VOLUME XXVIII, NO. 18
APRIL 30, 1975

THE WORK OF HUMANS

COMMENTING on "Old and New Dramas" (the lead article for Jan. 29), a reader wonders if the fears and insecurities of the present are not mainly the result of reduced fulfillment of enlarging expectations:

> Starvation and famine are not new. In the past, however, they were endured. In our time there is genuine solicitude for starving peoples even by nations whose customary concerns are those of a military and political nature.
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> Anxiety is not a newly formed emotional condition. Man has always suffered a sense of transiency and ambiguity, both states of feeling that create psychical disquiet.
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> Expectations can be and have been a splendid manifestation of man's drive to overcome adversity in an effort to achieve both mental calm and material affluence. Still, in this effort it is essential to realize that we have no contracts with life that while we must all do what we can to achieve the goals we set for ourselves, it is not ordained that we achieve them. We have become so accustomed to the notion that life owes us freedom from every kind of pain that we protest the moment we suffer and feel that we have been personally maligned. Thus, we seek panaceas, and immediate ones, from every kind of duping device that offers us emotional health; we set about amassing as much money as we can, despoiling the environment in the meantime, frequently exploiting our fellowmen and embarking on wars when we feel that certain conditions which we set down are not met. Now, in the present global economic crisis, there is a great cry that we are not as happy as we want to be, and that we do not have enough of the world's goods. So the air is filled with woe. . . .
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> Life is hard, and we must now come to grips with it. It cannot be the same ever again. The plastic world of the last several decades had no foundation. It was rootless—its essential attribute was perishability, it offered no clues to a meaningful permanence. This was as true of objects as it was of values. . . . the GNP had to burst. The useless objects that were manufactured in such abundance finally turned out to be just that—useless. The contrived consumer wants that a dehumanized technology created with the sole goal of profits have been exposed as empty promises.
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> Our task, then, is to get rid of the brittle, insubstantial nonsense that cluttered up our lives and assert the real basis on which a decent life can be lived. We must learn to be strong. We must learn to suffer affliction and deal with it. Our expectations must not be directed toward an accumulation of things and of easeful days, but in a strengthening of ourselves as hard-working men and women, bent on making a decent livelihood and helping others where we can, and then providing time for pleasures whose purpose is not to dull us with time-erasing manifestations but to lead us to reflective mental and psychical delight.

There is a lot to chew over in this letter. "It is essential to realize," our reader says, "that we have no contracts with life." Nonetheless, it is added, we must do what we can to reach the goals we set, even when lacking assurance that we will achieve them.

Well, *why* should we do what we can if there is no contract? We think it immoral for a man to have to work for nothing, and if there is no fulfilling reward for our best efforts, doesn't that make the universe an amoral place? The interesting thing is that whether or not we find an answer to this question, there is some kind of mandate in our being for agreeing with the proposition that we ought to do the best we can. We'd *like* to have a rational foundation for striving, but the most admirable human beings strive anyway, no matter what. And we honor them for it. As William the Silent said: "It is not necessary to hope in order to undertake, or to succeed in order to persevere."

The Stoic philosophers declared that men should do their very best, simply in order to embody the dignity of being human. The promise of reward, in either this world or the next, was for them not a factor worth considering.

We recognize, however, that *something* is getting done, even in obvious failure, when there has been heroic or strenuous effort. We say this, not because we can measure what gets done, but because we feel it. We honor and remember Socrates, who failed to improve the morals of the city of Athens. And if the critics are right who say that Christianity has never been tried, we may call Jesus a failure, too; yet we revere him. Of Western mythic figures, Prometheus may be the most memorable, but it is his attempt to enlighten and uplift mankind that we honor, not his success.

There are certain psychological problems or contradictions here. We are saying that an effort is more important than a result. But an effort which brings no result can hardly satisfy the human longing for rationality. Even so, it must be admitted that strong effort brings us the *feeling* of validity, or a *sense* of fulfillment. The man or woman who *tries,* who works unceasingly for some high purpose or cause earns at least respect, including self-respect. When we are asked to explain this effect, we say that the individual has forged a noble character, has been true to him or her self. And in elevated moments we declare that that is enough!

How about traditional social arrangements in relation to these questions? One thinks, of course, of the castes of India, and of the high obligations assumed by knights in the Middle Ages. Kshatriyas and Brahmins, by definition, lived without expectation of material reward. Knights committed themselves to put down evil, unseat tyrants, succor damsels in distress, and to seek the holy truth—all activities for which tradition promised no contractual compensation. The Brahmins were teachers, and beggars.

Not everyone is able, ready, or willing to assume such obligations—hence the grades or classes of human beings in ancient or traditional forms of social order. Can we say that the best human beings feel that there *is* some sort of subjective contract to fulfill—an agreement or commitment they make to themselves? Whatever we say, it remains a fact that the people who accept and practice William the Silent's dictum are comparatively few. And also that those who *pretend* to the callings of *noblesse oblige,* and then demand high pay, have been more numerous—their dissimulations resulting, in time, in revolutions and, after the eighteenth century, in spread of the idea that all human beings are equal, having essentially the same potentialities, and therefore the same rights.

What is the meaning of "rights"? It is difficult—perhaps impossible—to give content to the idea of rights without proposing various sorts of contractual arrangements. The question we are struggling with is, then, whether or not "rights" are something given in the natural order of things. The question has no easy answer, yet a strong moral emotion makes us assert that everyone—every man, woman, and child—has certain clearly defined rights, simply from being in existence: the right to decent conditions, to a job or schooling, to opportunities for self-improvement, and to freedom to choose the kind of life each one desires.

To whom do we address this declaration about "rights"? Obviously, we say it to each other. It is a very broad declaration affirming simply that whoever becomes responsible for the practical arrangements of life in society must recognize that these are the conditions which ought to be met.

This is where we are now, on the subject of "rights." We use a great deal of rhetoric in speaking of rights, but have little understanding of what the term implies. We *feel* about rights, but do not know much about them. "Rights," it seems clear, is a derivative conception.

Derived from what? What makes us care about rights, demand them of the universe, or from the political improvement of the universe known as the State?

The idea of rights seems utterly dependent upon our perception of needs. We have wants

and needs which cry out for fulfillment, so that declarations of rights follow from our determination to make sure of the satisfaction of needs. No one would think of rights unless he felt needs.

Needs, however, are various, and distinguishing between different sorts of needs may throw some light on the question of why it is that the most excellent of human beings go on doing what seems to them right or fitting, without laying claim to any reward or right to compensation. Here the division of human needs into two great classifications—Deficiency needs and Being needs—by A. H. Maslow provides immediate clarification. Deficiency needs are needs suggesting a *quid pro quo*—one thing for another. You work for a living. You get paid for what you do. The laborer is worthy of his hire. The law of compensation applies. It must, we say, be just. Justice is allotted according to a scale.

Being needs are of another sort. They do not come in finite quantities. The need to love cannot be thought of as having a one-to-one relation with anyone or anything. The joy of creation is not measurable, nor can it be given by one human to another. The devoted labors of an altruistic person have no price, nor can such a man be hired to do what he is already determined to do, no matter what anyone else may do. Self-respect is not a commodity, integrity cannot be callibrated. The generous emotions—sympathy, empathy, compassion—are by nature unexpectant and uncalculating.

William T. Harris, the first American Commissioner of Education, put the distinction well: The goods of the material world are diminished by being shared; the goods of the mind and the heart increase when they are given away.

What happens when the goods of the material world are dealt with in the spirit of mind and heart? You could say that, almost miraculously—as with the multiplication of the loaves and fishes—there is a transfer of the qualities of the spirit to material things, as in Ruth Benedict's synergistic society. "Synergy," says Buckminster Fuller, "means behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts taken separately." A fine metaphysical neutrality, but you get what he means.

Maslow wrote a good deal about the hierarchy of human needs. It becomes evident that the notion of "rights" has validity in relation to the lower needs—the needs which, when they are denied, make it difficult or impossible for us to function as healthy organisms. It is common sense to make the satisfaction of these needs a matter of rights, however difficult it may be to provide for their universal fulfillment. Part of the difficulty is practical, but some of it obviously arises from widely differing conceptions of what a human being really needs or ought to have. How do you draw the line between necessities and conveniences, between conveniences and luxuries? Who is competent to draw such lines, and where would he get his authority?

It is a reasonable hypothesis that rights are the legitimate of[spring only of responsibilities. Conceivably, when all the work of the ecologists is complete—which would be when we have thorough knowledge of the needs and requirements of all aspects of Nature, and an equal knowledge of man in all his functions and possibilities—we shall be able to define responsibility adequately, so that, in the natural flow of events, all "rights" (needs) will be taken care of. It also seems likely that with a general fulfillment of this sort, the idea of "rights" will play little part in the kind of thinking we shall then pursue. Rights would be obsolete in a world of fulfilled responsibilities.

This utopian vision raises a question that is seldom considered or discussed, yet which may be basic to all our present problems. It is: What is the role of human beings in the world?

This may be a dangerous question to ask—dangerous by reason of the temptation to offer simplistic answers. No matter what we conclude about the "role" or "calling" of human beings, as a

general proposition, the fact remains that individual humans will not agree unless they find themselves fulfilled by what they do. In other words, the abstract statement of role will have to be general enough to accommodate a wide variety of activities. One man wants to build houses, another finds joy in repairing Volkswagens. Or inventing them. This woman wants to teach school, and another writes books about the need for changes in eating habits. There are even people who believe it is good to go to war. And others, like Gandhi and Schweitzer, are devoted to working for peace. And so on. Ad infinitum.

Well, there are those who maintain that man has, or ought to have, a "spiritual" purpose in life—which is, or is sometimes held to be, to get out of it by appropriate means. "Freedom from rebirth" is a refrain familiar to those who study Oriental philosophy. This seems echoed in the Christian teaching in St. John's Revelations (iii, 12), where it is said that one who "overcometh" will become a pillar of the temple and "shall go no more out." Is the world, then, no more than a castle of illusion, a vale of tears—a place of imprisonment as Plato said, or a vulgar, third-rate emanation as the Gnostics maintained—or is something happening here worth doing and worth talking about?

These are times when earthly, material goals are being widely questioned. Even the West now agrees with Wordsworth:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Wordsworth says we have made a mess of ourselves by our way of living in the world, and the ecologists point out that we have also made a mess of the world. So there is reviving interest in various mystics who declare that there are means for abolishing the world, or for shutting it out entirely from our consciousness, which may amount to the same thing. These reproaches and counter-proposals, however, at least in the form commonly presented, deal chiefly with the correction of errors and the avoidance of further trouble. They do not tell us much about the role of man in the world. They do not say what is man *for*.

There are a few answers, or hints of answers. The Hopis maintain that man is the glue that holds the universe together—that a human being who does all he ought to do in his daily life establishes rhythms of harmonious function that affect all the world for good. Writing of the folk traditions of old Europe and the East, Richard Hertz (in *Man on a Rock)* spoke of the "songs which people used to sing during the ceremony we call work." They made their daily tasks into collaborations with transcendental fulfillment:

> Chinese peasants, moving into the mountains every morning to gather tea, sang a hymn in honor of their enterprise, which they compared to a pilgrimage to the Western paradise. The Volga boatmen "accepted the universe," and the women of Madagascar acted, when they cultivated the rice fields, like bayaderes trying to please a god.
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> Miguel Covarrubias, in his book on Bali, describes the bandjars, or cooperative societies as we would call them in our dry idiom; they watched the magic of work unfold with proper art and majesty in their Indonesian eden, when night fell they sent the arpeggios of their tireless orchestras through fragrant vales. . . . The medieval fraternities of workers in Flanders, toiling in the frozen music of crepuscular cities, rolled the stone from the tomb of their narrow space; their triumph over the refractory material of the world was not mere routine, but was understood by them in its vast metaphysical connotations. Work interpreted as spiritual discipline gave these people a superhuman patience, detachment from results.

Here, at least, is the feeling of the role of man as comprehender, as interpreter—and in his highest function the orchestrator of natural harmonies—a function tragically neglected and often reversed in recent centuries. Yet the idea strikes a responsive chord. What if the meaning of human life is most completely attained through raising all that one touches, uses, relates to, to a higher level of awareness and interdependent function? What if man's business in life—in both

science and religion—is to extend the radius of conscious reciprocity throughout the world?

Speaking as a champion of wilderness areas, Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac:*

> To the laborer in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was the wilderness adversary to the pioneer.
>
> But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished, because it gives definition and meaning to his life.

There is profundity here, since Leopold's observation reflects the two aspects of human life. Man is both laborer and philosopher. He must struggle with and in the world, and at the same time he needs to love and cherish it. There may be a sense in which he is the world's meaning, or the climax of the world's meaning, but only as, through reflection, he comes to understand the world as the scene of a great drama of unfolding life—life for which he becomes the focus of self-awareness. The laborer has his deficiency needs, his requirement of contracts, of valid exchanges and just rewards. But the philosopher emerging from within in the laborer gives the work with the world a transcendental reference, a spiritual counterpoint.

John Keats rebelled against the idea of the world as a vale of tears. He thought this a circumscribing notion:

> Call the world if you please "The vale of Soul-making!" . . . I say *"Soul-making"*—Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences at work or sparks of divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.

This would account for most of the painful tensions in our lives. There are, Emerson said, "two laws discrete, Not reconciled,—Law for man, and law for thing." Soul-making, then, must be the process of reconciliation. If we suppose that souls are made by transubstantiation of the stuff of the world, bringing the raw material of things to a higher pitch of being by man's intervention, then work in the world has both a practical and a higher meaning. So long as the two meanings remain unreconciled, humans suffer pain and endure ordeals. The desire to escape is reductionism. Embracing the task and learning to comprehend the tensions is the choice of those distinguished individuals who have never greatly cared about their "rights" and who seldom bother to justify themselves to the rest of the world.

REVIEW
NEW MYTHS FOR OLD

IN April, 1972, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas gave his dissenting opinion to the decision in the Mineral King case, maintaining that natural objects such as trees, streams, lakes, and meadows have rights which may be defended by appropriate spokesmen or guardians. He argued:

> The river, for example, is the living symbol of all the life it sustains or nourishes—fish, aquatic insects, water ouzels, otter, fisher, deer, elk, bear, and all other animals, including man, who are dependent on it or who enjoy it for its sight, its sound, or its life. The river as plaintiff speaks for the ecological unit of life that is part of it. Those people who have a meaningful relation to that body of water—whether it be a fisherman, a canoeist, a zoologist, or a logger—must be able to speak for the values which the river represents and which are threatened with destruction.

The Court had held that the Sierra Club, which sought an injunction, had no standing to argue against the ecological and aesthetic effects of the plan of the Disney Enterprises to develop the Mineral King Valley (in Tulare County, California) into a $35 million recreational resort. The members of the Club, the Court ruled, would not be damaged by the development. In his dissent, Justice Douglas contended that threatened natural objects themselves have rights, giving them "standing" in the courts, and that persons intimately concerned with their welfare are entitled to represent them. He said:

> Those inarticulate members of the ecological group cannot speak. But those people who have so frequented the place as to know its values and wonders will be able to speak for the entire ecological community.

Justice Douglas' dissenting opinion (he was joined in dissent by Justices Blackmun and Brennan) was widely quoted in the press, and while the majority opinion went against the Sierra Club, the Court allowed the Club to amend its complaint to show definite grounds of interest in Mineral King. A preliminary injunction was then granted by the district court, to remain in effect until future decision of the issue by trial.

But what about the idea of recognizing trees and streams, forests and valleys as legal entities with rights? Does this conclusion really have the support of reason? If, for example, a river has the right to have its ecological relationships preserved—its waters kept pure, its flora and fauna respected—does, then, the river also have responsibilities? What if a river drowns a human being in its angry waters during a time of flood? Should the river be prosecuted? And does a river have interests of its own, or are these all derived from human values?

These questions and considerations have attention in a book by Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing?*, published last year by William Kaufmann, Inc. (Los Altos, Calif. 94022). There is reason to think that Justice Douglas found support for his opinion in this engrossing essay, since he cites it in his first paragraph, in which he maintains that environmental objects should be able "to sue for their own preservation." Prof. Stone's paper "Should Trees Have Standing?" was first published in the spring of 1979 in the *Southern California Law Review* (Vol. 45, No. 2), and since the Supreme Court Mineral King decision was delayed until April of that year, Justice Douglas was able to read it before writing his dissent.

In his foreword to the published book, Garrett Hardin quoted from Prof. Stone (who teaches law at the University of Southern California) the account of how the essay came to be written:

> For some time I had been thinking about the interplay between law and the development of social awareness, emphasizing to my students that societies like human beings progress through different stages of sensitiveness, and that in our progress through these stages the law—like art—has a role to play, dramatizing and summoning into the open the changes that are taking place within us. While exemplifying this in class and trying to imagine what

> a future consciousness might look like, I began to discuss the idea of nature or natural objects being regarded as the subject of legal rights.
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> The students were—to say the least—skeptical. After all it is easy to say, "Nature should have legal rights," but if the notion were ever to be more than a vague sentiment, I had to find some pending case in which nature's having legal rights would make a real operational difference.
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> It was in this context that I turned to the Mineral King case, then recently decided (against the Sierra Club) by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. . . This, I saw at once, was the needed case, a ready-made vehicle to bring to the Court's attention the theory I was developing. Perhaps the injury to the Sierra Club was tenuous, but the injury to Mineral King—the park itself—wasn't. If I could get the courts thinking about the park itself as a jural person—the way corporations are "persons"—the notion of nature having rights would make a significant operational difference—the difference between the case being heard and (the way things were then heading) thrown out of court.

Well, Prof. Stone's article did get the courts to thinking about the park—and trees and streams—as "jural persons," even though this was not the basis of the district court's later decision. It accomplished this objective through the step-by-step reasoning now available for inspection in his book.

He first establishes that the conception of a legal entity or jural person is culturally determined. There was once a time when eminent jurists thought the idea of a corporation having "rights" ridiculous. Chief Justice Marshall expressed this view on two occasions. But now we take for granted the rights of corporate business institutions. Why not, then, the rights of a tree or a lake?

In arguing in behalf of the legal rights of all so-called "natural objects—indeed, of the natural environment as a whole"—Prof. Stone invites us to consider that even a human life is similarly constituted of a flow of many influences, exchanges, and borrowings. A man is not simple and single, but, like nature, a constellation of motives, interests, and objectives.

There are problems, of course. The spokesman or "guardian" of a grove of trees or a mountain lake may have difficulty in defining or setting limits to the "interests" of such natural objects. Do we really know the needs of an ecological community? Indeed, biologists continually remind us of how little we understand of these things. But here common sense enters, since nature, while without words, still has powers of communication. A man's lawn informs him when it needs water:

> The lawn tells me that it wants water by a certain dryness of the blades and soil—immediately obvious to the touch—the appearance of bald spots, yellowing, and a lack of springiness after being walked on; how does "the United States" communicate to the Attorney General? For similar reasons, the guardian attorney for a smog-endangered stand of pines could venture with more confidence that his client wants the smog stopped, than the directors of a corporation can assert that "the corporation" wants dividends declared. We make decisions on behalf of, and in the purported interests of, others every day; these "others" are often creatures whose wants are far less verifiable, and even far more metaphysical in conception, than the wants of rivers, trees, and land.

The homocentric scale of values behind our legal ideas becomes evident in a discussion of action for damages. If, for example, a paper mill pollutes acres of oyster beds, causing the oysters to die out, the mill can be required to create an oyster bed of the same size in another area. This is not unreasonable. The builders of the Alaskan pipeline, Prof. Stone says, "are apparently prepared to meet conservationists' objections halfway by re-establishing wildlife away from the pipeline, so far as is feasible." But suppose, on the other hand, that a seaside nuclear generator warmed the nearby ocean enough to kill off a rare species of sea urchins sensitive to heat: would we then tax ourselves indefinitely to restore them to being? What, indeed, is the natural or rather the market value of sea urchins? "How can we capitalize their loss to the ocean, independent of any commercial value they may have to someone else?"

Fortunately, the law has learned rough and ready ways of meeting such objections. As Prof. Stone puts it:

> Decisions of this sort are always hard, but not impossible. We have increasingly taken (human) pain and suffering into account in reckoning damages, not because we think we can ascertain them as objective "facts" about the universe, but because, even in view of all the room for disagreement, we come up with a better society by making rude estimates of them than by ignoring them. We can make such estimates in regard to environmental losses fully aware that what we are really doing is making implicit normative judgments (as with pain and suffering)—laying down rules as to what the society is going to "value" rather than reporting market evaluations. . . . All burdens of proof should reflect common experience; our experience in environmental matters has been a continual discovery that our acts have caused more long-range damage than we were able to appreciate at the outset.

Toward the end of his book Prof. Stone suggests that the time has come for us "to give up some psychic investment in our sense of separateness and specialness in the Universe." By thinking about the subtle balances of life which are disturbed when water is polluted, we may gain the capacity to recognize the fragile delicacy of natural processes. And from this growing sensibility there might evolve a new myth of man's relationships to the rest of nature.

> I do not mean "myth" in a demeaning sense of the term, but in the sense in which, at different times in history our social "facts" and relationships have been comprehended and integrated by reference to the "myths" that we are co-signers of a social contract, that the Pope is God's agent, and that all men are created equal. Pantheism, Shinto and Tao all have myths to offer. But they are all, each in its own fashion quaint, primitive and archaic. What is needed is a myth that can fit our growing body of knowledge of geophysics, biology and the cosmos. In this vein, I do not think it too remote that we may come to regard the Earth, as some have suggested, as one organism, of which Mankind is a functional part—the mind, perhaps, different from the rest of nature, but different as a man's brain is from his lungs.

In his conclusion Prof. Stone returns to the question of the Supreme Court's decision in such matters as Mineral King, proposing that the true work of the Court may be as beneficent *agent procateur:*

> . . . the Court may be at its best not in its work of handing down decrees, but at the very task that is called for: of summoning up from the human spirit the kindest and most generous and worthy ideas that abound there, giving them shape and reality and legitimacy. Witness the School Desegregation Cases which, more importantly than to integrate the schools (assuming they did), awakened us to moral needs which, when made visible, could not be denied. And so here, too, in the case of the environment, the Supreme Court may find itself in a position to award "rights" in a way that will contribute to a change in popular consciousness. It would be a modest move, to be sure, but one in furtherance of a large goal: the future of the planet as we know it.

COMMENTARY
NEW AND GOOD STUFF

IN last week's "Children," Harold Goddard tells about a little girl who said to him, "If cows could talk, nobody knows what new stuff would come into the world."

This is the really big thing that is now happening. The rest is just argument and detail. For the fact is that cows have found a spokesman, and not only cows. In his Mineral King dissent (see Review) Justice Douglas gives voice to hitherto speechless forms of life—"the pileated woodpecker as well as the coyote and the bear, the lemmings as well as the trout in the streams."

How are cows learning to talk? Through Frances Lappé, as related in Frontiers, cows—beef cattle, we call them—are making it plain that we are raising too many of them, more than the grain of the world can support and still supply enough food for everyone. When a book is published with the title, "Diet for a *Small* Planet," new stuff in the way of an enlarging perspective has come into the world. We are beginning—just making a start—at thinking holistically, which means responsibly. That is, a few articulate people are beginning to see the needs and balances of the world as a whole. This is certainly new. Spreading the idea around will doubtless take time, since it requires of us what Aldo Leopold said can happen only to the laborer in repose—when he is able to open his philosophical eye and see that the world is something to be loved and cherished. Who, we are likely to say to ourselves, has time for that?

The point is, by now we *should* have time.

Thinking about the world as a whole is essential to the suggestion of our correspondent (see page 1): "Our task, then, is to get rid of the brittle insubstantial nonsense that cluttered up our lives and assert the real basis on which a decent life can be lived." And this, too, is a new spirit in thinking about human existence. No one—not any more—talks eagerly of the delights of getting and spending. Only in retrospect, and with embarrassment, do we say anything about our expert ways of "conquering" either nature or other men. The young recently made themselves heard emphatically on the crime of conquering other people. The idea made them sick at heart and rebellious in spirit. The forays against Nature by acquisitive man have meanwhile become notorious, and her forces and resources are beginning to show a real grasp of the language we know best—economics—and presenting irresistible arguments.

So, as the little girl predicted, some new stuff is coming into the world.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THROUGH LAURA'S EYES

IN the *Atlantic* for February, Susan Bagg uses a television program as a reason for calling attention to the "Little House" series of books for children, which Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote to tell about her life on the frontier in the covered wagon days of the 1870s. One of these eight books—*Little House on the Prairie*—was made the basis of a recent NBC series, of which Susan Baggs remarks that even if the programs are not very true to their source, they are warmhearted and presumably "introducing thousands of people to the books." Mrs. Bagg's article is especially timely so far as we are concerned, since we have just borrowed a set of the "Little House" books from a teacher who admires them, and need some help with a review.

Mrs. Wilder began her series in 1939 with *Little House in the Woods.* Eight volumes appeared during the next eleven years—"entrancing tales of a vanished way of life." They report the experiences of a child, a girl, and a young woman—her travels with her family, the homes they made and lived in—in Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and finally the Dakota Territory where she married Almanzo Wilder. Mrs. Bagg says:

> Quiet adherence to the routines of daily life abuts adventure and hardship. The adventures are sensational, yet they are told without flourish. They are tucked into their place, not altering the discipline and merriment of the family. Their private values remain untouched by whatever outside forces appear. There must have been doubts over the treacherous life through which Pa led his family. But Laura celebrates the twinkle in her father's eye and the rare independence of his spirit.

Mrs. Bagg relates that she hadn't known about these books until she read them to her daughter; she then discovered how much she enjoyed them, too—probably because "the story is told through the eyes of Laura; each book seems to duplicate in turn the age Laura was at the time the story takes place." The prose grows up with the girl. The charm and the power of these tales, Mrs. Bagg suggests, come from the intensity of the recollections of a woman who began writing at the age of sixty-five:

> Mrs. Wilder remembered what it was like to be so fiercely involved in each moment that its transience is beyond recognition. She is describing, in the voice of the young Laura, the most precious instinct of childhood: intense feeling toward the present. . . . Hemingway said that what matters most is what one leaves out, and this dictum is true with a vengeance of a children's book author—or at least one who would deal in reality. Mrs. Wilder's carefully controlled relinquishment of her adult sensibility makes the life she once led available to every child. And yet the adult voice behind the child's never condescends; she simplifies, omits what may be too difficult for a young listener to understand but never shirks an experience. The result is a prose that is always dignified and restrained, often eloquent, a rarity in children's literature. Gradually you understand your pleasure: you are reading something that promised to be entertainment and that turns out to be art.

What do the books tell about?

> You learn how to slaughter a pig (and to play ball with a pork bladder), how to train oxen, milk-feed a pumpkin, build a door with a latchkey, dig a well. You meet bears, Indians, wolves, locusts. There are blizzards in which you can't see your hand in front of your face, hailstones that knock a man out, tornadoes that strip off a boy's clothes. You know what it's like to sleep on the floor of the prairie, to learn in a one-room school house, to treasure glass windows, to go hungry.

Years after Mrs. Wilder's death (at ninety in 1957) her diary, written in 1894, was discovered. It tells how she and her husband and their daughter Rose traveled in a wagon from a drought-stricken farm in South Dakota to a new beginning in Mansfield, Missouri, in the Ozarks. We mention this book mainly for the frontispiece photograph of a twenty-seven-year-old woman who has the face of a Valkyrie. People who come to admire her books for children might want to look at it (in *On the Way Home,* Harper & Row, 1969).

In *Little House on the Prairie,* a scary time came when Pa rode home one evening, just after putting up their log cabin, his mare in a lather because of the fifty buffalo wolves he had encountered. That night there wasn't much sleeping because the wolves were outside, howling. Only a quilt separated the family from the animals, which had formed a ring around the house. The house was built, but there was no door, just an opening with bedding hung to close it. The family looked out of a window at the wolves in the moonlight:

> They were just in time to see the big wolf lift his nose till it pointed straight at the sky. His mouth opened, and a long howl rose toward the moon.
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> Then all around the house the circle of wolves pointed their noses toward the sky and answered him. Their howls shuddered through the house and filled the moonlight and quavered away across the vast silence of the prairie.
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> "Now go back to bed, little half-pint," Pa said. "Go to sleep. Jack [a bulldog] and I will take care of you all."
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> So Laura went back to bed. But for a long time she did not sleep. She lay and listened to the breathing of the wolves on the other side of the log wall. . . . She heard the big gray leader howl again, and all the others answering him.
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> But Pa was walking quietly from one window hole to the other, and Jack did not stop pacing up and down before the quilt that hung in the doorway. The wolves might howl, but they could not get in while Pa and Jack were there. So at last Laura fell asleep.

Why wasn't there any door? Pa hadn't had time to make one. The next day he hitched up his team and went after the timber. When he brought back the logs, Laura became his helper, handing him tools. The door was going to be an old-fashioned kind because Pa was out of nails. After he sawed out the verticals and cross-pieces and smoothed them, he drilled holes in them both.

> Into every hole he drove a wooden peg that fitted tightly.
>
> That made the door. It was a good oak door, solid and strong.
>
> For the hinges he cut three long straps. One hinge was to be near the top of the door, one near the bottom, and one in the middle.

The story tells just how the strap hinges were fastened to the door with pegs, and how the latch was made so that it would fall into place when the door was closed. Next he devised the latch string so that the door could be opened from the outside. Why all this detail? How could Laura remember back close to sixty years in the past? Well she had helped her father with the tools, but what makes the details essential is thinking about those wolves. Exactly how to make a good door becomes very important when there are fifty wolves outside, wanting to get in.

> The door was finished. It was strong and solid, made of thick oak with oak slabs across it, all pegged together with good stout pegs. The latch-string was out; if you wanted to come in you pulled the latch-string. But if you were inside and wanted to keep anyone out, then you pulled the latchstring in through its hole and nobody could get in. There was no doorknob on that door, and there was no keyhole and no key. But it was a good door.

Next Pa built a door for the barn, the same as the house door except that there was no latch-string. The two horses, Pet and Patty, didn't know much about latchstrings. So Pa made a hole through the door and at night ran a chain through the hole and then around through a crack in the wall. He padlocked the two ends of the chain together so that nobody could get into the stable.

> That night at supper Pa said to Ma, "Now, Caroline, as soon as we get Edward's [a neighbor's] house up, I'm going to build you a fireplace, so you can do your cooking in the house, out of the wind and the storms. It seems like I never did see a place with so much sunshine, but I suppose it's bound to rain sometime."
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> "Yes, Charles," Ma said. "Good weather never lasts forever on this earth."

FRONTIERS

Response to the Food Crisis

[This is a much condensed version of an article by Ed Lazar, who works with the New England Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee, 48 Inman Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. Single copies of the complete article are available at 15 cents.]

HOW can concerned people respond to the worldwide food crisis? Frances Lappé shows in *Diet for a Small Planet* that there is simply not enough land or water to sustain a meat-based diet for the present world population. A meat- and milk-centered diet requires approximately three and a half acres of land per person, while a plant-protein diet requires approximately a fifth of an acre; and with present population there is estimated to be only one acre of food-producing land available per person.

In our country, cattle once foraged the grassy plains and were producers of protein which otherwise would not have been available. With the shift to large-scale livestock industry, cattle are now fed grain-rich diets. It requires from eight to ten pounds of grain to produce a pound of beef. During the period of enormous surplus grain harvests in the U.S. this practice of feeding some 78 per cent of our annual grain supply to animals did not get much attention; but now, with the spiralling cost of bread and grain and the worldwide grain shortage, it is time to evaluate our use of grain for meat production.

North Americans now each consume about 1850 lbs. of grain per year, most of it indirectly through meat products. People in South Asia consume directly about 400 lbs. of grain. Since 1949, the U.S. population has more than doubled its meat consumption—from 50 lbs. to 115 lbs. a year per person. In other words, our present level of meat consumption is not an inherent part of our culture. It is estimated that if North Americans can decrease the meat they eat by 10 per cent, it will free some million tons of grain—enough to feed 60 million people.

I do not suggest instant total vegetarianism, but rather the beginning of change toward a meatless diet, starting with what one is able and prepared to do. My suggestion for non-vegetarians is to plan for meatless meals on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday—a midweek vegetarian diet which allows room for experiment. *Diet for a Small Planet* makes a vegetarian diet attractive as well as humane. It seems important to avoid the holier-than-thou attitude. Do what feels right and possible in your situation, but also consider the implications of what you eat.

It is often harder for people with limited means to change diet patterns than it is for the relatively affluent, who have more time and money to shop and cook experimentally. In moving toward a meatless diet, we should consider the needs of people with limited income for protein-rich alternatives to meat. Nutrition education is also important.

One of the few benefits of higher gas and food costs is that the move back to small farms makes evident sense. A "return" to small farms does not imply turning back the clock, but learning from the past. There is need for developing new farm models and relationships with consumers—farm belts circling urban areas. A decentralist approach favors local production for local population, cutting out much of the processing and transport. The purpose of farming is to feed people, not to create a profit.

Besides being sounder in social terms and for individual life, small-scale farms can also produce more than large-scale farms. U.S. production in total terms is very high, but per-acre production in the U.S. of wheat, rice, and many other commodities is significantly lower than in Western Europe, Japan, and other areas where small-scale agricultural technology and more intensive labor are used.

Production and distribution of food may seem far removed from the lives of urban and suburban people in America, but many house-owners and even some apartment-renters could grow a large

proportion of their own vegetables and sometimes fruit. As a public health nutritionist in India, one of my jobs was to help villagers to grow vegetables in little patches of land near their cottages, using waste water from cooking and bathing for their gardens. Even three or four square yards of land, used wisely, produced valuable food for each villager.

Home-owners in the U.S. now spend time, energy, and money growing grass. We Americans use some 3 million tons of fertilizer each year on lawns, golf courses, and cemeteries. Such areas, along with public parks, university grounds, and school lawns, could be made into gardens. The International Independence Institute (Ashby, Mass.) has prepared a guide which tells how community land trusts can foster intelligent land-use in the U.S.

A decentralist program starts at home. I have emphasized consumption, production, and land-use by our own population because the most important contribution we can make to other countries may be to develop people-oriented programs in our own country. A decentralist aid program would identify and support local programs abroad which are cooperative and encourage self-determination, benefitting all the people in the community. The goal should be to enable the hungry to grow food for themselves. In many areas this will require major land reforms and other social change.

We are fortunate in still having a protein surplus in the United States, even though it is poorly distributed. Yet the U.S. imports thousands of tons of animal and vegetable protein annually from Latin America, South Asia, and Africa. These imports include peanut products from India and fish from Latin America, both for ingredients of animal feed here. In other words, we are taking protein from protein-deficient areas in order to fatten our livestock.

The best aid we can give to less developed countries is to stop exploiting their natural resources and to help them to be independent of our foreign policy. (Of the world's resources, some 40 per cent is now consumed by the United States, which has only 6 per cent of the population.) Much foreign aid now increases maldistribution of wealth in the recipient nation. Only prosperous farmers receive and are able to use the kind of help we give. This has enabled the rich to buy out the smaller farmers, making the latter into urban unemployed who then depend upon food ships from abroad.

Fertilizer is now sent as aid to other countries for nonfood cash crop agriculture. Some of the best land in Brazil, Bangladesh, and India is used for such crops as coffee, jute, tobacco, and tea production. These three countries, along with fifty-eight others, have food deficits, but the non-food cash crops bring high income.

The changes in consumption, land-use, and aid suggested here are elements of a decentralist approach which is based on respect for people. We are an interdependent world, where self-sufficiency does not mean isolationism but recognition that world community will grow out of strong units able and willing to share and cooperate. The food aid urgently necessary in immediate situations nonetheless creates insecurity. For the intermediate and long-range future, small, cooperative, self-help models, developed by people throughout the world, are the way to a healthy and secure society,

ED LAZAR