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MUSINGS ON EDUCATION

THE really good books on education are likely to be unpretentious affairs, and may even have a melancholy quality. For they all, if they are honest about it, deal with matters that cannot be directly described. The robustly confident books on education simply ignore this intrinsic obscurity. They don't attempt to discuss what education is for, or is supposed to do, except in terms of conventional assumptions. For if you adopt the conventional assumptions then you can write a large and expensive book on how to do well what may not be worth doing at all.

Surely, those engaged in education ought to be primarily concerned with what is most worth doing. But we doubt if there is any course in any university which openly addresses itself to this question. Is the question too simple, and therefore a bit silly?

The question, although simple, is not silly at all, since it involves the idea of a hierarchy of values. A great many things which are regarded as necessary to learn are important because they implement other intentions. But any skill is two-edged; it can be used in degrading as well as constructive ways; so the question remains: what is most worth doing?

An elementary example of this problem is provided in a dialogue between Mario Montessori and A. S. Neill, printed in *Redbook* for December, 1964. Montessori had been telling about his mother's achievements in teaching small children to read and write, and he went on to describe the effect this had on the illiterate parents of the children. The mothers came to Madame Montessori, saying that they wanted to learn, too. It is easy to see why Mario Montessori was proud of what happened in the case of these poor, uneducated parents, but Neill's reaction was very different. He exploded, exclaiming, "This is beyond me. It's beyond me." Puzzled, Montessori asked him why. Neill replied:

> It's beyond me because you're talking about education, the three R's and science, and I'm thinking about the dynamics of life, the dynamic in a child, how we're going to prevent the child from becoming a Gestapo, or becoming a color hater and all these things. The sickness of the world. I'm interested in what we're going to do *for* children to stop them from becoming haters, to stop them from being anti-life.

Well, there wasn't much that Montessori could say to this. There isn't much anyone can say, since Neill is so right, although it remains very difficult to put into words just what ought to be done to overcome "the sickness of the world." Is working on this the most important thing to do?

A person with the task of planning a public school curriculum would probably say no. He would say that the business of the schools is to give the children a knowledge of the practical tools of coping with the world as it is. He might add that to work against the sickness of the world would require a staff of really extraordinary teachers, and nobody knows how to develop enough teachers of this quality and commitment. There is some truth in this last comment. Michael Polanyi has a wonderful passage in *Personal Knowledge* (p. 53) on the impossibility of making up rules for the transmission of the practice of a high art. So we can easily see why institutional practice in education falls back on manuals devoted to technique and develops wave after wave of teaching "methods." It is at least possible to write "professionally" about such things, and to give courses in them. So, for the "educationists," Neill's challenge amounts to a bull in a china shop; he makes a great deal of the current talk about education irrelevant.

What about Neill and the merit of what *he* is doing? Somewhere, Joseph Featherstone made a

comment on Neill which has justice in it. He said that Summerhill was not so much a project in education as an experiment in community living. Neill, he said, was teaching his students how to get along with one another; and, Featherstone added, this may be more important than "education."

Some more of the dialogue between Montessori and Neill may apply here:

> Neill: To hell with arithmetic. . . .
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> Montessori: Why do you say to hell with arithmetic?
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> Neill: That's partly personal. You see, I spent four years at Edinburgh University taking an Honours English degree and then I went to found a school in Germany in 1921, and suddenly I found I had to sit silent and listen to people talking about art and philosophy and music. I didn't learn a thing about them, and it struck me then what a miserably narrow thing any university education is. And it's true, I think, all that stuff you learn at school, most of it flies away. I once read Homer in Greek! I can't now. I once could read Latin. I can't read Latin today. So much of that has gone, so that I discounted it as being relatively unimportant. . . . I've often had critics say to me, "Is it fair to keep a child away from music? It's not that they get to know music, but look at the joy they get." But look at the millions of good, happy people who don't learn music. Look at the millions who don't know anything about astronomy and things like that. So many things to know. But I find that children simply follow what they can. One boy with not much gray matter has just left our school. He's a carpenter, quite a good one, and quite happy. Four other boys are university professors—or at least lecturers. I had a boy of seventeen who left Summerhill unable to read or write. He's now a very successful engineer.
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> Montessori: He couldn't read or write at the age of seventeen?
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> Neill: No, he couldn't. He learned because he found that without reading he couldn't read engineering plans. That was a complicated case because he had a grandmother who tried to make him read the Bible at three, I think. My daughter learned to read and write without any teaching at all, really, at five or six.

Neill reveals himself pretty thoroughly, here, and one can imagine the perturbation he would cause in any typical school board, yet the questions he asks all need answers.

An entirely different approach to the idea of education comes from reading Ann Nolan Clark. It *is* safe to say that any contact with Mrs. Clark's work will lead the reader through everything she has written. She is the author of children's stories and has spent her life teaching American Indian children. In her book of essays, *Journey to the People* (Viking, 1969), she tells at length about teaching the children of the Tewa Tesuque Pueblo to read by involving them in printing projects in which they made their own textbooks. Then she says:

> For many years I was concerned only with teaching reading to children. I knew that many adult Indians, for a variety of reasons, had learned neither to read nor to write, but this seemed only to strengthen my resolution that this must not happen to children in my classrooms. I did not take the time to realize that many adult nonreaders feel the need, the longing, and have the ability to learn to read and write in the language their white neighbors use so fluently and unceasingly.
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> I remember that I first recognized the tragic need for everyone to know how to read when I met one of the fathers of two children in my classroom. He was young, intelligent, outgoing, but he was blind. I still feel the sick rage I felt when I learned what had caused his blindness: He could not read, and, being too proud to ask for help in reading the labels on bottles, he had used disinfectant in his eyes instead of the eyewash the doctor had recommended. It was then I realized that every man, woman, and child in our society has the need to know how to read.
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> So I knew the *need* for everyone to have reading skill, but it was not until years afterward that I was made to know the *longing* to be able to read that a nonreader may have. This happened in Guatemala, at a training school for rural teachers with a demonstration school for the near-by children. The occasion was a school fiesta of some kind. Its reason I have forgotten, but I remember a somber, stern-looking Indian bringing his small daughter to me and asking her to read for me. When she had finished, he said with pride, "The book talks to her." Then he took the book and looked at it for a long time. At last he spoke, and I will never forget the heartbreak in his

> voice as he told me, "The book talks to her but it does not talk to me."
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> I had not known before that people who could not read wanted to read. Now, with the realization of their need to read, I knew there was longing that for many people could never be satisfied.

One might say that in this experience of Mrs. Clark there is considerable support for Mario Montessori's identification of education with reading and writing, yet this would miss the point. Education is supposed to be the means of bringing larger horizons to people, and in some cases it does this, but in others it fails miserably. The capacity to read and write may also have quite other effects. Ananda Coomaraswamy has pointed out in *The Bugbear of Literacy* that the classic forms of speech which evolve naturally in great oral cultures are usually lost with the coming of literacy. This has certainly been one of the results of the sort of literacy which accompanied the industrial revolution, which brought with it the need of a large labor force trained to read the instruction manuals for operating machines. Such "literacy" has in many instances meant little more than the displacement of authentic culture. Until recently, we have believed that this was an inevitable side-effect of "progress," and that the benefits of industrialization would soon compensate for any cultural losses involved. Yet the "Americanization" of the world, to the extent that it has been accomplished, is not an achievement of which anyone can be proud. We have not spread self-reliance and independence and self-determination along with our products and consumption habits, but rather the popular jargon of a sensate, self-indulgent people has perverted the quality of cultures all over the world. Literacy as the means for the transmission of such exports has not been a boon to anyone at all.

This is not an attack on literacy, which would be ridiculous, but rather submission of evidence that training in the skills of communication, without relating what is communicated to some hierarchy of value, does not deserve to be called education.

You can go to the library and come back with half a dozen new books on education, and do this a couple of times each month without duplicating anything you've read. There are of course good things here and there in these books, but, on the whole, absolutely no justification at all for so much publication. Too many of the books take for granted that we know what education is for, and that the public systems operated by the state are in the service of the young people who go to the schools. But what really serves the young? Does *anybody* know? Can such things be put into books? The best books seem to be the ones which tell how to avoid mistreating, deceiving, and lying to the children.

The notorious Jensen paper of several years ago, concerned with the claim that heredity imposes limitations on intelligence, had one unmistakable virtue. It showed that the public education system of the country is really in the service of industry. It amounts to a vast agency for qualifying the young for various levels of jobs. This may be a necessary service, but ought it to be confused with the idea of education?

John Holt cleared the air considerably by remarking that the trouble with the elementary schools is that they are made to do several things that have nothing to do with teaching children, and that this gravely harms and sometimes destroys the teaching function. Schools are supposed to teach, but they are also arms of the government and have police power through the truancy laws. The compulsory aspect of school attendance works at cross purposes with the spontaneous relationships in which true learning takes place, and the political side of school administration cannot help but have a bad effect on the attitudes of teachers. Similarly, institutions of higher learning are deeply involved with government policy through the subsidies obtained for military research, and the relations with industry, also involving research, often make the

universities seem like high-level service stations for technology. Nor is there, commonly, much regard for the students as human beings in the institutions of higher learning. Academic professionalism usually has far more importance than "the bothersome business of education." As Theodore Roszak remarked in *The Dissenting Academy:*

> So, for example, when the English department at, let us say, the University of California is making its decisions about hiring and firing and promotions and tenure, what the department will be very largely concerned about is the impression its appointments will create in the department at Harvard, not with the influence they may have on the local student body or in the local community. This is what the "community of scholars" means as most academics understand that term.

The excellence of separate disciplines, and not of men, has quite plainly become the ideal of academic undertakings, and since the practice of these disciplines, under the inspiration and guidance of the scientific method, has very little to do with the characteristic issues and problems of human life, but goes off in isolated directions dictated by the exigencies and accidents of "research," the production of narrow specialists who have neither knowledge of nor concern for good teaching is the inevitable result. Roszak's comment is pertinent:

> But as Socrates long ago warned the Sophists, to partition the personality is the first step away from wisdom. To isolate any human skill (as the Sophists isolated the skill of rhetoric), to cultivate and assess it apart from the total person in whom it resides, is to trivialize the skill and diminish the person.

Yet if we ask what is the first step *toward* wisdom, we suffer the same embarrassments as Socrates (or Plato), since it can hardly be claimed that a simple answer is given to this question in the Platonic books. Plato, we might argue, attempts to invoke an answer, but not to "give" it—invoke it in the sense of showing that Socrates spent his whole life investigating the meaning of virtue, as the best way of "teaching" it.

Moreover, the assumption of the *Republic* is that it is indeed possible to produce through education whole or wise men who, by reason of their debt to the ideal community which nurtured them, would become the teachers of future generations. This comes out clearly in Book VII, when Socrates says to Glaucon:

> You have received a better and more complete education than the others, and you are more capable of sharing both ways of life. Down you must go then, each in his turn, to the habitations of the others and accustom yourselves to the observation of the obscure things there. For once habituated you will discern them infinitely better than the dwellers there, and you will know what each of the "idols" is and whereof it is a semblance, because you have seen the reality of the beautiful, the just and the good. So our city will be governed by us and you with waking minds, and not, as most cities now which are inhabited and ruled darkly as in a dream by men who fight one another for shadows and wrangle for office as if that were a great good, when the truth is that the city in which those who are to rule are least eager to hold office must needs be best administered and most free from dissension, and the state that gets the contrary type of ruler will be the opposite of this.

Plato's whole men are men who recognize the essences of things, and are not confused by their material analogues. Yet there are parallels between what is ordinarily accounted useful learning and the sort of learning Plato hopes to make possible. In planning courses for study, Socrates proposes mathematics, which should not, he said, be degraded to the purposes of mere huckstering, but serve as training in the grasp of abstract ideas. He also refers to astronomy, and Glaucon quickly agrees to this subject, speaking of its importance to agriculture and navigation, and even the military art. Here Socrates rejoins:

> I am amused, said I, at your apparent fear lest the multitude may suppose you to be recommending useless studies. It is indeed no trifling task, but very difficult to realize that there is in every soul an organ or instrument of knowledge that is purified and kindled afresh by such studies when it has been destroyed and blinded by ordinary pursuits, a faculty whose preservation outweighs ten thousand eyes, for by it only is reality beheld. Those who share this

> faith will think your words superlatively true. But those who have and have had no inkling of it will naturally think them all moonshine. For they can see no other benefit from such pursuits worth mentioning. Decide, then, on the spot, to which party you address yourself.

The difficulty here defined by Plato so long ago is doubtless the reason for the lack of attention to what education is really *for,* since extraordinary conviction is required to express oneself along lines which will be condemned as "moonshine" by a great many highly placed critics. Yet it is surely the dawning perception of the beautiful, the just, and the good, which comes in unpredictable ways, as a subtle and apparently random accompaniment to other forms of learning, that is the highest meaning of education, and which, in time, gives direction and order to all the capacities of the man.

The awakening of this faculty can never be institutionalized, nor can any "curriculum" be designed to give it play, although all the activities of human life present opportunities for exercising the powers of that intelligence which, when brought to maturity, is known as wisdom. So there is much truth in what is said by present-day advocates of "random" or "incidental" education. The teaching of Socrates, after all, was framed by no orthodoxy or institution, and the inquiry represented by his life is too universal and all-inclusive to be claimed or contained by any school, church, or state. Yet the spirit and intuitive inspiration of a teacher, wherever it exists, reaches out in spontaneous fashion to do the same work that Socrates attempted, and it is for this reason alone that the schools, colleges, and universities of today, for all their shortcomings, are still sometimes places where the young are helped to participate in wider horizons, and where sparks of idealism burst into flame. It is not the institutions or educational systems which accomplish this wonder, but the human beings who work, sometimes almost clandestinely, to transmit their own enthusiasm for finding the truth, or their ardor for looking for it. Nor are such teachers necessarily found in schools.

The multiple disillusionments of our time are growing very difficult to bear. The loss of faith in institutions is taking an enormous toll in terms of the familiar forms of "ambition" and "responsibility" and other virtues which are supported by the common objectives of a material and acquisitive civilization. Actually, the disorders afflicting the public school systems throughout the country, the diminishing enrollments experienced by the colleges and universities, and the aggressive self-criticism now being pursued by dozens of educators—all this is no more than a reflection of the still more basic questions that are arising in countless individuals about the meaning and purpose of their own lives. So long as these questions were not asked, there could be no serious questioning of education. But when a civilization questions itself, it must also question every aspect of what it does in the name of education, since the very foundations of what is taught are being challenged.

It follows, then, that a renewal of the Platonic inquiry is very much in order. For the issues of education are not different from the basic philosophical questions, as Plato showed.

REVIEW
A TIMELY WARNING

POLICE IN TROUBLE by James F. Ahern, a man who rose from patrolman to chief of police in New Haven, Connecticut, is a balanced and informing study which corrects many misconceptions. (It is published by Hawthorn Books, New York, at $6.95.) Written for the general reader, this book explores two sets of mental attitudes—how policemen think of themselves and their work, together with the influences that shape their feelings and ideas, and the views of the general public concerning crime, law enforcement, and what is typically expected of the police. It becomes clear from reading Mr. Ahern that if people generally could share in the comprehensive social understanding his book reveals, a broad redistribution of responsibility for "law and order" would soon take place, with the tasks of the police sensibly redefined.

The author begins by telling how the rookie policeman is systematically disillusioned by the daily experiences of his job. The pressure to submit to minor corruption is enormous. His life may be made almost intolerable unless he accepts the code of the "closed fraternity" and behaves as most other officers do, protecting and covering for each other. He learns that political influence is far more important to his advancement than conscientious police work, and that it is bad policy to give traffic tickets to friends of the higher-ups in the department. Meanwhile, he finds himself disliked and feared by everyone but other policemen. His work is hazardous; he seldom knows what waits on the other side of the door when he answers a call for help; and the strain of expecting violence wears away at his nerves. Often he comes to incline toward violence himself. Older policemen tell him "a good shot with the stick" will often take the starch out of potential resisters, and he finds that this works. So he becomes known as a head-cracker and enjoys a kind of "respect." Mr. Ahern then says:

> Policemen who seek to avoid brutality, on the other hand, consistently find themselves in full-blown brawls with "cop-fighters"—people who have heard of their "weakness" and who want to make their reputations by beating up cops. The courts are far away, and justice is farther. As long as he confines his techniques to lower-class areas, the stick man has little to fear that his conduct, although patently illegal, will ever be censured. At least on these matters the courts are likely to be sympathetic. It is only when public opinion against police brutality is aroused that the courts do an about-face and condemn the cops for tactics that they have protected or condoned all along.

Police in Trouble is filled with open discussion of this sort. The author takes the reader into the everyday experience of the average policeman, showing what he must endure, how he is discouraged, and how his natural desire for security or simple survival leads him in directions which are under so much criticism, these days. What Ahern believes ought to be done about some of these tendencies is described in the chapter, "Rebuilding Our Police Departments," in which he tells about the training program developed by John Heaphy for the New Haven police, but the over-all remedy for what is wrong with police work lies with the general public, since public attitudes are largely responsible for the defensive and self-protective attitudes of the police. Honesty and conscientiousness too often go unrewarded, while the cop who plays politics gets ahead.

Police work, Ahern maintains, is by nature a professional activity, yet it has hardly any models of excellence at a high level, and no goals to which the patrolman can aspire. The problem, here, Ahern believes, is the inherited structure of authority in police departments which dates from the militaristic concept of police work which prevailed during the period when police departments came into being. The role of the police as "law enforcers," he says, has been vastly exaggerated. Simple inspection of what a policeman does, every day of his life, shows that most of his time and energy is spent in the maintenance of order—an activity in which

making an arrest may be the least desirable result. Ahern contends that the policeman now works as a professional, and that recognizing this role and giving better training for its duties is the only intelligent course. He writes:

> The key factor that militates against police professionalism on a systematic basis is the pseudo-military command structure of the police department. This structure is largely unnecessary to police work. It breeds a notion of supervision that is inappropriate to the patrolman's discretion and forces police departments to perpetrate monstrous fictions about the very role of the patrolman itself. If chiefs of police were called directors, if captains were called supervisors, and if titles were changed on down the line to the point where patrolmen were called generalists and detectives investigative specialists, little would be substantively changed, but a far more accurate picture of the discretionary patterns of the police department might emerge. For in fact, as has been pointed out again and again, it is the patrolman who exercises individual discretion in situations involving life and death, honor and dishonor. His superiors may set policy and hold him to its guidelines, but they cannot tell him what to do every day or even every week. A military unit always works as a unit and must be coordinated. Some city services, such as fire protection, can legitimately be organized in this way. But police work individually and must be dispersed. At present, most patrolmen exercise discretion with a lack of policy and leadership on the basis of their own street sense. Because of the frustration of their jobs and their limited education and training, they often do so according to inappropriate prejudices. Although a temporary solution might be to place them under closer supervision and to spell out policy in order to contain behavior, in the long run, as the patrolman changes and becomes more able to handle his discretion effectively, the supervisor's role must change. He must supply the patrolman with positive support for professional conduct and with the resources that he needs to do his job. He must become more involved in how the patrolman is used and in high-level policy decisions and planning and less concerned with knowing where every cop is every minute.

Something should be said about the problems of the police departments of the metropolitan centers of the United States. The patrolman whose beat is in a slum area often arrests a person who, he knows from experience, he will arrest again and again. In most large cities there are districts where crime seems almost the rule rather than the exception, and to expect the police to have much effect on situations of this sort seems wholly unreasonable. The police cannot transform a social community from a festering sore into a healthy organism. Even an amelioration of "street crime," as Jane Jacobs points out, requires the alertness and cooperation of the people in the neighborhood, who help to maintain order because they feel a spontaneous concern for the welfare of others, know one another, and keep a watchful eye out for any sort of disorder. But in some areas, the destructive tendencies have gone too far, and the crime-producing patterns are part of the ordinary experience of the young. An introductory paragraph from *The Manhattan Court Employment Project*, a pamphlet issued by the Vera Institute of Justice (Room 1330, 100 Centre St., New York, N.Y. 10013), tells this story:

> One hundred and three thousand persons came into the Manhattan Criminal Court in 1968. Most were young, uneducated, unskilled, unemployed members of a minority group from one of the city s ghettos. In the normal course of events this would not be their last arrest. Statistics vary, but at least one expert has concluded that "the average man who is arrested once will be arrested seven times." . . . It is likely that the only successful people most of these defendants had ever known were people beating the system: gamblers, pimps, numbers-runners, narcotics dealers. People from the ghetto who make a legal success of themselves do not remain in the ghetto as examples for the young.

So, one might say that those hundred thousand persons represented a total of seven hundred thousand arrests that would be made. By whom? By New York policemen. New York is probably the richest if not the largest city in the world, and it ought to be able to figure out a way of dealing with persons who are brought up in this way *by the city*—the city, after all, exposed them in childhood to gamblers, pimps, and numbers-runners, and other illegal "successes"—that is better than arresting them seven times and often

sending them to the jails and prisons which are schools for crime.

The crime in slums and ghettos is not really a problem for the police to solve at all; the entire community is responsible for all this trouble and failure, and it is foolish to expect the police to change behavior patterns created by generations of indifference to the cruelty and corruption of life in urban slums. Mr. Ahern tells it very well:

> As his years in the squad car wear on, the endless cycle of shifts takes its toll, and the cop's frustration increases as he sees that he is running hard but getting nowhere. He arrests drunks and sees them thrown into jail, where the causes of their alcoholism are compounded. He knows he will arrest them again. He refers juveniles to juvenile courts and sees them on the street again with the same lack of support and direction that led to their delinquency. He knows he will arrest them again too, when they have grown, through neglect, into full-fledged criminals. He sees everyone on the take and no one giving. He tires of being trapped between his superiors and the courts, between prosecutors and the public. He tires of making instantaneous judgments on the street that are meticulously analyzed ex *post facto* by people who have no idea what the street as he sees it is like. He becomes exhausted with climbing endless flights of stairs and knocking on the same doors, with finding himself in the middle of fights and brawls, with treating endless problems for which there is—for him—no solution.

This is a valuable book which shows policemen for what they are—ordinary human beings in a very difficult and often impossible job. It is a book which inspires hope, mainly because a man like James F. Ahern could get to be a chief of police and then set down so much common sense and expert counsel to his countrymen. There are several excellent sections which we have not referred to at all, such as the chapter on crime statistics, and how misleading they can be, and the different sorts of "crime" in connection with the enormous problems which are created by legislators who pass unenforceable laws. "Police need fewer laws and simpler ones," Ahern says, "not more and more complex ones." He also has a chapter on the political misuse of the "law and order" theme, and how this weakens morale and undermines the authority of local police departments which may be trying very hard to avoid illegal and indiscriminate arrests that violate the constitutional rights of citizens. As a member of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest, Mr. Ahern is well qualified to comment on the harm done to responsible police work by national political figures who demand a "get tough" policy. Toward the end of this volume, the author gives this warning:

> The roots of police failure are buried deeply in the failures of society, and every day these roots are deepening and strengthening their hold. If the state of police is not changed, if police continue to be exploited in their weakness, then they may one day turn, and the nightmare of a police state will be upon us.

COMMENTARY
HOPI DISSENTERS

READING over the material in this week's lead article recalled still another difficulty or "contradiction" in connection with plans for education. Mrs. Clark writes about teaching Indian children to learn to read, and about the longing to be able to read that she encountered in older Indians. Years ago, however, during a visit to the Hopi Reservation, we met some aged Indians, leaders of the portion of the tribe which had remained faithful to their ancestral religion and traditions, and who had refused even to learn to speak English. They saw the adoption of white American customs, language, and beliefs as a ruthless perversion of the Hopi way of life. Missionaries had been permitted to establish schools on the reservation, which meant that the young were led away from tribal traditions. So these Indians were, you could say, deliberate "illiterates," yet the dignity of their attitudes and acts easily overcame the language barrier. The increasing dependence of the tribe upon the economic resources of the surrounding white civilization was one of the bitterest things these Indians had to endure.

Who, it must be asked, has the right to plan "education" for such people?

In *The Hopi Way* (University of Chicago Press, 1947), Laura Thompson observes:

> The children are sent to school by their parents usually not out of genuine admiration for the values of reading, writing and American history, or because our system of moral education is thought to be truly desirable and superior to their own but, as they openly voice it, because school may provide them with the necessary tools for defense—first of all, the knowledge of English—in the fight for their own survival in contact with a physically stronger force.

The children, she says, usually respond to their parents' intentions and the more schooling they have, the more they resist measures taken by the administration. The children try to arm themselves defensively with the white man's knowledge "without accepting its alien spirit."

There is much to think about here. It is an irony that while the schools carry on programs intended to help Indian children "assimilate" and become part of the dominant culture, American sociologists write books about the wonder of the Hopi way of life and the extraordinary moral qualities of the Hopi people, stressing in particular their wisdom in relation to teaching the young.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
HOLT'S NEW BOOK

JOHN HOLT'S books about teaching are consistently good because they are full of accounts of particular situations, experiences he has had, problems he has faced, people he has known. Another reason they are good is that they are really more about adults than about children—he makes it plain, that is, that children have problems mainly because of what adults do to them, and the reader senses the truth in this.

People sometimes suppose that if they could create an "ideal" school or environment for the young, things would get better right away, and the children would respond in wonderful ways. But the fact is that this doesn't happen. And even when they do begin to respond, perhaps a year or so after the good environment has been established, then other problems of a more far-reaching nature arise.

In *Freedom and Beyond*, Holt considers the difficulties encountered by teachers who try to have "open" classrooms, usually in a junior high school or a high school. Giving the students "choices" may not arouse the desired initiative. Holt writes:

> First, we should try to see this situation through the eyes of the student. For years he has been playing a school game which looks to him about like this. The teacher holds up a hoop and says "Jump!" He jumps, and if he makes it, he gets a doggy biscuit. Or, perhaps, the student makes a feeble pretense of jumping, saying, "I'm jumping as high as I can, this is the best I can do." Or, he may lie on the floor and refuse to jump. But in any case the rules of the game are simple and dear—hoop, jump, biscuit. Now along comes a teacher who says, "We aren't going to play that game anymore, you're going to decide for yourselves what you're going to do." What is the student going to think about this? Almost certainly, he is going to think, "They're hiding the hoop! It was bad enough having to jump through it before, but now I have to find it." Then after a while he is likely to think, "On second thought, maybe I don't have to find it. If I just wait long enough, pretty soon that hoop is going to slip out of its hiding place, and then we'll be back to the old game where at least I know the rules and am comfortable."

The "ideal" school has a great deal to overcome in the way of history. To be successful, it shouldn't be a school at all, in order to free the enterprise from the bad associations the children have with schools. As Holt says:

> In short, if we make this offer of freedom, choice, self-direction to students who have spent much time in traditional schools, most of them will not trust us or believe us. Given their experience, they are quite right not to. A student in a traditional school learns before long in a hundred different ways that the school is not on his side; that it is working, not for him, but for the community and the state; that it is not interested in him except as he serves its purposes; and that among all the reasons for which the adults in the school do things, his happiness, health, and growth are by far the least important. He has probably also learned that most of the adults in the school do not tell him the truth and indeed are not allowed to—unless they are willing to run the risk of being fired, which most of them are not. They are not independent and responsible persons, free to say what they think, feel, believe, or to do what seems reasonable and right. They are employees and spokesmen, telling the children whatever the school administration, the school board, the community, or the legislature want the children to be told. Their job is by whatever means they can to "motivate" the students to do whatever the school wants. So, when a school or a teacher says that the students don't have to play the old school game anymore, most of them, certainly those who have not been "good students," will not believe it. They would be very foolish if they did.

So establishing the reality of freedom takes time. But then, when it really does get established, and begins to work, there are other difficulties. In a chapter called "Some Tensions of Freedom," Holt says:

> One of the problems of many free schools, whether public or private—at least everyone (wrongly) experiences it as a problem—is that many of the students are surprisingly unhappy. They think, What's the matter? Here we've been saying, if we could only get away from the do this, do that, from the corridor passes, from the get-back-to-your-

> classroom, from the cutthroat competition with other students, from the constant endless struggle either to please teachers or to resist them—if we could only get away from that, we'd be happy. Then when a few lucky students do get away, they often find themselves no happier than they were before. They and their teachers worry about it. Is something wrong with us? Is something wrong with the school? Is there something we should be doing here that we're not doing?

Notice that Holt said this is *wrongly* regarded as a problem, and by this he means that people who gain freedom soon develop needs they hadn't felt before—needs for things to do with their freedom. Teaching situations which are not part of society itself find it very difficult to supply such needs. How can a free school be part of "society" when it has set itself against many of the things society stands for? When it is a bravely rebellious undertaking? So young people who have been liberated in free schools, as Holt says, need things to do. He continues:

> In many free schools, small and broke, there's not much to do. Some people try to excuse this by making a theory or ideology or way of life out of it. They put up a picture of Buddha saying, "Don't just do something; sit there." It doesn't work, not for most of them, not for long. Beyond something to do right now, they need something more important. Paul Goodman put it very well in *Growing Up Absurd,* and no one has said it better since. They need a society to grow in and into, a society that makes some sense, has reasonable purposes, that they can trust and respect. What if no such society exists? What if the society, the very world they live in, is not just dishonest, unjust, corrupt, and murderous, but suicidal? Next best thing might be to find whatever people are working to make a decent and just and viable society and world, and join them in their work. But what if they can't find them? Or if, having found them, they are prevented, by the laws and customs that declare them to be children, from working with them in any serious way? What sense will their present freedom make if beyond it they can see only a life that looks like a kind of slavery?
>
> What if this pleasant world they live in seems to have no connection with any larger reality? We might put it this way. The more freedom a student has in his life in school, the more he is likely to see how pointless and wasteful it is, in times like these, that he should be in school at all.
>
> In short, free schools, at least free high schools, by satisfying one very important need, allow others to surface that they cannot satisfy, that no school *could* satisfy, and that perhaps in these times nothing can satisfy.

Is this an "attack" on even "free" schools? Hardly, or not at all. So far as we can see, Holt regards the free schools as an instrument for growing our society up to a new conception of moral responsibility. Schools are not places in which to become "happy," but places to find out the work that has to be done. When a student begins to make up his mind about what he wants to do with his life, all his relationships with the institutions of society change. These institutions become the available tools for what he will set out to do. Good, bad, or indifferent, he will use them as best he can. This is the kind of maturity a young person can be expected to want and have—the maturity which no longer needs any artificial, institutional barriers to hide from the growing individual the kind of a world we live in today.

There is an enormous amount of work to be done. For example, we learned recently from a curriculum supervisor in the Los Angeles City schools that hardly any administrators and very few teachers in the system read John Holt, and those who do don't refer to him in their professional relationships. But Holt and the other vital critics of present-day education, whom he often quotes, have a more important audience—the people at large. In this book, *Freedom and Beyond,* Holt is making it crystal clear that tinkering with the schools is not the way to go at the problem of helping the young with their schooling and education. The changes that are needed must come in the society itself.

FRONTIERS

An Unsettled Argument

WHAT is the right way for human beings to live on and get along with their home planet? There isn't much agreement about the answer to this question. There is a lot of agreement on the bad things that have been done to the earth, and that people continue to do, but very little concerning what would be the ideal relationships of man to earth. The best course, in the present, might be to correct the obvious abuses, try to cure ourselves of making war and of excesses of the acquisitive spirit, and *then* see if the resulting improved intelligence can give some answers to our questions.

A book that seems to point in this direction, although without saying so, is John McPhee's *Encounters with the Archdruid* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). Mr. McPhee is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. In this book he tells about the encounters of David Brower, the country's most militant conservationist, with three men of radically different views—a mining engineer, a resort developer, and a dam builder. The author doesn't take sides, but he does a lot more than just "report." His book is a patient, intensely interesting effort to lay before the reader the feelings and thinking of the participants in these dialogues. Here we tell only about the encounter with the mining engineer—Charles Park, who is an advocate of multiple use of the resources of nature, as contrasted with David Brower's insistence on the preservation untouched of certain wilderness areas for the sake of present and future generations.

The dialogue is friendly, but no one really changes his mind. What sort of man is Park? In a paragraph McPhee summarizes Park's case for the human need of the minerals of the earth—how dependent we all are on what is mined from the ground, pointing out that no nation has an adequate supply of the minerals it now requires. Then Mr. McPhee says:

> Park has recently published all this, in less random form, in a book titled *Affluence in Jeopardy*, which is in part a primer on minerals and their uses and significance and in part an exhortation to mankind to husband what we have. Introducing minerals one by one, he says in clear and fascinating detail what they are, where they come from, what we do with them, and, ultimately, how we are locked into a system of living that is fueled by them and founded upon them and would collapse without them. He quotes Lord Dewar, who said, "Minds are like parachutes. They only function when they are open," and he goes on to define conservation (at least with regard to minerals) as the complete use of natural resources, with as little waste as possible, for the benefit of all the people, and not merely for industrialists, on the one hand, and preservationists, on the other. [Park regards Brower as a "preservationist."] He says that the search for energy, being vital to the extraction of minerals, and thus to the survival of society, is far more important than exploration of the back of the moon, and he says that each nation should have a mineral policy that involves the intelligent exploration and development of mineral resources and an acceptance of fully reciprocal international trade.

The interchanges between Park and Brower take place along the trail as the three men are hiking in the Cascade Range in the state of Washington. The presence of copper ore, which Park points out, sharpens the dialogue. Brower is for leaving the copper where it is. The country, he maintains, would do well to get along with less, instead of always requiring more and more of such metals. McPhee has a paragraph on Brower's general outlook:

> Brower has computed that we are driving through the earth's resources at a rate comparable to a man's driving an automobile a hundred and twenty-eight miles per hour—and he says we are accelerating. He reminds his audience that buffalo were shot for their tongues alone, and he says that we still have a buffalo-tongue economy. "We're hooked on growth. We're addicted to it. In my lifetime, man has used more resources than in all previous history. Technology has just begun to happen. They are *mining* water under Arizona. Cotton is being subsidized by all that water. Why grow cotton in Arizona? There is no point to this. People in Texas want to divert the Yukon and have it flow to Texas. We are going to fill San Francisco Bay so we can

> have another Los Angeles in a state that deserves only one. Why grow to the point of repugnance? Aren't we repugnant enough already? In the new subdivisions, everybody can have a redwood of his own. Consolidated Edison has to quadruple by 1990. Then what have you got besides kilowatts? The United States has six per cent of the world's population and uses sixty per cent of the world's resources, and one per cent of Americans use sixty per cent of that. When one country gets more than its share, it builds tensions. War is waged over resources. Expansion will destroy us. We need an economics of peaceful stability. Instead, we are fishing off Peru, where the grounds are so rich there's enough protein to feed the undernourished of the world, and we bring the fish up here to fatten our cattle and chickens."

And so on. Mr. Brower is just getting warmed up. What has Dave Brower accomplished? While he was executive director of the Sierra Club, Mr. McPhee says, the membership grew from seven thousand to seventy-seven thousand members. Brower is a heroic campaigner for protected wilderness:

> To the Bureau of Reclamation he is the Antichrist. They say there that Brower singlehanded prevented the construction of two major dams in the Grand Canyon for at least two generations and possibly for all time. On the Green River in Utah, Brower stopped cold a dam that would have inundated parts of Dinosaur National Monument. In the cause of mountains, he and his lieutenants in the State of Washington fought loggers, miners, and hunters, and won a North Cascades National Park. For nearly twenty years, Brower has crossed and recrossed the United States campaigning for conservation before every kind of audience. The federal government's Outdoor Recreation Resources Review was his idea. He was a primary force in the advancement of the Wilderness Act.

Yet the sober advocacy of Mr. Park deserves a hearing, too. He has no use for mining companies who desert worked-out mines, leaving behind them raw cuts and ugly piles of waste. They can dean up after they're finished, he says, and sometimes even improve the area.

The good thing about this book is that it shows how much we need men like Dave Brower, Charles Park, *and* John McPhee. Actually, you can't help but like Charles Park. Once, when Brower had gone ahead, McPhee reports:

> Park said, "Dave lives in a house, doesn't he?" Park had a grin in the corner of his mouth, and I developed one in mine I told him I had once heard a man in an audience in Scarsdale tell Brower that to be consistent with his philosophy he should wear a skin and live in a cave.