muir wrote and published ten books—and we may be thankful for that—he had in general not much use for them. He said:

I have a low opinion of books; they are but piles of stones set up to show coming travelers where other minds have been, or at best signal smokes to call attention. Cadmus and all the other inventors of letters receive a thousand-fold more credit than they deserve. No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to *know* these mountains. As well seek to warm the naked and frostbitten by lectures on caloric and pictures of flame. One day's exposure to mountains is better than cartloads of books.

Giving other reasons in *Phaedrus*, Plato expresses a similar opinion, although he wrote some half a hundred books of his own, apparently thinking that books are better than saying nothing, and that they last longer than private conversations. The critics, it seems, expect of books what they cannot do, making this the ground of condemnation. Yet if we go back to Goodman's book, *Growing Up Absurd*, we easily see why books gain enemies. Goodman wrote:

Or think of this: an important executive of a very large publishing house has carefully explained to me that the criterion of their printing books, and of the books they choose to print, is the need to keep their several huge printing-presses occupied. That is, will the book promise enough sales (200,000) to warrant setting one of these presses going? and on the other hand, they must manufacture some book or other to keep all their presses going. As an author, I think this example is remarkable; one can turn it like a beryl and examine its prismatic lights.

Our technology exercises other influences. Goodman goes on:

In the elementary schools, children are tested by yes-and-no and multiple-choice questions because these are convenient to tabulate; then there is complaint later that they do not know how to articulate their thoughts. Now Dr. Skinner of Harvard has invented us a machine that does away with the creative relation of pupil, teacher, and developing subject-matter. It feeds the child questions "at his own pace" to teach him to add, read, write, and "other factual tasks," so that the teacher can apply himself to teaching "the refinements of education, the social aspects of learning, the philosophy of it, and advance thinking." But who, then, will watch the puzzlement on a child's face and suddenly guess what it is that he *really* doesn't understand, that has apparently nothing to do with the present problem, nor even the present subject matter? and who will notice the light in his eyes and seize the opportunity to spread glorious clarity over

> the whole range of knowledge; for instance, the nature of succession and series, or what grammar really *is:* the insightful moments that are worth years of ordinary teaching. I wonder how Dr. Skinner's machine would compare in efficiency with the method of Socrates in the *Meno?* . . .
>
> One striking characteristic of modern education is the unanimous disapproval of exploiting the powerful feeling of shame, the hot blush and wanting to sink into the ground out of sight. It is claimed that this injures personal dignity and either makes a child vengeful and not belonging, or breaks his spirit. Youth workers with delinquents make a fetish of protecting self-esteem, as contrasted with the cops' "You young Punk!" Yet in ancient education, e.g., in the Socratic dialogues, this very arousal of shame is a chief device; the teacher greets the hot flush as a capital sign that the youth is educable, he has noble aims. Such a youth has dignity in his very shame.

This was Goodman's way of saying that our officials, managers, and bureaucrats have no knowledge of human nature—that they do not know what is involved in awakening the inner potentialities of the individual. It is also his way of showing that they do not *care* about the individual, but only about how smoothly their system runs. They totally ignore the resources for a higher sort of order in the powerful souls who are always, to some degree, on the scene. As Goodman puts it:

> . . . the way in which our society does do honor to its indubitably great and serviceable men—say, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Einstein, Picasso, Buber—is a study in immunizing people against their virus; it would be a remarkable and melancholy subject for a sociologist. They are transformed into striking images and personalities, and we assign to them the role of being great men. We pay respectful attention to their birthday sayings. They are the menagerie of Very Important People who exist only for ceremonial occasions and to sponsor funds and drives for enterprises in which they will have no further function.
>
> This effectually prevents the two practical uses that we could make of them. We neither take seriously the simple, direct, fearless souls that they invariably are, whether humble or arrogant, to model ourselves after them because they make more sense as human beings; nor do we have recourse to them to please help us when we have need of exceptional purity, magnanimity, profundity, or imagination, giving them a free hand on the assumption that their action is really better. . . .
>
> I understand that to consider powerful souls as if they were a useful public resource is quite foreign to our customs. In a small sense it is undemocratic, for it assumes that some people really know better in a way that must seem arbitrary to most. In a large sense it is certainly democratic, in that it makes the great man serve as a man. Either of these choices, to eschew them or to use them, however, is preferable to creating glamorous images with empty roles.

However promising the undertakings of the bioregionalists, it becomes more and more difficult to accept Goodman's "optimism" in his preface, since for anything good to happen to the people he is talking about, their basic attitudes will have to change. Will anything short of a terrible disaster get such a change going? With tongue in cheek, Goodman talks about how parents bring up their children, these days. He says:

> Wrong training can be a very innocent thing. Consider a father who allows his child to read good books. That child may soon cease to watch television or go to the movies, nor will he eventually read Book-of-the-Month Club selections, because they are ludicrous or dull. As a young man, then, he will eventually be excluded from all of Madison Avenue and Hollywood and most of publishing, because what moves him or what he creates is quite irrelevant to what is going on: it is too fine. His father has brought him up as a dodo.

Well, the fact is that Goodman is optimistic here, too. Only very rare children will resist the temptations afforded by their peers and follow the path of an intelligent dodo. Yet the rare children are the ones who may grow into powerful souls. Do we want to do what we can to help them along? Do we want our boy to turn into a John Muir, a man who had no use for books, or would we rather have him become an Andrew Carnegie, who, in his later years, built hundreds of libraries throughout the United States? And the girls, too: what would we like to expect of them? Would we like a Simone Weil in the family? Or would we settle for a Jane Addams?

REVIEW
A MODERN PILGRIM

WE have for review a new book by Robert Coles, *Simone Weil—A Modern Pilgrimage*, published last year by Addison-Wesley, at $17.95. Dr. Coles is a psychiatrist who teaches at Harvard Medical School and is the author of many books, among them the series, *Children of Crisis.* He has also written about Erik Erikson, William Carlos Williams, and Flannery O'Connor. He has often been quoted in MANAS, perhaps for the reason that when reading him, you realize that he doesn't *sound* like a psychiatrist, but simply an intelligent human being, which, for some of us, is a considerable relief. He uses practically no professional language and never pulls rank on the reader. He is a writer, you conclude, you can trust.

We asked for this book from the publisher for the reason that, through the years, he refers to Simone Weil. We long ago decided that individuals who appreciate Simone Weil are bound to be thoughtful people, or writers worth reading, so we sent for the book. Now, with the book at hand, there is no cause for regret.

Simone Weil is very much of a mystery. She had one of the best minds of the century. She was born in Paris in 1909 and died in 1943 in a hospital in England, of tuberculosis and malnutrition. In her last days she wouldn't eat enough to keep body and soul together, so she had to leave, leading some to say that her death was a suicide, but it seems more reasonable to say that her impulsions, which she followed throughout her life, proved incompatible with its continuance. Dr. Coles finds deliberate self-destruction unreasonable in her case, and explains why.

Simone Weil's genius—and she was nothing less—appeared early, in her work in school. At nineteen she entered the Ecole Normale Superieur, scoring highest in the entrance examination, and at twenty-one she passed her finals and completed her thesis, "Science and Perception in Descartes" (which we have read in complete bewilderment by its difficult intellectual splendor), and in 1931 began teaching in a girls' school. She was already a "radical," labeled a "red virgin" by the newspaper which reported her part in a demonstration of the unemployed in the city where she taught (Le Puy). The educational authorities moved her around, since she now was considered a "dangerous leftist," but they couldn't slow her down. She took time from her academic work teaching philosophy to work in industry, in order to experience personally what working people go through. She found out, setting it down in careful notes that have since been translated. She took on several jobs, one of them operating a milling machine in the Renault works. She was convinced, Coles say, that "hard physical work was essential for an intellectual, lest the mind become all too taken with itself, all too removed from the concrete realities of everyday life, the burdens that rest upon the overwhelming majority the earth's population."

In 1936 she sought work on a farm. Coles says:

> She sought what James Agee saw at work in rural Alabama and what prompted in him a revival of his lyrical sensibility. Simone Weil worked on a farm with great enthusiasm, but she also kept an eye on the rapidly deteriorating European political scene. What would happen, she wondered, to the farmers and factory workers if Hitler and Mussolini and the French Fascists and Stalin, with his murderous forced collectivization, took over more and more territory? In July of 1936 the Spanish civil war started, and rather quickly she was on a train for Barcelona, to do what she could for the republican, the loyalist side. She went to Aragon, near Saragossa, and like George Orwell later, prepared to fight on the side of the anarchist forces. But she would be in Spain only a couple of months. While on bivouac along the Ebro River, she stepped into a pot of oil being heated to cook dinner, and she had to be hospitalized and returned to France. As her biographer Simone Petrement has pointed out, her clumsiness probably saved her life, since the rest of her group was killed soon afterward.

By 1938 she had become "a religiously intense person, Coles says, and visited Italy in the summer.

> One gathers that her parents offered no great opposition to this turn in her life. Not that she was interested in a conversion to Catholicism. In fact, as we shall see, her religious life was as unconventional and idiosyncratic as she herself. She was a solitary seeker of God's company, a mystic, not at all inclined to embrace the regular rhythms of an established church. She had a unique capacity to keep thinking politically, historically, and economically, at the same time embracing theology and religious philosophy. Moreover, her interests reached outside of Christianity. In 1939, as war began to ravage Europe, she was learning Sanskrit, reading the Bhagavad-Gita.

With the Germans on the way, the Weils fled to Marseille, and in 1942 they took ship for New York, but Simone Weil soon went to England where she sought work with the Free French. They invited her to write about what France should do after liberation was achieved, and she produced a remarkable book, *The Need for Roots,* which is a splendid introduction to her powerful and original mind. But now she would eat no more, she said, than the French people under Nazi domination would have, and she became ill with tuberculosis, finally dying in August of 1943, "a thirty-four-year-old woman mourned by only a handful of London friends." Coles reminds us:

> At the time of her death, she had earned no awards that made her famous, no honors, prizes or distinctions of any public kind. She'd gone from school to school in a dismal teaching career. She had published no books and only a handful of articles, and these in obscure periodicals—radical ones at that. She had been the subject of no articles, essays, or biographies. She had a small family who would miss her terribly, and a handful of devoted friends who would be similarly grief stricken. Her ideas impressed few of those around her as practical or useful.

But with time she nonetheless became known. Dwight Macdonald, for example, reprinted her in his magazine, *Politics,* setting some of his readers on fire with enthusiasm for Simone Weil (the future editors of MANAS among them). We should add (here or somewhere) that Simone Weil had an elder brother, André Weil, who had similar genius, becoming one of the best known mathematicians of our time, and who is now, at eighty-one, still at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. And her father and mother, he a successful and well-known M.D., she, devoted to her daughter's welfare, were assimilated French Jews of high cultural background.

We now present a passage by Simone Weil that Dr. Coles has chosen to include in his book. This is her estimate of "modern civilization":

> Work is no longer done with the. proud consciousness that one is being useful, but with the humiliating and agonizing feeling of enjoying a privilege from which one excludes several human beings by the mere fact that one enjoys, in fact, a job. The leaders of industry themselves have lost that naive belief in unlimited economic progress which made them imagine that they had a mission. Technical progress seems to have gone bankrupt, since instead of happiness it has only brought the masses that physical and moral wretchedness in which we see them floundering, moreover, technical innovations are now banned everywhere, or very nearly so, except in industries connected with war. As for scientific progress, it is difficult to see what can be the use of piling up still more knowledge on to a heap already much too vast to be able to be embraced by the minds of even specialists; and experience has shown that our forefathers were mistaken in believing in the spread of enlightenment, since all that can be revealed to the masses is a miserable caricature which, far from forming their judgment, accustoms them to be credulous, and itself suffers the backlash of the general confusion, which partly deprives it of its public, and by that very fact impairs inspiration. Finally, family life has become nothing but anxiety, now that society is closed to the young. The very generation for whom a feverish expectation of the future is the whole of life, vegetates, all over the world, with the feeling that it has no future, that there is no room for it in our world.

Dr. Coles says at the end of his book:

> Hers was a modern pilgrimage; she entertained all our assumptions, presumptions, and anticipations—her journey is ours. She experienced,

> in the few years she knew among us, our buoyancy, our optimism, and soon enough, our terrible discouragement and melancholy. She saw Pandora's box open, revealing its cheap tricks, its deceptions. She saw clear skies cloud up overnight. She saw all the castles we have built in those skies; she entered them, took their measure, and left with tears or anger, bitterness. In the end only one sight was left for her eyes; in the end, that modern pilgrimage so swiftly concluded, she looked upward, affirmed unflinchingly her last hope, the hope of heaven—and died, one suspects, glad at last, glad to be hurrying home. . . .

Yet it would be a mistake to think of Simone Weil as an escapist. Rather we might think that she dove into death just as in her teens, she had dived into life, uncompromisingly courageous, head up, forging on. If there is anything wrong with this book, it is that Robert Coles does not submit enough to his love and admiration for Simone Weil. He seems to go to too much trouble to explain her occasionally puzzling and fractious ways. But to understand such things, one would have to be Simone Weil. One could have lesser aspiration. Our suggestion is to get her books and read them, and also the "affectionate" biography by Simone Pétrement.

COMMENTARY
WHAT IS "SAFE ENOUGH"?

THE new magazine, *World Watch*, which comes out six times a year, and which began publication with the January-February issue, presents a discussion by Christopher Flavin on the likelihood of further disasters to nuclear power plants. Apparently, the optimistic predictions that accidents are unlikely are quite unreliable. Flavin says, for example, that assuming there will be 500 nuclear plants in operation in the late 1990s, present analyses indicate that there will be "one core-damaging accident every 20 years." He begins by noting:

> Through April 25, 1986, the Chernobyl 4 nuclear reactor was one of the world's most reliable. It had the best operating record of any power reactor in the Soviet Union, producing at 83 per cent of capacity in 1985. But on April 26th it exploded, hurling the contents of its radioactive core across Europe.

He also says:

> The accidents at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island can be traced to human mistakes and, more specifically, to the "man-machine interface" at the center of complex technology.
>
> The President's Commission on the Accident at Three Mile Island stated in its 1979 report: "Equipment can and should be improved to add further safety to nuclear power plants. . . . But as the evidence accumulated, it became clear that the fundamental problems are people-related problems and not equipment problems."

Flavin comments:

> The fact that operators helped cause both accidents means that plant control systems and operator-training programs need to be upgraded. It does not mean, however, that the solution is to replace human operators with robots. Computer systems can malfunction or be misprogrammed, and some aspects of plant operation require human judgment. As long as people run nuclear power plants, human error can never be entirely avoided.
>
> Incidents in the United States demonstrate that carelessness and willful violation of operating procedures are not confined to Soviet nuclear plants. Less than a year after Chernobyl, an engineer at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission detailed a longstanding pattern of operators turning off important safety systems unknowingly or through carelessness. Were problems to develop while these safety systems were turned off, then an otherwise manageable situation could have gone dangerously out of control.

He finds the U.S. record "dismal."

> Despite post-Three Mile Island improvements, American nuclear plants are still plagued by problems. There were almost 3,000 plant mishaps and 764 emergency shutdowns in 1985, up 28 per cent from 1984.
>
> The average nuclear plant in the U.S. was shut down six times in 1985, and the industry as a whole averaged two shutdowns per day. More than just a sign of trouble, emergency shutdowns are sudden, violent procedures that stress a nuclear plant's intricate and crucial plumbing, and can impair safety. Although most of these shutdowns were due to minor problems, at least 18 were serious accidents that could have led to core damage. One of nuclear power's fundamental problems is that even the most trivial incident could one day lead to catastrophe, a fact made possible by the enormous complexity of these systems. Significant nuclear incidents have already been initiated by hungry field mice, a worker's loose shirttail and an improperly used candle. . . .
>
> Computer models can help us to understand the risks, but they cannot pass judgment—they cannot tell us how safe is safe enough. The answer to that question will always fall to human beings.

And that is hardly "safe enough."

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

"DON'T TALK, ACT!"

> "How many times do I have to tell you to wash your hands before you come to the table? Now beat it, all three of you. And don't come back to this table until you're clean!"

That's what Mother said to her three older children, who scraped back in their chairs and left the table. And mother went on feeding the one-year-old.

This is a situation described by Rudolf Dreikurs in his book, *Children: The Challenge*, published in 1964 by Duell, Sloan and Pearce. The author comments:

> So why do the three children continue to come to the table with dirty hands? What is their hidden purpose? Well, what happens as a result? What does Mother do? She makes a fuss about it. There is the baby getting Mother's attention. Suddenly she is aware of the dirty hands. Now the other three have her attention. They have defied a rule and gained a response. Mother plays right into their hands and serves their purpose. It would be silly to wash their hands as they have been told! Then they couldn't keep Mother busy with them.

Well, what *should* she have done? Dr. Dreikurs (an M.D.) has an answer. He says:

> If Mother really wants to change the behavior of her children, she will have to *act.* Words are futile. Out of respect for the children she cannot decide what they will do. But she can decide what *she* will do. "I will not sit at the table with you when you have dirty hands." Mother removes the plates and serves no food to people with dirty hands. The second time that Mother finds dirty hands at the table she doesn't even have to say why she does not serve. Now the situation is changed. The children no longer have Mother busy with them. What purpose can dirty hands serve now?

Dr. Dreikurs was an Austrian whose researches in social psychiatry led him to organize the first mental hygiene group in Austria. He was long associated with Alfred Adler. He came to the United States in 1937 and established his practice in Chicago. He was professor of psychiatry at the Chicago Medical School and became the author of eight books. His education apparently increased his practical common sense instead of diminishing it. He said in the present book:

> So many times a parent feels that the words themselves will have a punitive effect. When the child still fails to respond, the parent usually manages a strategic retreat, leaving the child unrestrained, uninhibited, and an uneducated victor. Nothing has been accomplished toward training the child in cooperation. The parent is vaguely aware of this and at the next occasion redoubles his efforts to "teach" the child by "reasoning" with him, with the same results.
>
> In order to pull ourselves out of this dilemma, we must learn to substitute action for words. We must adopt the motto, "At the time of conflict, keep your mouth shut and act." . . .
>
> The only two forms of action that do not express—and therefore do not increase—hostility are the use of natural consequences or, if this is not possible, removal from the situation.

Johnny's mother had just planted some new seedbeds in her garden, but Johnny, a four-year-old, kept running back and forth on them. "Johnny, get out of my garden," she exclaimed, but he continued to run back and forth. He did it four more times, and then sat down to rest. The next day the child stomped over a neighbor's seedbeds. The neighbor said to him, "See here, young man, you are not welcome in this yard. Stay out." "Did he hurt anything?" his mother asked. The neighbor replied, "Of course he did." She went on:

> "He doesn't mind me any better than he minds you. He'd better not come back in this yard." Johnny burst into sobs. "My poor darling," Mother comforted and picked him up. She walked back to her own yard with the child sobbing against her shoulder as she comforted him against "that mean old woman."

Dreikurs says:

> Johnny is a misguided boy who feels that unless he has his own way he has no place. He is a tyrant. He does as he pleases, and no one can stop him—at least not with words! He stopped tromping on

Mother's garden when *he was ready*, after he had sufficiently annoyed her. Mother's continued admonitions fell on deaf ears. Since she does nothing but talk, Johnny continues to do as he pleases.

The neighbor, on the other hand, acted. She led him out of her yard. Of course, she displayed her anger at both Johnnie and his mother. . . . In return, Johnny's mother felt that he was under attack and instantly offered her sympathy, which was certainly unwarranted. If her son has acted in such a way as to provoke anger and hostility, he should be allowed to experience rejection of his behavior rather than to be shielded against it with ill-advised sympathy. . . .

In order to help Johnny out of his mistaken approach, his parents must first realize their own mistaken concept of how to express their love. Then they must act rather than talk. Johnny would have been much more impressed in the garden scene if Mother had taken his hand and led him into the house. "I'm sorry you don't feel like behaving. You may come out again when you are ready." Mother need not offer any further explanation about his behavior or why it is wrong. He knows very well that he shouldn't run over the newly seeded bed.

But Dr. Dreikurs often takes the side of the child. He believes in having *respect* for children—something parents often overlook.

We should never ask a child to do what we would not like to be asked to do. Mother wanted to visit with her friends, so she asked Hazel to leave hers and take care of the distracting baby. This implies gross disrespect for Hazel's rights. Mother should have excused herself and put David to bed.

When we want to make a request of a child, we must be sensitive to the situation and to the capacities of the child. Many children enjoy the responsibility of taking care of younger children. However, there should be an agreement beforehand as to when this responsibility is to be assumed. Naturally, if Mother is in a spot where she really needs extra help, she may call on the older child.

We can always be suspicious of a situation in which we "demand" that a child do something "right now." This is an authoritative approach and is usually an unreasonable request. The child's response, "Aw, she's always hollering at me to do something," indicates a poor relationship lacking in harmony and cooperation. When we make our requests few and far between, and enlist the child's help rather than command his service or obedience, we promote friendliness and a satisfactory relationship.

Another aspect of "respect."

In the store, Mother met a friend whom she hadn't seen since Cynthia was born. "How old is she now?" "Eleven months." "Oh, isn't um dust the sweetest ittle sing?" The friend chucked the baby under the chin and clucked at her.

The simpering "baby talk" and the condescending "simple talk" which we use with young children indicate our feeling that children are inferior. We speak to them in a manner and with a tone of voice that we would *never* use with a friend. If we make it a practice to listen to ourselves we can soon discover the amount of disrespect we show our children. We are prone to talk down to them, to splash false gaiety and exude excitement to stimulate interest, or speak with saccharine sweetness to win cooperation. Once we become aware of errors in our tone of voice we are in a position to change.

As readers probably have noticed by now, Dr. Dreikurs seems a bit "old-fashioned" in his approach to the relations between children and adults. But this shows only in his language, reflecting, perhaps, his Old World background. Most of the time, however, it is his maturity that makes us think of him in this way. Early in the book he says:

There has been a great deal written and said about "molding a child's character"—as if a child were a bit of clay and we had the job of shaping him into a socially acceptable human being. This is a gravely mistaken concept. . . . Earlier than we realize, children shape and mold themselves, their parents, and their environment. A child is an active and dynamic entity. He shares equally in establishing the relationships between himself and each other person in his environment.

FRONTIERS

Building Community

IN the September-October 1987 *Community Service Newsletter,* Burt Berlowe tells the story of a successful effort by people living in Minneapolis to develop a self-reliant community. He writes:

> In 1970, a group of residents of Minneapolis' Cedar-Riverside neighborhood started a "backyard" club to distribute whole natural foods to each other. They purchased food in bulk wholesale and divided it up on the rear porch of a community couple's home, Alvin and Diane Oderman. In less than a month, word had spread to over so more people who expressed an interest in joining the effort. The club soon moved to the basement of a community center then leased a storefront from an area college. There they set up a bustling, volunteer-run business, North County Coop, the first food cooperative in the Twin Cities. Within a few months, North Country had helped seven food co-ops start elsewhere in the city, while folk musicians in the community played benefits at no cost to raise money for the enterprises.

By this pioneering effort, Burt Burlowe says, the CedarRiverside—also known as the West Bank—neighborhood has become a model for cooperative neighborhood organization. "It is populated by a generation of residents who have worked innovatively and cooperatively towards community control through food and housing co-ops, alternative energy and medical care, down-home music and grassroots political activity." . . .

> The West Bank currently has a co-op grocery and pharmacy, several hundred units of resident-owned housing that contain alternative energy and community gardens, as well as a locally-bred festival and theater district and a community center/health clinic that has become a focus of neighborhood cultural and political activity. In recent years, the neighborhood has run energy workshops and educated residents on how to organize on their own behalf. While successfully limiting a massive high-rise development, West Bank grassroots organizations have simultaneously built a home-grown or people's community steeped in the concepts of populism, democracy and self-determination.

It is natural for people to wonder, "Why isn't there something like that going on in *my* neighborhood?" Well, it's a big country. Such activities begin and take root slowly and usually get little or no publicity from the local press. The germs of community regeneration begin to stir in very small groups made up of one or two individuals who have reached a certain level of maturity and who begin by talking with their friends. Then, perhaps, as in the West Bank neighborhood, the idea of getting together finds friends and a small, beginning program takes off. News of the achievement of these people may be spread by little papers like the *Community Service Newsletter* and people in other towns and cities are moved to get going for themselves. Burt Berlowe relates:

> There are several significant aspects of the West Bank's evolution. Individually, it has marked the onset of a new age for a community with a history of counterculture, often militant, political activity. The Bohemian atmosphere of this neighborhood remains but it has been accompanied by a calmer, more conciliatory and positive approach, focusing on community-building that has become a local model.
>
> On a larger scale, Cedar-Riverside is a pioneer of what has become a nationally popular idea—the fashioning of a self-reliant community. In cities throughout the country, grassroots groups are developing and running their own neighborhoods In some cases this has meant the actual construction of new sustainable communities, where energy conservation, alternative technology, urban agriculture, community-controlled housing, businesses and transportation function interdependently and humanely, and income is recycled back into the community.

Berlowe now turns to something that has happened in California:

> One current example is Marin Village, California, which includes 1900 dwellings in five distinct neighborhoods, all with private gardens and terraces connected by pedestrian walkways and bikepaths. It has over 50 acres in agricultural and energy production, an abundance of on-side recreation, sewage treatment and disposal, mini-buses, a village community center, shopping district and employment center along with local networks in home care, crime prevention and food production.

> According to its founders, the main objective of Marin Village is to establish a sense of neighborhood and a "greater opportunity to do collectively what people have previously done separately." In some ways this concept is based on the garden city movement of the 1890's, the idea of a greenbelt city, patterned after kibbutzes of communes that define an economic, political and philosophical basis for small community.
>
> Most of the contemporary efforts to build the self-reliant or "eco-community," as some have called it, focus on working within existing neighborhoods, much as was done in Cedar-Riverside, to build a truly home-grown civilization. One of the popular examples of this concept is a process called "regeneration," which emphasizes using resources already in the community to rebuild it from within. Regenerative economic development is defined as the creation of goods and services through the building of community and work that is in harmony with nature. It is an economy of regional interdependence based on self-reliance in agriculture, ecology, politics, technology and theology.

Berlowe recalls the work of a modern pioneer in community, Arthur E. Morgan, who was the founder of the Community Service group in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which publishes the *Community Service Newsletter* from which we have been quoting. Berlowe says:

> As far back as 1942, Arthur Morgan's book, *The Small Community*, set forth some of the principles of an effective small community. These included not only advocacy of specific policies like emphasizing local economy and community-based culture, but also less tangible ideas like increased neighborliness, helpfulness, critical inquiry, respect for individuality, leadership development and equal opportunity for all. These concepts have been put into practice in countless examples of contemporary community organizing.

The address of Community Service Inc. is P.O. Box 243, Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387. The membership contribution is $15 a year, which includes subscription to the *Newsletter*.