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A THEORY THAT BREAKS DOWN

A QUESTION we have been puzzling about in recent weeks might be set by proposing a certain choice: Suppose one had to decide between the resources for culture and education that existed at the beginning of this century, and what we have learned, or believe we have learned since—which should we choose? Since 1900 we have been favored with all sorts of scientific discoveries—revolutionary discoveries, they are often called—which have radically changed at least the external characteristics of our lives. All we know of electronics came after 1900, and what we know, or think we know, about the potentialities of the atom, resulted from discoveries made since that time. Yet it must be admitted that all this progress in science has not really improved our lives or made us any wiser. But great claims have been made for the progress of the twentieth century. If we choose to rely on all these findings, from 1900 on, we should nevertheless be without the classics of philosophy, religion, and literature of both East and West.

On the other hand, if we choose the cultural riches which were acquired up to 1900, while letting the scientific discoveries go, we would still have the resources of a good education. There are a few advocates and defenders of those cultural riches—called by one of them the Great Tradition—and since we seem to be entering a period when there is more chance of his idea being taken seriously, we call upon him as a champion of the past. He is Albert Jay Nock, and his work to be quoted is *The Theory of Education in the United States*, first published in 1932 and reprinted in 1949 by Regnery. We begin with his report of a conversation he had with an Italian, "one of the most accomplished men in Europe."

> He said he had been in America several times, and had met some very well-educated men, as an Italian would understand the term; but they were all in the neighborhood of sixty years old. Under that age, he said, he had happened upon no one who impressed him as at all well-educated. I told him that he had been observing the remnant of a pre-revolutionary product. . . . that he should easily understand what that meant; that our educational system had been thoroughly reorganized, both in spirit and structure, about thirty-five years ago, and that his well-educated men of sixty or so were merely holdovers from what we now put down, by general consent, "as the times of ignorance.". . . .
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> "But," I went on, "our younger men are really very keen; they are men of parts, and our schools and universities do an immense deal for them. Just try to come round one of them about the merits of a bond issue or a motor-car, the fine points of cake-icing or retail shoe-merchandising, or the problems of waste involved in bricklaying or in washing dishes, and you are sure to find that he will give a first-rate account of himself, and that he reflects credit on the educational system that turned him out." My friend looked at me a moment in a vacant kind of way, and presently said that proficiency in these pursuits was not precisely what he had in mind when he spoke of education. "Just so," I replied, "but it is very much what we have in mind. We are all for being practical in education."

What was education like in the United States before, say, the last decade of the nineteenth century? Nock answers:

> The progress through school and college did, in fact, remain quite strictly disciplinary up to the revolutionary period which set in, as well as one can put a date to it, about thirty-five years ago. Now, it was of the very essence of this disciplinary character—the very fifth essence, as a medievalist might say—that all the knowledge canvassed in these fixed curricula should be of the order of formative. Instrumental knowledge, knowledge of the sort which bears directly on doing something or getting something, should have no place there; it should have as strict an institutional quarantine raised against it as cities raise against a plague. This discrimination was quite carefully regarded in our institutions until the revolution of thirty-five years ago broke it down.
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> I suggest that we look for a moment at the disciplinary fixed curricula made up of purely formative studies, to see what it actually came to in practice. Let us look at it in this way: let us suppose that an educable person found good schools and a good college, where all circumstances were

> favorable—there were such—what would he do, and what might be expected of him? After the three R's, or rather for a time in company with them, his staples were Latin, Greek and mathematics. He took up the elements of these two languages very early, and continued at them, with arithmetic and algebra, nearly all the way through the primary, and all the way through the secondary schools. . . . When he reached the undergraduate college at the age of sixteen or so, all his language-difficulties with Greek and Latin were behind him; he could read anything in either tongue, and write in either, and he was thus prepared to deal with both literatures purely as literature, to bestow on them a purely literary interest. He had also in hand arithmetic, and algebra as far as quadratics. Then in four years at college he covered practically the whole range of Greek and Latin literature; mathematics as far as differential calculus, and including the mathematics of elementary physics and astronomy; a brief course, covering about six weeks, in formal logic; and one as brief in the bare history of the formation and growth of the English language.

Putting off the obvious objection—first, that modern students will not put up with these rigors—we now refer to what Nock speaks of as the *formative* character of these studies:

> The literatures of Greece and Rome comprise the longest and fullest continuous record available to us, of what the human mind has been busy about in practically every department of spiritual and social activity; every department, I think, except one—music. This record covers twenty-five hundred consecutive years of the human mind's operations in poetry, drama, law, agriculture, philosophy, architecture, natural history, philology, rhetoric, astronomy, politics, medicine, theology, geography, everything. Hence the mind that has attentively canvassed this record is not only a disciplined mind but an *experienced* mind, a mind that instinctively views any contemporary phenomenon from the vantage-point of an immensely long perspective attained through this profound and weighty experience of the human spirit's operations. . . . These studies, then, in a word, were regarded as formative because they are *maturing*, because they powerfully inculcate the views of life and the demands on life that are appropriate to maturity and that are indeed the specific marks, the outward and visible signs, of the inward and spiritual grace of maturity.

If we admit the force of Nock's argument on the formative power of a classical education then we are free to admit that by the end of the nineteenth century, the teaching of Latin and Greek had had its day in the United States. The language classes were on the whole dull and unimaginative, according to histories of education. The land grant colleges were filled with students who were interested in "practical" objectives and there were teachers eager to teach farm boys new methods of agriculture and related subjects. The generation that would start out in the twentieth century felt that Greek and Latin had nothing to do with what they wanted to learn. They wanted, in fact, practical training instead of education. As Nock puts it:

> The revolutionary principle was the identification of training with education; the revolutionary process was the sweeping away of the discipline set by the Great Tradition and the construction of another procedure to replace it.
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> In making up a procedure to replace the discipline of the Great Tradition, we were accidentally affected by certain social phenomena appearing at this time, which struck us with all the force of novelty. One was the general preoccupation with natural science, brought about by an unprecedented irruption of invention and discovery. Science touched the popular sense of awe and wonder. In a memorable conflict with many of the dogmatic constructions of organized Christianity, it had come off easily first best; and this had immense popular significance, such significance as is hard for us now even to imagine. Men's minds were full of the marvels of science; their imaginations were busy with its alluring prospect of further marvels. Here, then, was something out of which to construct a procedure. Children should not grow up ignorant of these matters, they should be taught "something about" the natural sciences. This idea was plausible, none could have been more so, and considering the great general preoccupation with the wonders of invention and discovery, none could have been more acceptable.

But no one, so far as we know, drew attention to the fact that education was now divorced from the moral content of the Great Tradition, and those that thought some about this were confident that with the discipline of science, we would no longer need it. It took us about fifty years—until 1945—to realize that science itself was without moral guidance, and that now we had nothing to take the place of the character-forming tendencies of the classical curriculum. Other things have happened to the

college curriculum besides its adoption of the scientific-mechanist scheme. Speaking of the past, Albert Jay Nock says:

> The interest of the students was not the first interest of the institution. Putting it roughly, the scholars were busy about their own affairs, but because the Great Tradition had to be carried on from generation to generation, they allowed certain youngsters to hang about and pick up what they could; they lectured every now and then, and otherwise gave the students a lift when and as they thought fit. The point is that the whole burden of education lay on the student, not on the institution or on the individual scholar. Traditionally, also, the undergraduate college put the whole burden of education on the student. The curriculum was fixed, he might take it or leave it; but if he wished to proceed bachelor of arts, he had to complete it satisfactorily. Moreover, he had to complete it pretty well on his own; there was no pressure of any kind on an instructor to get him through it, or to assume any responsibility whatever for his progress or to supply any adventitious interest in his pursuits. The instructor usually did make himself reasonably helpful, especially in the case of those whom he regarded as promising, but it was no part of the institution's intention or purpose that he should transfer any of the actual burden of education from the student's shoulders to his own, or contribute anything from his own fund of interest in his subject by way of making up for any deficiency of interest on the part of the student.

Nock visited an English class of a friend teaching in a Middle Western University, finding the class busy with only eighth-grade work. Later he told the president of another college, after he had watched an English class that belonged in grade school, that he was surprised by this. "Yes," said the president, "but don't you think we ought to do something for these poor fellows who come to us so imperfectly prepared?"

> "Certainly I do," I said. "Fire them."
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> "Ah yes," he replied, "but then, you see, we should not have any students and would have to shut up shop."
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> I hinted as delicately as I could that this might not be in the long-run an absolute misfortune, as I remember, I may have quoted Homer's pertinent line on the death of Patrodus. He admitted the force of this, but said, "We are doing a poor job, I know, but we are doing something as best we can, and I think a little better than most institutions of our kind; so we hope it is worth while."

Another bit of dialogue which comes toward the end of the book is in its way equally illuminating:

> Four or five years ago I was passing through the lobby of a hotel in New York, in company with an acquaintance who had been one of the world's foremost financiers, but was then retired. There was a broker's office in the hotel and we stopped for a moment to look at the quotations. After we had watched them for a while, my friend said to me in an undertone, "This is a filthy business; we are merely gambling in the sweat of a lot of poor men." He was very rich; he did not care if he never turned another penny in his life. Moreover, he no longer had any associations or commitments to consider, and no friends who would have thought a whit less of him for the public expression of his honest opinion on any subject. . . . I urged him to come out with it . . . I thought the public expression of his views would do some good, as I still think it might, very probably would, have done. But he never spoke out; and for no conceivable reason except the inhibitions put upon him by this curious, illogical—as far as I can see, indefensible—sense of loyalty to an economic system which he knew was thoroughly bad, for which he felt a corresponding contempt and disgust, but out of which he had done well.

Here, one could say, was an educated man who needed no instruction in right and wrong, yet played the moneymaking game because he was good at it and was too proud to say to the world what he thought about how he became rich. And what about the college president who admitted that his school was doing a poor job—but after all, one must think that he *liked* being a college president.

What should have happened at the end of the nineteenth century, when concern for the classics was dying out, is that educators, if they themselves were educated in any true sense, should have recognized the moral abyss their "revolution" would leave in their plans for the future. That recognition is slowly dawning now, but after all the weaknesses accumulated in this century have been institutionalized. They were already institutionalized in 1932 when Nock's book was first published.

Looking back over his book, we came across a passage about English which deserves repetition:

> Forty years ago, our English-speaking students learned English quite informally; it was our own tongue, we were bred to a native idiomatic use of it, such a use as none but a native can ever possibly acquire. To say that English was not taught in our higher institutions means merely that everybody taught it. No matter what the stated subject under discussion might be, if we expressed ourselves inaccurately, loosely, unidiomatically, we heard about it at once and on the spot, and in terms that forcibly suggested a greater carefulness in the future. As for English literature it was our literature, our concern with it was proprietary; everything in it was open to us, and the critical judgment the standards of taste and discrimination that we applied to it, were such as had been bred in us by our long acquaintance with the literatures of Greece and Rome. No one dreamed of *teaching* English literature; indeed, I do not see how it can be effectively taught in any formal fashion, how a really competent acquaintance with it can be brought about in any other way than the way it was brought about in us. Why, then, is it that "courses in English" should hold so large a place in the newest type of institutional organization? They do so for a very simple reason. Under the conditions that we have been describing, great masses of ineducable people come into our institutions.

This, in a way, is the end of our discussion. Mr. Nock can no longer be useful to us, since he has said what he had to say and it is wholly unacceptable to the planners and designers of our educational system. They have been driven by necessity to turn educational centers into places of training which people go to in order to find jobs, not because they want to become wiser, more mature, more capable as humane individuals. With some few exceptions, the planners shrug off Mr. Nock and his analysis as elitist and therefore not needing attention. They would rather give allegiance to the democratic dogma that all people are equally educable while apologizing for the failures of the successive systems they design, than to admit the truth of Nock's indictment, even though he has proved his case up to the hilt. Nock is not opposed to training schools for the work in the world that people set out to do; he is only opposed to calling it "education" in the sense that he uses the term. As he puts it:

> . . . there is something monstrous and shocking about the conferring of an academic degree in the liberal arts, on the strength of such qualifications as . . wrestling, poultry-raising, advertising research, clothing decoration. . . . If I should come here and try to impress you by saying that my institution turned out so-many hundred Masters of Arts last year, and would turn out so-many hundred more this year, I should expect you to reply somewhat thus: "Yes, that is all very fine, very good, but what are they like? To bear the degree of Master of Arts is an immense pretension, and *noblesse oblige*—how are they justifying it? Are they showing disciplines and experienced minds, are they capable of maintaining a mature and informed disinterestedness, a humane and elevated serenity, in all their views of human life? Do they display invariably the imperial distinction of spirit, the patrician fineness of taste, which we have been taught to associate with that degree of proficiency in the liberal arts? We cannot see that kind of discipline to which you say they have been subjected has any such bearing. Gymnastics, copy-editing, stenography, food-etiquette, home laundering, and such like, are commendable pursuits, and we are all for having them well and freely taught, but we cannot see that they tend in the least towards what we have always understood an advanced degree in the liberal arts to mean.

If, on the grounds of Mr. Nock's contentions, we could get rid of the systematized pretense of modern education, we would take the first step in evolving a "Great Tradition" of our own, and perhaps begin to produce some classics of our own time. Great problems would remain. We would still have to understand what is the best education for those whom Nock disposes of as ineducable, since they have capacities which run in other directions which in no way shut out the quality of moral awareness—which is much more than an intellectual ability—an education which would protect them from becoming part of the mass which is exploited by the clever manipulators who are lacking in moral sensibility. But if genuine culture could be restored at the level of the educable, the whole tone of our civilization would be changed, benefitting all its members. For this Mr. Nock has pointed the way: We must stop trying to live according to a plausible set of beliefs which cannot be made to work.

REVIEW
THREE BOOKS OF VALUE

THREE books came in for review this week, one from India, one from the Sierra Club, and one from the University of California Press. The one from India by Bharat Dogra is called *Empty Stomachs and Packed Godowns* (Godowns are warehouses), is published at $10 and may be ordered from the author at D-7 Raksha Kunj, Paschim Vihar, New Delhi. 110063, India. The book from the Sierra Club is *Suncell* by Christopher C. Swan ($17.95) and is about photovoltaic cells which the author believes will be the major source of energy by the year 2000—a multibillion dollar industry. This book is clearly written and is a course in electronics. The third book is *Keeper of Concentration Camps,* largely concerned with the career of Dillon S. Myer as head of the War Relocation Authority and later as head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, by Richard Drinnon. The price of this book is $24.95.

Why consider these books together? Because our awareness of these three very difficult reports, at the same time, tells us something about both the world and ourselves. Some kind of lesson seems pounded home by the maturity this sort of reading demands of us. To learn about the hunger which afflicts half the population of India makes us undergo a change that is not temporary but permanent. Here is a people which once had the highest civilization on earth, attained to reaches of the mind in epic literature and religious philosophy which have never been equalled, yet is now reduced to the squalor of extreme poverty and pain.

Then, the invention of the photovoltaic cell may turn out to be a development that will serve as the economic foundation of another sort of society, transforming the relationships of individuals, creating the conditions of economic independence without the authority of centralized power, provided that this extraordinary potentiality is recognized and made to serve the ends which common sense indicates.

Finally, Drinnon's study af what, as everyone now admits, was the cruel nationalism and injustice of the incarceration of the Japanese in this country during World War II, brings home the fact that under the emotional disturbance of war Americans were capable of actions which violated all their principles and even their common humanity—again a lesson which we should not become able to forget.

Are we, one wonders, about to grow up? Is it possible to spread throughout our culture the realizations that these writers have accomplished in themselves? Are we able to change our acquisitive society into a cooperative society? Is it possible to become individuals who are unable to live calmly and enjoyably in the presence of so much anguish in other parts of the world? That this is not possible for some is well established; what about the rest of us?

These questions may have to remain unanswered for a time, but meanwhile we may become at least generally familiar with the realities these books report. We turn, then, to the books.

In his study of conditions in India, Bharat Dogra examines the familiar claim that the green revolution has solved India's food problem, pointing out that while there have been substantial gains in the production of food grains, this has been of little assistance to those who need help most, by reason of their impoverished condition. He says:

> It is becoming increasingly clear that while it may be possible to make limited increases in foodgrains production by importing chemical fertilizers (or importing technology and machinery for local production of inputs), it is quite another matter to actually send foodgrains to the houses and hearths of the hungry and malnourished people who need it the most. Foodgrain is available in the market but most people are too poor to afford it in adequate quantities, so a lot of people remain hungry while the foodgrain stocks increase. . . .

A lot of writing on the food system of India—a food system of 750 million people—ignores this basic reality of Indian economy. Selective data on agricultural production are flaunted to give a false picture of the success of the so-called green revolution. Even when the reality of widespread hunger is recognized, closely related and very relevant problems of the shortage of drinking water, environmental deterioration over vast stretches, crises of green revolution areas, glaring failure of land-redistribution efforts, etc., are ignored. In this book an effort is made to present the food situation of India from the point of view of people most in need of food, to present some neglected aspects of the food situation and to take a hard look at the factual situation without succumbing to the myths which vested interests are trying to spread all the time.

Who are the hungry of India?

Indian population for 1986 has been estimated at 761 million. The urban population has been estimated at 192 million. In other words, only 25 per cent of the population lives in urban areas. The proportion of hungry and malnourished people is also lower in urban areas compared to the rural areas. Thus the overwhelming majority of the hungry in India live in rural areas. Sixty per cent of the country's total workforce finds its livelihood in the agricultural sector. In view of these facts, it is in the villages and in the agricultural sector that we should look for the majority of the hungry and malnourished people in India.

Whereas the bottom 47 per cent of farm households operate only 7 per cent of the land, the top 19 per cent of the farm households operate 60 per cent of the land. This is the unequal base and agricultural development that has been taking place. . . .

Statistics from country-wide diet surveys collected by the National Nutrition Monitoring Bureau reveal that nearly half the households surveyed in different states of India were deficient, even on the basis of a lowered yardstick adopted by the Bureau about a decade back. According to the same yardstick, only less than 15 per cent of children below 5 years of age could be considered as being in a normal state of nutrition; the rest suffered varying degrees of undernutrition.

There are more than 190 pages in this book, all devoted to the conditions which lead to hunger on the part of the great mass of the population. Dogra's last chapter, which is short, is devoted to solutions. The major need is a just distribution of land; another fundamental is intelligent management of India's forests, and still another is the restoration to food products of nutritional elements that have been removed, through, for example, the polishing of rice, which experts say should be banned. All the recommended reforms would easily become possible, given the right attitudes.

In *Suncell* Christopher Swan heralds the advent of a revolutionary source of energy, already under progressive development in Southern California. He says on his first page:

> Until recently, discussion of energy technology centered around nuclear power, coal, and alternatives within the general realm of "solar energy." As late as 1980, photovoltaic cells were considered to be a far-out technology that would not be commercially viable until some time in the next century. Now, however, in discussions about electrical-generation technology, nuclear power is no longer considered an option and coal is seen as possible but not very exciting. The big questions have become, How soon are photovoltaic cells going to become widely competitive? and How will the spread of PV systems alter the entire business of generating electricity?
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> In essence, photovoltaics, or "PVs," allow the direct transformation of incoming solar energy, light, into electricity. No fuel, no moving parts, no smoke, no noise—and no necessary relationship between efficiency and scale—are involved. The event that permits this transformation occurs on an atomic scale within a thin wafer or coating. . . .
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> Photovoltaics present the possibility of a rapid transition to a solar economy with more than 80 per cent of the existing buildings in *the world* becoming self-sufficient in electricity. Photovoltaics in combination with a modicum of other renewable resources, may replace nearly all electrical generation by fossil or nuclear fuels within 35 to 50 years.
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> Most photovoltaic cells are wafer-thin objects between 2 and 5 inches across, usually made of silicon and thin wire that will generate electricity when placed in the sun. . . . Photovoltaics are inherently modular and endlessly expandable, they can be as efficient on your thumbnail as on the scale of a city block, and they can be assembled into all

manner of systems, in any circumstances, and on practically any scale almost anywhere in the planet.

The only production drawback is toxic chemicals used in making pure silicon, but this, Swan says, should be easily solved. His book is well written and easy to understand. His subject is one of the few really encouraging things on the horizon. More than any other thing, this development will, he says, "dramatically reduce the disparity between the rich and the poor, between industrialized and nonindustrialized."

The best introduction to the spirit and content of Drinnon's book on Dillon Myer, who headed the War Relocation Authority in charge of the camps where we sent the Japanese, is a passage which comes early in the book:

> Undeniably, Myer's career reached out laterally to become an expression of Western racialism, nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism and in that global context added confirmation to Hannah Arendt's insight into "the banality of evil." Yet just as undeniably, as I have emphasized, Myer was as American as the Stars and Stripes, and this is of necessity a study of him in that narrower context. Born in the white Protestant heartland, he was a walking repository of the Puritan virtues and traditional hostility to the very idea of the survival of separate peoples with separate cultures. Always sure he did good, he did great wrongs. How did he come to be? How did he come to be a member of the "helping professions"? Why was he made the keeper of hundreds of thousands of souls? Who were his allies and his enemies? Who were his victims? Do such questions matter?
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> Obviously, I think they do and hope that readers will too before they put the book down.

The three books briefly noted here set the problem of human character and identity.

COMMENTARY
A REVEALING TREND

IN the *Nation* for May 9, Herbert Kohl, educator and writer on teaching children, recorded in a brief article on teen-age suicide:

> According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the rate of teen-age suicide has doubled since 1972. The current annual rate is 400,000 attempts, 6,000 of which end in death. That averages out to fifteen dead teen-agers a day. Those figures don't include the suicides of runaways, or those that are reported as automobile accidents, or drug overdoses.

Why have these young people given up on the idea of a future life? What is missing in our society which leaves them hopeless? Kohl has given much thought to this question, since the tragedy of youthful suicide has been brought home to him by personal experience. Students he has worked with have ended their lives because of the oppressions of racism and institutional indifference to their needs. Some of these youngsters are black, some Hispanic, some white. It may happen anywhere. Kohl writes of recent cases:

> On March 11 four teen-agers from Bergenfield, New Jersey, locked themselves in a garage, turned on the car motor and killed themselves. The following week four youths in Ohio took their lives, and another couple in Bergenfield tried to kill themselves in the same garage that was the scene of the earlier suicide.

The four—two girls and two boys—had either dropped out of school or had been suspended. They were called "burnouts" by their classmates. Three of them were out of work. Kohl says:

> The four youngsters who decided not to live were depressed and, as teen-agers, were considered sources of trouble and burdens to society. They were marginal and, what is worse, disposable. There was no attempt to reach out to them. There was no attempt to change school programs to meet their needs or change economic priorities to give them places in the world. It is easier to demand things of teenagers than to serve their needs. . . .

Intentionally or not, we have made the world into a very unfriendly place. There is not enough unexacting sympathy and concern in the world. Our love is not uncalculating, our affections come almost as part of a "deal." Teachers tike Herbert Kohl understand this, see its effects.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

WHAT CHILDREN ARE LIKE

THE most valuable part of John Holt's *How Children Learn* is the last few pages of the book, where he summarizes what he has been endeavoring to get across to the reader. His point is simple enough. It is that most of us adults have forgotten what it is like to be a child and no longer understand the child's way of learning and knowing. Parents and probably most teachers suppose they know what is missing in a child's understanding of the world and the things in it, and set out to fill the gaps by simply *telling* him. This, you could say, is "rational," but is usually wrong. The child's idea of what is missing is not ours, with the result that what we tell him is not what he needs to know. We, in the glory of our adulthood, think that the answers we give the child speak to his condition, but the fact is that we do not, actually cannot, understand his condition, which is that of an adventurous explorer intent upon discoveries which we regard, upon coming across them, as irrelevant to the process of growing up. So we condescend, try to be "patient," but eventually become quite irritated when he shows indifference to our explanations.

Holt, however, has acquired the modesty of a genuine teacher. He knows that he does not know, and has found out ways to free the child's explorations so that his progress can come about in ways that are natural to him. In his last chapter in *How Children Learn* (1967) he generalizes what he has learned from children:

> The child is curious. He wants to make sense out of things, find out how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment, do what he can see other people doing. He is open, receptive, and perceptive. He does not shut himself off from the strange, confused, complicated world around him. He observes it closely and sharply, tries to take it all in. He is experimental. He does not merely observe the world around him, but tastes it, touches it, hefts it, bends it, breaks it. To find out how reality works, he works on it. He is bold. He is not afraid of making mistakes. And he is patient. He can tolerate an extraordinary amount of uncertainty, confusion, ignorance, and suspense. He does not have to have instant meaning in any new situation. He is willing and able to wait for meaning to come to him—even if it comes very slowly, which it usually does.
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> School is not a place that gives much time, or opportunity, or reward, for this kind of thinking and learning. Can we make it so? I think we can, and must. In this book I have tried to suggest, very briefly, how we might do it. . . . What is essential is to realize that children learn independently, not in bunches; that they learn out of interest and curiosity, not to please or appease the adults in power; and that they ought to be in control of their own learning, deciding for themselves what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

Children are not perfect; they have the natural qualities and virtues. of human beings. It is those natural qualities that the teacher must learn to work with—the qualities that Holt describes. When the children are young, they simply don't respond to bad teaching, but as they get older they learn the advantages of "pleasing" the teacher, and this is the beginning of the distortion, if not corruption, of their lives. That is, they discover the value of conformity and the price they pay for independence. So, too often, they submit to these temptations and start playing parts. Or, in some cases, they may simply become rebellious, which means that while they retain their independence, they cut themselves off from various constructive influences. Yet these are the spunky ones who, if they ever get balance, usually accomplish something in the world.

Holt has had critics who said to him:

> "Aren't you asking children to discover and re-create, all by themselves, the whole history of the human race?" It would be easy to dismiss the question as silly, except that so many sensible and serious people ask it. What trips them up is this word "discover." They act as if it meant "invent," that is, discovery for the first time. But this is not what I mean, or any educators mean, when they talk about the importance of letting children discover things for themselves. We do not ask or expect a child to invent the wheel starting from scratch. He doesn't have to.

The wheel has been invented. It is out there, in front of him. All I am saying is that a child does not need to be *told* what wheels are and what they are for, in order to know. He can figure it out for himself, in his own way, in his own good time. In the same way, he does not have to invent the electric light bulb, the airplane, the internal combustion engine—or law, government, art, or music. They, too, have been invented, and are out there. The whole culture is out there. What I urge is that a child be free to explore and make sense of that culture in his own way. This is as much discovery as I ask of him, a discovery that he is well able to make.

Another question asked is:

"Aren't there certain things that everyone ought to know, and isn't it our job, therefore, to make sure that children know them?" This argument can be attacked on many fronts. With the possible exception of knowing how to read, which in any case is a skill, it cannot be proved that any piece of knowledge is essential for everyone. Useful and convenient, perhaps; essential, no. However, the people who feel that certain knowledge is essential do not agree among themselves on what that knowledge is. The historians vote for history; the linguists, for language; the mathematicians, for math; and so on. In the words of Jimmy Durante, "Everybody wants to get into the act." Moreover, the knowledge changes, becomes useless, out of date, or downright false. Believers in essential knowledge decreed that when I was in school I should study physics and chemistry. In physics we used a reputable and then up-to-date college text that announced on page 1 that "matter was not created or destroyed." Of my chemistry, I remember only two or three formulas and a concept called "valence." I mentioned valence to a chemist the other day and he laughed. When I asked what was so funny, he said, "Nobody ever talks about valence any more; it's an outmoded concept." But the rate of discovery being what it is, the likelihood that what children learn today will be out of date in twenty years is much *greater* than it was when I was a student.

What Holt is really after is helping the child to grow to maturity in a natural way, which is something quite different from transmitting the curriculum to the child as though it could be some sort of substitute for growing up. Holt puts this clearly:

My real reason, however, for believing that the learner, young or old, is the best judge of what he should learn next, is very different. I would be against trying to cram knowledge into the heads of children, even if we could agree on what knowledge to cram, and could be sure that it would not go out of date, even if we could be sure that, once crammed in, it would stay in. Even then, I would trust the child to direct his own learning. For it seems to me a fact that, in our struggle to make sense out of life, the things we most need to learn are the things we most want to learn. To put this another way, curiosity is hardly ever idle. What we want to know, we want to know for a reason. The reason is that there is a hole, a gap, an empty space in our understanding of things, our mental model of the world. We feel that gap like a hole in a tooth and want to fill it up. It makes us ask How? When? Why? While the gap is there, we are in tension, in suspense. Listen to the anxiety in a person's voice when he says, "This doesn't make sense!" When the gap in our understanding is filled, we feel pleasure, satisfaction, relief. Things make sense again—or at any rate, they make more sense than they did.

When we learn this way, for these reasons, we learn both rapidly and permanently. The person who really needs to know something, does not need to be told many times, drilled, tested. Once is enough. The new piece of knowledge fits into the gap ready for it, like a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Once in place, it is held in, it can't fall out. We don't forget the things that make the world a more reasonable or interesting place for us, that make our model more complete and accurate. . . .

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.

This sounds easy, and it ought to be, but it turns out to be quite difficult, mainly because we don't understand children very well. This was Holt's genius—to understand the child.

FRONTIERS

News from Oxfam

WE have from a MANAS reader a copy of *Oxfam America News,* with reports about the hungry and the suffering throughout the world. In this 1986-87 Winter issue, the lead story tells what is happening in Sudan, which has, we learn, "one of the most liberal immigration policies in the world." Already Sudan is harboring more than a million refugees. The story goes on:

> Many refugees from Ethiopia wind up in camps like Wad Sherife—an expanse of tents on a sun-baked plain prone to violent dust storms. In the spring of 1985, at the height of Ethiopia's four-year drought, up to 1,000 people a day were crossing the border and entering Wad Sherife.
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> Shortages of food and water, poor sanitation, and overcrowding in camps like Wad Sherife created critical health problems. Last year and the year before, death rates were high, particularly among children. But an innovative healthcare program funded by Oxfam America combined emergency aid with longer-term development.
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> "Malaria, diarrhea, and measles are the illnesses I treat most often," said Hussein Kemol, a bright, 26-year-old refugee from Eritrea. Kemol, one of 25 Eritrean health-care workers trained under the program, was supervising the entire staff of home health visitors at Wad Sherife when I [Sylvia Sukop, who writes the report] visited the camp in September. . . . Last fall, many of the refugees and healthcare workers at Wad Sherife were transferred to Shagarab, to the south.
>
> Among the 46,000 refugees in Shagarab is Gebra, an Eritrean who lost all his livestock and possessions in the devastating 1984-85 drought. Although the drought is over now a 25-year-old war continues between the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and Ethiopian government forces. Even if his cattle and tools could be replaced, Gebra said he would not want to go back to Eritrea because of the war. "The army would bomb them," he said bluntly. "Besides, where would I put my children?"

What is Oxfam? The name comes from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded in England in 1942 and since has spread to other countries. Oxfam America is an international relief that funds self-help projects and disaster relief in poor countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and provides educational materials and programs from Americans on issues of development and hunger. Oxfam America is a non-sectarian, nonprofit agency that neither seeks nor accepts U.S. government funds.

Another article in *Oxfam America News* describes the growth and also a setback in the Tools for Peace and Justice campaign of Oxfam in Latin America, helping particularly displaced civilians in war-torn Nicaragua.

> As war and economic recession continue to afflict the region, the Tools campaign is a vital means for North Americans to assist rural people who are hardest hit by these crises: impoverished small farmers and displaced peasants.
>
> In 1986, throughout the United States, the number of participating individuals and groups grew to 1,700, compared to 400 in 1985. With their help, the campaign raised more than $300,000. Overall, Oxfam America grants in 1986 totaled $607,000 to Central America, and $164,000 to the eastern Caribbean.
>
> The setback came in August, when the U.S. Treasury Department, on advice of the State Department, denied our application for a license to ship $41,000 worth of agricultural tools and emergency housing supplies to Nicaragua. One year before, our license application to send a similar shipment to the same organizations had been approved.
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> "To condone the waging of war against civilians is bad enough," said Executive Director John Hammock, referring to U.S. support for contra rebels in Nicaragua. "But to block a shipment of critically needed supplies to civilian war victims is unconscionable."

Following is another contra story by Jethro Pettit, an Oxfam representative in the Caribbean.

> At 4 a.m. on Sept. 8, more than 100 contras attacked a small cooperative of displaced peasants in Wilikon, in northcentral Nicaragua.
>
> Defending the Luis Enrique Mejia Cruz Cooperative were 10 militiamen—heads of the farming families who form the community. They soon ran out of ammunition and were forced to

> retreat, covering their families, who fled into the surrounding hills. The co-op's president, Juan Campos Lopez, held out for two hours before he was killed. . . . Only one mouth before the attack, the cooperative had been founded by the peasant families displaced by the war waged by contra rebels. The settlement comprised 10 huts made of bamboo, palm leaves, and corrugated steel roofing . . . funded by Oxfam America and Bread for the World in West Germany.

A brief report tells the story of Oxfam's Third World crafts shop which did a brisk business for a month in a store-front near Harvard Square. The manager, Anuradha Desai, said:

> "We make sure that Third World artisans get a fair share of the profits from the sales of their products. We also try to tell Americans making purchases about the lives and crafts of people in developing countries."
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> The shop featured a variety of textiles, handbags, jewelry, and other crafts from 40 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The sales, to support Oxfam America projects overseas, exceeded $20,000 during the first three weeks. By Christmas, virtually the entire stock had been sold out.

The success of the project was due to a lot of interdependent cooperation.

> Operating costs were minimal. A real estate firm, the Gunwyn Company, donated the space. Thirty-five volunteers pitched in to staff the shop throughout the month, doing everything from building the shelves to waiting on customers. Among the volunteers were a pediatrician, an art historian, and a software analyst who told Anuradha she wanted to work in the shop during her lunch hour because '51'm tired of feeding my own stomach. I want to help other people."

Oxfam shops in England were the inspiration for this project. "Some 800 Oxfam shops throughout Britain have helped to make Oxfam a household word in that country."