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WE SEE WHAT WE ARE

HOW do we know? The question is too big, of course. There are so many things to know and so many ways of knowing. Yet the importance of the general question cannot be denied. What we do in our schools and colleges—and how we attempt to explain things in conversation—depend upon it, or should. One reason for confusion is bound to be that we have mistaken ideas about how people learn. A similar difficulty attends the simpler process of seeing with our eyes. In a paper which outlines the history of theories of vision, the M.I.T. psychologist, Richard Held, suggests that the assumptions on which existing theories are based stand in the way of progress in understanding. At the end of this paper (published in *Structure in Art and Science,* ea., Kepes, Braziller, 1965), Prof. Held says:

> We may be able to avoid vitiating assumptions if for a moment we regard the observer with all his capabilities as a machine having unknown rules of operation. . . . It is immediately evident that if this machine does in fact respond adaptively to physically definable properties of its environment, then information about those properties must be available to the system that controls its behavior. . . . But what has not always been recognized is that the specification tells us nothing either about the machine's method of processing the information which must be available to it or about the manner in which this information will relate to perceived objects. . . . What sort of an information processing system could conceivably yield the correspondence that is sought? We might as well confront it with the most general and difficult demand that we know of. The system should be capable of the kinds of pattern recognition of which human observers are capable.

The psychologist ends by saying that human beings are possessed of an extraordinary capacity for pattern recognition which cannot be explained as the result of education. We are just *able* to see and recognize, and hardly know how. "We are forced to conclude that having been presented with a relatively small sample of instances, the system can recognize an unlimited set." We must not, Prof. Held seems to be saying, ignore what we can really do because of the limitations implied by past theories of how we do it.

In his book, *The Tacit Dimension* (Anchor, 1967), Michael Polanyi, a chemist turned philosopher, sets out from precisely this point of view in a discussion of knowing. While seeing is a sense experience, it is closely connected with, or a serviceable analogue of, the knowing done by the mind. Polanyi says:

> My search has led me to a novel idea of human knowledge . . . by starting from the fact that *we can know more than we can tell*. This fact seems obvious enough; but it is not easy to say exactly what it means. Take an example. We know a person's face, and can recognize it among a thousand, indeed among a million. Yet we usually cannot tell how we recognize a face we know. . . . We recognize the moods of the human face, without being able to tell, except quite vaguely, by what signs we know it.

He finds a clue to how we do this in what we do without noticing it:

> Physiologists long ago established that the way we see an object is determined by our awareness of certain efforts inside our body, efforts which we cannot feel in themselves. We are aware of these things going on inside our body in terms of the position, size, shape, and motion of an object, to which we are attending. In other words, we are attending *from* these internal processes *to* the qualities of things outside. These qualities are what those internal processes *mean* to us. . . .
>
> Modern philosophers have argued that perception does not involve projection, since we are not previously aware of the internal processes which we are supposed to have projected into the qualities of things perceived. But we have now established that projection of this very kind is present in various instances of tacit knowing. Moreover, the fact that we do not originally sense the internal processes in themselves now appears irrelevant.

We go, if we are scientifically inclined, from tacit knowing or intuitive recognition to analysis of detail, which may enrich our knowing—or it may not. As Polanyi says:

> The meticulous dismembering of a text, which can kill its appreciation, can also supply material for a much deeper understanding of it. In these cases, the detailing of particulars, which by itself would destroy meaning, serves as a guide to their subsequent integration and this establishes a more secure and more accurate meaning of them.
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> But the damage done by the specification of particulars may be irremediable. Meticulous detailing may obscure beyond recall a subject like history, literature, or philosophy. Speaking more generally, the belief that, since particulars are more tangible, their knowledge offers a true conception of things is fundamentally mistaken. . . . The skill of a driver cannot be replaced by a thorough schooling in the theory of a motor car; the knowledge I have of my own body differs altogether from the knowledge of its physiology; and the rules of rhyming and prosody do not tell me what a poem told me, without any knowledge of its rules.

Now comes Polanyi's central point:

> We are approaching here a crucial question. The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this ideal is accepted only as a temporary imperfection which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge. The idea of exact science would turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies.

Quite evidently, the consideration of such possibilities—they seem actualities—will leave objective, exact science behind. Is one then all alone in thinking about such things? Not at all. There are wonderful "family resemblances" in explorations which go in this direction, making the drawing of some parallels worth while.

For example, a brief chapter in *Thoughts on Education* (Sarva Seva Sangh, 1964) by Vinoba Bhave seems to make what Polanyi calls "tacit knowing" the basis of education. It begins:

> There is a verse in the Scriptures: *Purnat purnam udachyate.* From the perfect comes the perfect, that is the law of natural development. A question may well be raised here, for if something is perfect to begin with, and also perfect later, how is there any "development"? . . .
>
> Yes, such language undoubtedly does seem meaningless, but there is profound meaning hidden within it. Perfect from perfect, that is, from that which is small but perfect, arises that which is great, and also perfect. A new-born baby is a perfect whole, and so is a young man of twenty. . . . if we grasp the essence of this verse, we shall see that "From the perfect comes the perfect" is a new watchword of natural development. At five o'clock in the morning I see the tree in front of me as a dim shape. I can see the whole of it, but not clearly. By half-past five the outline has become clearer. As before, I see the whole of it, but in greater detail. After sunrise, I can still see the whole tree, but now I see it with complete clarity. I do not see a quarter of the tree at five o'clock, half a tree at half-past five, and the whole tree only after sunrise. I see the whole each time first a dim whole, then a rather clearer whole, and lastly a perfectly clear whole. The sunlight has "developed" my sight of the tree from dim to rather clear to very clear, but always it was the "development" of the whole tree. This is natural development, from a small whole to a large whole, from a dim whole to a clear whole.

From perfect to perfect, Vinoba declares, is "the law of the growth of the soul." It applies to all human development. It is the foundation of self-reliance and a rule known to teachers of the arts. Vinoba ends with an illustration:

> There is a book on "Clay Modelling" which expressly forbids the method of modelling "from imperfect to perfect." The author writes from his own experience. It is quite wrong, he says, to set to work with the feeling that it does not matter how we shape the clay in the beginning, we shall be able to get the form we want in the end. On the contrary, the work must be so planned that at any stage, from beginning to end, the onlooker may be able to see what it is that is being made. This is the secret of true sculpture. There seem to be plenty of practitioners who do not want to display their work until it is finished. "Let us make it anyhow to begin with, and afterwards put it right," they appear to think. Such a headstrong approach can never result in true art. For art is an immortal part of the soul, and the birth of art can take

place only when the law of spiritual development, "from perfect to perfect," is observed.

Polanyi talks about beginnings in science, seeming to reach the same conclusion:

> It is a commonplace that all research must start from a problem. Research can be successful only if the problem is good; it can be original only if the problem is original. But how can one see a problem, any problem, let alone a good and original problem? For to see a problem is to see something that is hidden. It is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars. The problem is good if this intimation is true; it is original if no one else can see the possibilities of the comprehension that we are anticipating. To see a problem that will lead to a great discovery is not just to see something hidden, but to see something of which the rest of humanity cannot have even an inkling. All this is commonplace; we take it for granted, without noticing the clash of self-contradiction entailed in it. Yet Plato has pointed out this contradiction in the *Meno.* He says that to search for the solution of a problem is an absurdity; for either you know what you are looking for, and then there is no problem; or you do not know what you are looking for, and then you cannot expect to find anything.
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> The solution which Plato offered for this paradox was that all discovery is a remembering of past lives. This explanation has hardly ever been accepted, but neither has any other solution been offered for avoiding the contradiction. . . . the *Meno* shows conclusively that if all knowledge is explicit, i.e., capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for its solution. And the *Meno* also shows, therefore, that if problems nevertheless exist, and discoveries can be made by solving them, we can know things, and important things, that we cannot tell.

Just as Vinoba declares a first principle for the educator, Polanyi finds in tacit knowing the key to the practice of science:

> To hold such knowledge is an act deeply committed to the conviction that there is something there to be discovered. It is personal, in the sense of involving the personality of him who holds it, and also in the sense of being, as a rule, solitary; but there is no trace in it of self-indulgence. The discoverer is filled with a compelling sense of responsibility for the pursuit of a hidden truth, which demands his services for revealing it. . . .
>
> You cannot formalize the act of commitment, for you cannot express your commitment noncommittally. To attempt this is to exercise the kind of lucidity which destroys its subject matter. Hence the failure of the positivist movement in the philosophy of science. The difficulty is to find a stable alternative to its ideal of objectivity. This is indeed the task for which the theory of tacit knowing should prepare us.

This idea of "knowing" inside or tacitly—or through reminiscence by the soul from a past life—emerges again and again in antique thought. It was the theme of Plotinus' essay *On Beauty,* as Kathleen Raine makes clear in her discussion in the *Southern Review* (Summer, 1979). Beauty, Plotinus maintains, is more than formal symmetry, and it belongs to both the whole and its parts. The soul recognizes something akin to its own nature and potentiality:

> Beauty in bodies, Plotinus proceeds to argue, "is something which, at first view, presents itself to sense; and which the soul familiarly and eagerly embraces, as if it were allied to itself." We recognize in a work of art, a piece of music, an order inherent in the soul itself. When the soul perceives such an order, it is "astonished with the striking resemblance" and its dormant powers are aroused "so that it at length perfectly recollects its kindred and allies." The soul remembers; the Greek word *anamnesis* means, literally, to "un-forget"; or, as we should say, much in the psyche is unconscious, and those things that are "akin" or "related" to its own nature serve to awaken recollection, which recollection is also self-knowledge, since what we remember is not some past event or experience but something inherent in us. And the soul itself is in its turn produced by "the divine reason" which is "the great fountain of all forms." Beauty therefore reminds the soul of what is implanted in it by "the divine reason" itself. The beautiful possesses intelligible form, "and whatever is entirely remote from this immortal source, is perfectly base, and deformed." The opposite of beauty, according to Plotinus, is the formless; "and such is matter, which by its nature is ever averse from the supervening radiations of form." . . . The passage concludes with a definition of matter astonishingly modern; for none knows better than the scientist the

intangible, elusive nature of what to the popular mind seems the most solid of substances.

. . . we can now understand that, for the Platonist, the arts have a real and indispensable spiritual function, they are initiatory, the symbolic images of the Mysteries of the psyche itself. They serve to remind us to make us "unforget" by *anamnesis*—an inner order they reflect. That inner order is that of our own being, the order of the soul. The arts discover us to ourselves, bring us to self-knowledge.

Closely related to these conceptions is the idea that the human is a microcosm of the macrocosm, and that the human soul is an instance of the soul of the world. This, at any rate, would help to explain many of the mysteries of our psychological.life, giving a rationale to the "correspondences" between our processes of seeing and knowing and the great and complex world outside. It seems suitable to quote here a passage directly from Plotinus on Beauty, for more evidence of how he expresses himself or conducts his argument. What, he asks at the beginning, is beauty in bodily forms?

Clearly, it is something detected at first glance, something that the soul—remembering—names, recognizes, gives welcome to, and, in a way fuses with. When the soul falls in with ugliness, it shrinks back, repulses it, turns away from it as disagreeable and alien. We therefore suggest that the soul, being delighted when it sees any signs of kinship or anything that is akin to itself, takes its own to itself and is stirred to new awareness of whence and what it really is.

But is there any similarity between loveliness here below and that of the intelligible realm? If there is, then the two orders will be—in this—alike. What can they have in common, beauty here and beauty there? They have, we suggest, this in common: they are sharers of the same Idea.

As long as any shapelessness that admits of being patterned and shaped does not share in reason or Idea, it continues to be ugly and foreign to that above it. It is utter ugliness, since all ugliness comes from an insufficient mastery by form and reason, matter not yielding at every point to formation in accord with Idea. (*The Essential Plotinus*, Elmer O'Brien, Mentor, 1964.)

This seems a form of rationalism toward which the whole world of modern culture—including science and philosophy—is now able to move, having exhausted or run into the ground all other conceptions of knowing and knowledge. The works of Plotinus are an appeal to reason from a region of awareness which lies beyond. But sight of the beautiful by the soul depends upon the beauty of the soul itself, for how else would it know such correspondences? There are ugly souls who do not enjoy beauty, but are attracted in a perverse way to ugliness in the world. "For the eye," as Plotinus says, "must be adapted to what is seen, have some likeness to it, if it would give itself to contemplation. No eye that has not become like unto the sun will ever look upon the sun; nor will any that is not beautiful look upon the beautiful."

The language may seem difficult, but Plotinus had brooded upon these Platonic conceptions all his life and they had become as familiar to him as everyday matters are to us. Yet already, in our time, a corresponding language has been invented and is beginning to have currency. In one of his later papers, "Isomorphic Interrelationships between Knower and Known," published in *Sign, Symbol, Image* (Kepes, Braziller, 1966), A. H. Maslow concluded an investigation of how healthy people perceive and know:

A last word about what I call B-cognition (cognition of Being). This seems to me to be the purest and most efficient kind of perception of reality (although this remains to be tested experimentally). It is the truer and more veridical perception of the percept because the most detached, most objective, least contaminated by the wishes, fears, and needs of the perceiver. It is noninterfering, non-demanding, most accepting. In B-cognition, dichotomies tend to fuse, categorizing tends to disappear and the percept is seen as unique.

Self-actualizing people tend more to this kind of perceiving. But I have been able to get reports of this kind of perception in practically *all* the people I have questioned, in the highest, happiest, most perfect moments of their lives (peak-experiences). Now, my point is this: Careful questioning shows that as

the percept gets more individual, more unified and integrated, more enjoyable, more rich, so also does the perceiving individual get more alive, more integrated, more unified, more rich, more healthy for the moment. They happen simultaneously and can be set off on either side, i.e., the more whole the percept (the world) becomes, the more whole the person becomes. And also, the more whole the person becomes, the more whole becomes the world. It is a dynamic interrelation, a mutual causation. The meaning of a message clearly depends not alone on its content but also on the extent to which the personality is able to respond to it. The "higher" meaning is perceptible only to the "higher" person. The taller he is, the more he can see.

As Emerson said, "What we are, that only can we see." But we must now add that what we see tends in turn to make us what it is and what we are.

How do we know? The question is still unanswered, but some glimmers come through the trees.

REVIEW
THE SPREAD OF SEEDS

THE "simple life" is on the way, as both "surveys" and personal experience predict, and book after book undertakes to instruct us in either its desirability or inevitability or both. The purpose of the books is to help us get ready to do without a lot of things we have come to regard as part of a "normal" life. Their invitation may not be entrancing to a reader who has a couple of free hours, yet such books have a certain low-key pull. For a hardy few, the simple life is the latter-day twentieth-century version of the Promised Land. Well, which of these books might one choose to read first? They come, one could say, in three sorts. They are either missionary, managerial, or celebrations, and without question the best of the three are the celebrations.

Yet the missionary books are probably best for people who are having guilty moments. The normal response is, "Yes, that is what I really ought to do," and the reader may become something of a crusader, even a preacher who spreads the word. Managerial books are for people with scientific tendencies, open to the persuasion of statistics, and who wonder about how to make appropriate definition of tomorrow's social wholes. The best expression of this sort of thinking comes from ecologists. The good celebrations are by writers who are already living the simple life, do it well, and bubble over about it. Once in a while a writer or a writing team like Helen and Scott Nearing is able to combine the appeals of all three approaches.

A useful way to think about the simple life is that it begins with a change of taste. If you believe in evolution and feel that there must be a natural course of further human development—not biological any more, but a spontaneous movement toward some realizable ideal—then the goal of simplicity is likely to be involved. At the same time it is well to recognize that humans are beings of conflicting tastes. The resolution of these conflicts calls for deliberation and decision, followed by action of some sort; and the action opens up fresh areas of development, so that the process begins again.

How are people affected by thinking about such possibilities? Well, if some evolutionary undercurrent toward simplicity is actually under way, then the spread of provocative ideas, resolving motives, and visionary objectives is accomplished in as many ways as nature has found for the dissemination of seeds. One thinks for example of the extraordinary collaboration between the yucca plant and the yucca moth, or the desperate solution of the chaparral manzanita, requiring a forest fire in order to reproduce its kind. Whatever the "gardening" genius helping to animate the next evolutionary impulse of mankind, a vast diversity of means is surely involved.

Example: in *Payne Hollow* (Eakins Press, 1974) Harlan Hubbard, once a shanty-boat owner and always a painter, recalls one of his natural impulses to simplicity, although he doesn't use the word. He tells about how he spends time on the water:

> Our objections to an outboard motor are more subtle, and not generally understood by the practical-minded. It makes a different craft out of the johnboat, a driven thing, quivering as if in pain. A motor is odorous and noisy. Even a small one spoils to some extent communion with the river. It interferes with your contemplation of the sky and the water and the distant view. Its noise discourages conversation, but this in some cases may be a desirable feature.
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> A motor gives its operator a sense of power which is false, for anyone can run the thing. It sets you over to the far shore so quickly and easily that you have not the oarsman's pride of accomplishment; and rowing is an art that can be studied and practiced until a high degree of efficiency, coordination and rhythm is developed. Good rowing is beautiful to watch.
>
> By its undeniable need for gasoline, a motor is another strand tying you to the city; but the greatest price I pay is agony of spirit at its erratic behavior, its failure to start or run properly. After a spell of

> ineffective pulling on the starting cord I feel degraded by what seems a servile relation to it.
>
> At the present time I have gone back to rowing, and thus regained my independence.

There is something to be said on both sides—a motor gives you independence, too; but an inability to value the independence Hubbard is talking about may be about the worst thing that can happen to a human being.

Hubbard writes about independence as an artist. Gandhi wrote about it as patriot, reformer, and moralist. Long ago Chuangtse wrote about it as a Taoist ironist:

> Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, and gangsters will stop. Fling away jade and destroy pearls and petty thieves will cease. Burn tallies and break signets, and the people will revert to their uncouth integrity. Split measures and smash scales, and the people will not fight over quantities. Trample down all the institutions of the Sages, and the people will begin to be fit for discussing (Tao). . . . Destroy arcs and lines, fling away squares and compasses, snap off the fingers of Ch'ui the Artisan, and each man will use his own natural skill. Wherefore the saying, "Great skill appears like clumsiness." . . . When the rulers desire knowledge and neglect Tao, the empire is overwhelmed in confusion.

Oh, another Extremist! one might say. Well, he gets your attention. *Deschooling Society* got attention, too. In days like these extremists attract larger and larger audiences and it becomes important to decide which ones have the best points and do the least harm. Chuangtse and Lao tse wrote for managers, mainly with a transcendent ideal in mind as a value no good ruler will dare to neglect. Few of today's managers are open to such conceptions, so the writers who put together books for managers, or the managerial intelligence in citizens, instead of offering sublime metaphysical propositions, declare that destiny is inscribed in the fabric of Nature and that it is time to study and obey Her mandates, a little ahead of schedule if we can. One good example of such books is Warren Johnson's *Muddling Toward Frugality* (published by the Sierra Club in 1978 and now available in paperback at $2.95 from Shambhala). There are various logics pointing toward the practice of simplicity. Mr. Johnson's logic is that simplicity will be required of us and that it is worth while to discover how and why. This will help us to start changing our taste. Simplicity will then be at least endurable, and we might even learn to like it. A short preface sets the tone of the book:

> If we are to enjoy this planet for a long time, we may as well face the fact that trying to perpetuate the affluent society is going to be an uphill struggle. To maintain the heavy flow of raw materials now being cranked out through our economy will become an increasingly laborious and ultimately desperate task. Affluence will grow less comfortable, and there will be less peace and security in it. If the earth is to be a true home for us, a place of refuge and nurture, we may as well start to think about how we can make it such a place. The task will not be as difficult as it may sound, and requires no wishful thinking about technological breakthroughs, effective government, or heightened human consciousness. We can move toward a secure, sustainable way of life if we accept the logic of frugality.

The book is mostly about the ecological and economic forces that are going to make us frugal whether we want to be or not. Wanting will be better, but for some people wanting will come only as tardy cooperation with the inevitable, not spontaneously, as with celebrators like Harlan Hubbard. *Muddling Toward Frugality*, as the title suggests, takes human nature more or less as it is and traces out the options in relation to obvious trends.

In a chapter toward the end, on "The Pace of Change," the writer gives some good advice:

> The most important obstacle to small-scale alternatives is the difficulty of finding a way to obtain a living. There will be only a limited number of new economic opportunities until prices for energy and raw material go up substantially over present levels. In the meantime, the uncertainties are great. How much easier it would be if we knew for sure how fast the price of energy will go up, how the rising cost of transportation will affect population distribution, or how land prices will change. For example, it could be very advantageous to buy a small farm if the price of food went up in the future along with present

> increases in the prices of farm equipment, energy, and chemicals, such a combination would make a small, labor-intensive farm economically viable. But if a recession were to come along or agricultural surpluses reappeared, the same small farm might not produce enough income to make mortgage payments. Or again, a bakery in a small town requires customers to survive; if the town's population stagnated, a bakery might be a marginal operation, but if the population increased, the baker might congratulate himself or herself for getting in "on the ground floor."
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> In a sense, there is no point in struggling with these economic imponderables. . . . Whether the alternatives are viable does not depend entirely on how much money can be made. More and more, the key to economic survival will be to learn how to get by with less income. There are many opportunities to make a modest income; they will become economically viable opportunities to the first people that are able to get by on the small income generated. . . . A *low income is the heart of frugality.*

As Harlan Hubbard put it, "The secret is, spend little and you will have plenty." This is a great idea, a true idea, an evolutionary idea, but one not easy to get across. Archimedian leverage is needed. Mr. Johnson does his best.

COMMENTARY
NOTES ON SIMPLICITY

WHAT Harlan Hubbard says (page 3) about outboard motors recalls a passage in Wendell Berry's *Long-Legged House* on the speed boats that charge up and down, shattering the quiet of the Kentucky River:

> There is no such thing, apparently, as a slow pleasure boat. Even the large, awkwardly shaped houseboats are customarily equipped with powerful engines and send them along at cruiser speeds. When these boats take to the river in weekend numbers the pleasure of motorboating becomes the only possible pleasure. The use of a rowboat is possible, but hardly pleasant; canoeing can even be dangerous. Fishing, from a boat tossing and beating in the turbulence a cabin cruiser can stir up in a narrow stream, is simply impossible.
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> The use of these fast and powerful boats is not only destructive of the river and of the pleasure of other people; there is a sense, it seems to me, in which it is destructive of the pleasure of the boatmen themselves.
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> I know that if one of these men were asked to justify his sport he would certainly say that there is pleasure in the ownership and use of a fine boat, and that there is a pleasure in speed. I would agree. Some of those boats are indeed beautifully made; I understand the satisfaction there would be in the maintenance and use of one. And I am also a creature of the time and know the pleasure of going fast.

But why, then, choose the narrow, crooked Kentucky, when they have the wide Ohio for dramatic maneuvers?

> The only answer I can think of involves another pathetic paradox. They come in search of peace and quiet, solitude, some restorative contact with the natural world. Which is a little like going in search of a forest with a logging crew. Once they have got it, they have lost it. They come to seek the stillness of a natural place, and their way of seeking assures the failure of their search. They seek relief from restlessness and anxiety in these expensive, superhorsepowered boats, which are embodiments of restlessness and anxiety. They go toward their desire with such violence of haste that they can never arrive. . . . The boatman, then, has become what more and more seems the ideal man of our society: a superconsumer—which is to say, a waster, a ruiner, a benefit to "the economy," a burden to the world.

And this, in turn, recalls Edward Abbey's account of an evening stroll in *Desert Solitaire:*

> I have a flashlight with me but will not use it unless I hear some sign of animal life worthy of investigation. The flashlight, or electrical torch as the English call it, is a useful instrument in certain situations but I can see the road well enough without it. Better, in fact.
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> There's another disadvantage to the use of the flashlight: like many other mechanical gadgets it tends to separate a man from the world around him. If I switch it on my eyes adapt to it and I can see only the small pool of light which it makes in front of me; I am isolated. Leaving the flashlight in my pocket where it belongs, I remain a part of the environment I walk through and my vision though limited has no sharp or definite boundary.

Such ways of thinking may not result from anybody's drive for "simplicity"; perceptiveness and unspoiled taste are not spread around by campaigns; but the pangs of an enforced frugality will not go away without feelings of this sort to hurry them along.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
OUR TRIBAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

THE sharp cutting edge of Neil Postman's prose often depends on generalizations which leave untouched matters which ought, in one way or another, to have attention; at the same time, his surgical exposures are always worth considering. For example, ten or eleven years ago, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (written with Charles Weingartner), he said:

> The institution we call "school" is what it is because we have made it that way. If it is irrelevant, as Marshall McLuhan says; if it shields from reality, as Norbert Wiener says; if it educates for obsolescence, as John Gardner says; if it does not develop intelligence, as Jerome Brunner says; if it is based on fear, as John Holt says; if it avoids the promotion of significant learnings, as Carl Rogers says; if it induces alienation, as Paul Goodman says; if it punishes creativity and independence, as Edgar Friedenberg says; if, in short, it is not doing what needs to be done, it can be changed; it *must* be changed. It can be changed, we believe, because there are so many wise men who, in one way or another have offered us clear, intelligent, and new ideas to use, and as long as these ideas and the alternatives they suggest are available, there is no reason to abandon hope. We have mentioned some of these men above. We will allude to explicate, or otherwise use the ideas of still others throughout this book. For example, Alfred Korzybski, I. A. Richards Adelbert Ames, Earl Kelley, Alan Watts.

This is the blockbuster sort of paragraph you encounter in Neil Postman's writing. It has obvious value. It focuses issues and presents challenges. What does he leave out? Well, a number of the persons he names teach or have taught in schools, so the schools can't be entirely bad or such individuals would be found in some other place. And there are less articulate teachers working in schools who, in spite of all that is going wrong, are giving the young help, confidence, and hope. That doesn't make the schools good, but it raises the question: What other arrangement can we devise for giving such people access to the young? Apparently *they* haven't answered this question, although they do reach a small portion of the public through their critical and other writings. Why, after all, does Neil Postman remain a college professor teaching "Media Ecology" in New York University?

Well, these are rhetorical questions. Plato, whom Postman does not mention, made a similar indictment of the politics of Athens, giving its corruption as the reason why he withdrew from what we now call "public life," in order to study what could be done to improve it. That is, he turned to philosophy in order to discover how his countrymen might be persuaded to pursue the Good. He was unable to believe that much could be accomplished by tinkering with existing institutions. You have, he thought, to get back of the institutions to the humans who make them.

If all the really good men and women now tied down by institutions would withdraw to do something like that, interesting things might happen to our society—or begin to happen. Of course, they like to eat regular meals, which is a part of the problem. People who really institute changes are individuals who find themselves able to go without. Usually, however, their followers and successors have a different view—that good people doing good work deserve to have reasonably comfortable lives. In short, we get a Tom Paine or a Socrates only about once in a century or two, if that frequently. Acknowledging this may have a clarifying value.

What else has Neil Postman left out? Well, he says that there is no reason to abandon hope, but he doesn't list any impressive examples of changes in schooling institutions as a result of the efforts of the distinguished individuals he names or doesn't name. There must be natural laws governing the functions and fortunes of institutions, different from the laws governing the development of unusual humans. While parallels exist between the two processes, they are often very weak. No institution, as we recall, ever cried out to the world: Here I stand, I can do no other! Luther said this *to* an institution, not *from* one. Yet institutions seem to be necessary or inevitable. The hope may be to develop the least harmful ones we can. But they should be as few as possible and as small as possible, and by definition powerless.

This would mean developing strong, good, and intelligent human beings—people who have the virtues which institutions try but fail to replace when they are lacking. But who knows how this is accomplished? Where can we find a book about it? Who could *write* it? Plato could write it, did write it, and what he said has been echoing through our society for more than two thousand years. You may hear some of these echoes in Mr. Postman's prose. Plato was against the mimetic poets, who in his day were, as Eric Havelock points out (in *Preface to Plato*), the TV sets of the time. They compiled the tribal encyclopedia used by the Greeks, but bad as it was, in Plato's view, it now seems in retrospect a lot better than the one we have compiled. Our tastes and behavior, Postman suggests, reflect the going version of "relevance."

Taking off from this idea, Neil Postman says in an article in the *Los Angeles Times* for Jan. 27:

> By this definition of relevance, the best thing the schools could do would be to close their doors and turn the education of our youth over to the electronic media: television film, records and radio. For there can be no doubt that the media have our students' wholehearted attention, and that the "curriculum" of the media—"Star Wars," Fonzie, the Who and the like has a direct and urgent bearing on our students' lives.
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> As a matter of fact, something very close to this has already happened. The average American child, from age 6 to 18, spends about 16,000 hours in front of a television set. The only activity that occupies more of an American youth's time is sleeping. And if we add to TV viewing the amount of time spent listening to records and radio and watching movies, we get a figure in excess of 20,000 hours of "relevance."
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> Given the fact that the media are already the dominating force in the education of our youth, it is reasonable to ask if there is not some other definition of relevance that might be used by the schools during the 12,000 hours our students are required to be there.
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> I believe there is, and it may be simply stated: What has the most relevance to students is that which their culture *least* provides them. This is what Cicero meant when he said that the purpose of education is to free a student from the tyranny of the present. It is also what Andre Gide meant in saying the best education is that which goes counter to one's culture.
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> I call this the thermostatic view of schools. It may also be called the ecological view, which is to say that schools should try to keep the education of our youth in balance. When the culture stresses yin, the schools should stress yang. In this way, there is a continuous dialogue sustained between competing points of view: the teachings of the culture and the teachings of the school. Through this dialogue, students are protected against being overwhelmed by the biases of their own times—for to leave students entirely to the influences of the dominating biases of their culture is to guarantee them a one-dimensional education and a half-developed personality. What is relevant, therefore, is what the culture is insisting is irrelevant. . . .
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> The point I am making is that we can no longer ignore the extent to which the teachings of the media are controlling the direction of the intellectual character of our youth. In the future, the schools must promote, as never before, the skills, values and behaviors that the media either disregard or undermine.

The criticism is valid; are the recommendations good? If they are, they mean that we the people must go before the school boards around the country and tell them how to set up counter-cultural currents, focusing their flow in places established by political authority which—whatever else it is-—is not counter-cultural in either habit or hospitality. For this plan to be successful, the schools, first of all, would have to be made absolutely separate from the State. Are we ready to do this? Great universities have sometimes in the past exercised the influence that Mr. Postman calls for, but hardly at all in the present. How many of these enormous institutions would last more than a year or two without the allocations of "research" funds (military, for the most part) from the government?

The promise for education in our time lies in individuals, not institutions. An institution is by definition not heroic, and going against the prevailing notions and enthusiasms of the culture requires at least some measure of heroic resolve. Does Mr. Postman really think that present-day teachers became teachers, and administrators administrators, from a predisposition to heroism? There are, of course, a few with this tendency, but they don't make the mold of mass public education and never have. Perhaps, like Plato, Mr. Postman is really addressing individuals, appealing to them, trying to arouse them, instead of expecting to change the schools.

FRONTIERS

On "Prevailing" Opinion

A "FRONTIERS" story may reasonably be expected to deal with matters on the edge of history, involving the symptoms and processes of change. Today a great many diverse happenings qualify for inspection as frontier phenomena—transitions we are going through and need to understand. But this week we press for consideration a topic which has been a constant for thousands of years, and therefore of some importance to those active on the frontiers.

In the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* for Feb. 3, Henry Fairlie mourns the vulgarization of a term he gave to popular usage twenty-five years ago—"the Establishment." The word, he says, is not used as he meant it:

> The definition I gave it—which the Oxford English Dictionary repeats, and more or less adopts as its own—was explicit and firm on one point. "The Establishment" is not those people who hold and exercise power as such. It is the people who create and sustain the climate of assumptions and opinion within which power is exercised by those who do hold it by election or appointment.
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> But no sooner had I used the phrase than this careful meaning was lost, and the second edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, which obviously has no great liking for the phrase, quotes me as early as 1959:
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> "Intended to assist inquiry and thought, this virtuous, almost demure phrase has been debauched by the whole tribe of professional publicists and vulgarizers who today imagine that a little ill-will entitles them to comment on public affairs. Corrupted by them, the Establishment is now a harlot of a phrase. It is used indiscriminately by people merely to denote those in positions of power whom they happen to dislike most."

Repeating his original view, Mr. Fairlie goes on:

> Not only is it not power as such which they possess, but it is wholly mistaken to think in terms of any conspiracy. They are a number of men and women with certain very strong assumptions of their own, and with influence to make these assumptions prevail in society as a whole. . . . They keep power at arm's length—as if too fastidious to touch it—but lick it into shape at their dinner tables. It is this feeling that the rules are set by a number of little-known people which "the Establishment" was meant to capture and although the notion may be hardly susceptible to sociological analysis, it is perhaps none the worse for that.

As we said, the Establishment is not a Frontier phenomenon. Quite the opposite. In his analysis of the Sophists and their modes of persuasion, Plato pointed out that the art of rhetoric was for them a means of accommodating their arguments to the ingrained prejudices and unexamined opinions of the time—in short, the dictates of the Establishment. Persuasion which uses Establishment prestige for its leverage produces belief without knowledge. All that is new about the dominion of the Establishment is our growing awareness of how it works.

Mr. Fairlie suspects that sociologists might not care for his idea, but he was in fact anticipated somewhat by a distinguished sociologist, Ortega y Gasset, who gave another name—"Binding Observance"—to the conception. Ortega says in the last chapter of *Man and People* (Norton, 1957):

> Now, the greater part of the ideas by which and from which we live, we have never thought for ourselves, on our own responsibility, nor even rethought. We use them mechanically, on the authority of the collectivity in which we live and from which they waylaid us, penetrated us under pressure like oil in the automobile. . . . From which it follows that the overwhelming majority of our ideas, despite being ideas and acting in us as convictions, are nothing rational but are usages like our language or the handshake; in sum, no less mechanical, unintelligible, and imposed on us than these are.

Ortega also speaks of the necessities of those who try to spread ideas which go counter to Establishment opinion:

> In any case, it is clearly apparent that the person emitting such an opinion is fully conscious that if this private opinion of his is to have any public existence, he or a whole group of like-minded people must affirm it, declare, maintain, support, and propagate it.

> All this becomes even more obvious if we compare it with the expression of opinions that we know or suppose to be accepted by everybody. No one thinks of uttering them as a discovery of his own or as something needing our support. Instead of saying them forcefully and persuasively, it is enough for us to appeal to them, perhaps as a mere allusion, and instead of assuming the attitude of maintaining them, we rather do the opposite—we mention them to find support in them, as a resort to a higher authority, as if they were an ordinance, a rule, or a law. And this is because these opinions are in fact established usages, and "established" means they do not need support and backing from particular individuals or groups, but that, on the contrary, they impose themselves on everyone, exert their constraint on everyone. It is this that leads me to call them "binding observances." . . .
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> The binding force exercised by these observances is clearly and often unpleasantly perceived by anyone who tries to oppose it. At every normal moment of collective existence an immense repertory of these established opinions is an obligatory observance; they are what we call "commonplaces." . . . By this I do not mean to say that they are untrue ideas they may be magnificent ideas; what I do say is that inasmuch as they are observances or established opinions or commonplaces, their possible excellent qualities remain inactive. What acts is simply their mechanical pressure on all individuals, their soulless coercion. It is not without interest that in the most ordinary speech they are called "prevailing opinions."

It is difficult indeed to break out of the straitjacket of binding observances. Socrates worked on this project all his life, and we know the reward he got for his pains. Tom Paine struggled toward a similar objective with equal persistence, and while he managed to free the American people from their ties with England, his effort to emancipate them from their inherited religion was far less successful.