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# THE PROBLEM OF NOISE

THE problem of meaning continually asserts itself in this time of breakdown, flux, and new beginnings. How do we establish the meanings we live by, and what considerations are resisted in order to maintain our position? The question may be a bit offensive, since proper thinkers resist no considerations at all, save those regarded as nonsensical. It might be better to say that we resist matters that seem irrelevant, which is reasonable enough. But relevance, after all, relates to the initial idea of meaning, which has its hierarchy of values, and it is precisely this that we need to examine. Inspection of even apparent nonsense, then, may be in order. Well, yes, someone may say, but who has time for all that?

A disciplined, learned inquiry into the idea of meaning is likely to be dull, since it requires discussion of primary abstractions. In *The Meaning of History,* Erich Kahler, however, who was certainly learned, avoids dullness and we shall borrow from him here. He begins with Heraclitus, who showed that meaning grows out of our awareness of change. Meaning is the relation, for humans, between continuity and change. The relation discloses itself in waves or cycles. Change repeats itself, making the field in which we live our lives. To what end? is the question. Kahler says:

> The Greeks did not yet seek knowledge simply for knowledge's sake, nor essentially for technological and economic advantage. They were not concerned with that aimless amassing of facts, such as is practiced in our historical and social sciences, with that theoretical pragmatism, collecting data for future use, which, even should they be called for, could hardly be reached in the endless files of incoherent material. Greek historical research was pragmatic in a way utterly different from ours: the Greeks wanted to know in order to achieve an orientation in their world, in order to live in the right way; knowledge was closely connected with action, it was indeed a part of action. And living and acting in the right way was not necessarily equated with acting *successfully.* It meant acting and living in accordance with the cosmic order. Research, empirical as well as speculative, was therefore essentially search for the meaning of the cosmic order, meaning, not as purpose and end—for within eternal recurrence of events no purpose or goal of human life was conceivable—but meaning as established form. From pre-Socratic to Stoic thinking the quest for the meaning of cosmic order, which human conduct had to follow, was the prime motive of inquiry.

In Kahler's thought, then, there are two kinds of meaning: *"meaning as purpose, or goal,* and *meaning as form.* Any action, design, quest or search carries meaning as purpose, any work of art is meaning as form." A further statement is of value:

> Since a meaningful coherence requires a conscious mind to conceive it, *history can come about and develop only in connection with consciousness.* As man becomes more aware of the coherence of what he does and what happens to him, in like measure he gives it meaning and makes it into history. In this way he creates history, not only theoretically, as a concept, but actually, as reality. For as soon as a concept forms, it starts influencing and changing the actual world. It fuses with actuality, becomes part of it. People gradually come to act in awareness of the new concept. The concept continues effective, and out of conceptually changed reality an ever more elaborate comprehension of coherence, i.e. more and more consciousness, develops which, in turn, further transforms reality. History, then, appears to be an ever widening process of intercreation between conscious comprehension and material reality.
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> Hence, the vegetable and the animal world have no history, except the one that man, through the broadening scope of his understanding, has given them. The animal has no history because it lacks a conscious memory, an established consciousness of self. In the animal, memory is merely latent, that is to say, it is called up casually, by external stimuli, and their associations; it has never reached a stable, activated continuity, it has not come to form that

inner continuum of emotion, thought and action, which constitutes personal identity. Such grasp of inner coherence, of personal identity is a first, rudimentary concept, and without it no concept of any communal and collective identity—the prerequisite of history—is possible.

So history starts in man.

Something needs to be added here. The capacity to remember the thread of our own lives certainly gives us one sort of identity, but there is another identity which asserts itself at rare moments—in what A. H. Maslow called the "peak experience." In the rapture of such interludes the flow of change is united with the feeling of the unchanging—we become conscious of both change and continuity, the two being made to *fit.* So Kahler's two kinds of meaning come together—purpose and form become one. After this happens, purposes may be altered because a larger sense of meaning has been attained. The changeless has a *light*—it is difficult to say more about it, since "saying" is speaking of change. A peak experience is the meeting of the rational with the trans-rational in transcendent, hardly describable meaning.

Time to come down to earth, to our part of the earth. The American conception—or misconception—of meaning is of interest and importance to us. Whatever it is, our lives are tangled up in it. What we do in our personal identities may have some originality and independence, but this is accomplished within or against the framework of the generalized purposes of our countrymen. Some paragraphs by John Lahr in the January *Harper's,* shortened by omissions, serve admirably to provide this setting. He begins:

Every society is built on a sense of collective mission, but the particular virulence of America's dreams had its origin in the promise of the New World. . . . Dreaming, not freedom and equality, was the first inalienable right of the settlers. From the outset, the nation's credo was "I dream, therefore I am." . . .

When the colonies became a nation, democracy tumbled the barriers of privilege and replaced them with the obstacles of competition. America's yearning was quickly channeled into a quest for status and well-being, wealth being the only recognized distinction in a society that had rejected the aristocratic distinctions of birth and profession. . . . Dreams goaded every citizen to test his freedom. The immigrant could leave his failures and his past behind him, rewrite his history, pursue the idea of perfectibility that seemed built into the continent and the Constitution. Tomorrow, he might find his fortune, his homestead, his roots. . . .

Dreams made the society great, and anticipation drove it crazy. By the time de Tocqueville toured America in 1831, he found "an agitated mass" who were "restless in the midst of abundance." Even then the dream was entrenched and the populace spellbound in its hurry for well-being. The abundance that inspired dreams of perfectibility also robbed Americans of peace of mind. They were in the thrall of expectation and in fear of disappointment. They fueled their nervous solitude with frantic activity. . . .

With the frontier closed, with the exoduses to the big cities, with mass production promising a democracy of objects while reducing man's labor to a series of movements, the dreaming's negative aspect became apparent. Dreaming was not only a spur to but a refuge from the momentum and boredom of the new industrial rhythm. Day-dreamers became a central theme of American culture. The dazed resilience of the silent film clowns, those little men who bounced back from every act of violence while staunchly pursuing their goal, epitomized the spellbound triumphant.

While Mr. Lahr has more to say, this seems a sufficient characterization of our time. For him it is a long preface to notes on *American Dreams: Lost and Found* by Studs Terkel, a book the *Harper's* editor much admires. Terkel, he says, has gone in search of "the little man with a big story of struggle as an antidote to the enchantment he sees around him." What is the enchantment? Terkel writes with bitter brevity:

Forfeiting their own life experience, their native intelligence, their personal pride, they allow more celebrated surrogates, whose imaginations may be no larger than theirs, to *be* for them in the name of the greater good. Conditioned toward being "nobody," they look toward "somebody" for the answer. It is not what the American town meeting was all about.

Studs Terkel is a folksinger of sorts. The stuff of his books is the melancholy of undeserved defeat. It is the cry of pain set to a melodic line, an art of reproach. He turns his report into dark prophecy. As John Lahr says:

> Whether Terkel is talking to black Mississippi farmer Hartman Turnbow ("We makin' dyin' progress. We makin' progress to dig our grave") or the old activist-turned-prophet of self-sufficiency Scott Nearing ("The job is to keep your head above water and to do your share in making the dying society as tolerable as possible"), a great sense of demoralization emerges from these tales. People and resources are outrageously wasted, and the dreaming exacerbates the despotism even as it tries to assuage it.

Studs Terkel is saying to somebody or everybody—precisely *who?*—Look what you have done, at what you go on doing! And hundreds of accomplished critics are indicting all the social groupings, the government, the industries, the professions, the schools, the churches. Everyone, quite plainly, is guilty. Our purposes—taken together, the American Dream—aren't working any more. Our history is losing its meaning, and unless we are able to find another Dream our life will not go on.

There were, of course, other, earlier prophets who saw all this coming at least a century ago, among them Amiel, Heine, and Tolstoy. The meanings you are acting on, they said, are not the real meanings. How could the modern sense of meaning be simply put? Well, we could start with Hesiod. In the beginning, he said, repeating the belief of the Greeks, there was Chaos, and we took that to mean the last-ditch condition of entropic disorder. For Leucippus and Democritus, as we understand them, Chaos became the primordial "atoms and the void," the atoms just bouncing around as they felt like it. Meaning doesn't begin until *we* take hold, imposing our purposeful arrangements. We make patterns out of the raw materials of nature and see our idea of meaning embodied in a multitude of things. It was all just random happenings until we came on the scene. Now there begins to be purpose in the world, added by us. The Babylonians may have thought that Chaos was the abode of wisdom, the storehouse of future worlds, but for American children of the Enlightenment, this was all fanciful hearsay, and heathen hearsay at that. Here was this big continent, just waiting for boldly ingenious people to come along and organize it at a profit. It was chaos waiting for us to arrange. For a variety of reasons, Americans were good at making arrangements, the envy—for a time—of the rest of the world.

But today, things are different. Process after process is tied up by shortages, strikes, foreign conflicts, with regulation and "interference" at home. Our destiny is rapidly becoming unmanifest. And during the past twenty-five years, two classes of critics have emerged, both brilliantly effective. One class, which gets the most attention, keeps pointing out that we are doing things wrong for where we want to go. The other class, gaining additional audience every day, says that we are going in the wrong direction, and we had better start all over again. But this being hard to imagine, we tend to listen more closely to the first set of critics, if we listen at all. They tell us how they think the system ought to be changed or fixed, in order to work more efficiently. They don't question our purposes, but only our resourcefulness in trying to fulfill them. They make spot checks in various parts of the system, then write books and articles showing how impossible our normal expectations have become. These critics are the intelligent technicians.

A man who combined both sorts of criticism effectively was E. F. Schumacher. His primary interest was in a change in purpose, in the human sense of meaning, but knowing as well as he did the language of technical criticism, he was able to speak at both levels. But at heart he wanted to draw attention to the idea of "acting and living in accordance with the cosmic order." Instead of pointing to the old Greeks, he used the Gospels, Gandhi, and what he called "Buddhist Economics" as sources for what he understood the cosmic

order to be, and made a lot of relevant connections of this wisdom with the everyday economics of our lives.

Now this is for us a new idea. We have heard the expression, "harmony with nature," but "cosmic order" has a more comprehensive ring. It seems to suggest that there is actual purpose in the world itself, and in world processes. And we ask: *What* purpose, in those atoms bouncing all around? Where, indeed, might one look for instruction in the meaning of the cosmic order, supposing we ought to try to get in line?

The problem in raising questions like that is that you have to try to answer them. This is embarrassing. What good is it to tell people to consult the cosmos? Yet that seems about all there is to say. Fortunately, the cosmos has various ways of expressing itself. And, over the centuries, it has had various spokesmen. Lao tse was one who turned up in China, and the Buddha appeared in India. You find glints of a natural religion in the work of many. Close to our time were Emerson and Thoreau. It was Emerson who declared that Nature—or the Cosmic Order—finds a voice in every human being. Yet to hear it may require a supernatural effort. He said:

> To the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise and will not be rashly explained. Her secret is untold. Many and many an Œdipus arrives: he has the whole mystery teeming in his brain. Alas! the same sorcery has spoiled his skill; no syllable can he shape on his lips. Her mighty orbit vaults like the fresh rainbow into the deep, but no archangel's wing was yet strong enough to follow it, and report of the return of the curve. But it also appears, that our actions are seconded and disposed to greater conclusions than we designed. We are escorted on every hand through life by spiritual agents, and a beneficent purpose lies in wait for us. We cannot bandy words with nature, or deal with her as we deal with persons. If we measure our individual forces against hers, we may easily feel as if we were the sport of an insuperable destiny. But if, instead of identifying ourselves with the work, we feel that the soul of the workman streams through us, we shall find the peace of the morning dwelling first in our hearts, and the fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry, and, over them, of life, pre-existing within us in their highest form.

And now, in his time, he speaks to ours:

> We anticipate a new era from the invention of a locomotive or a balloon; the new engine brings with it the old checks. They say that by electro-magnetism, your salad shall be grown from the seed, whilst your fowl is roasting for dinner: it is a symbol of our modern aims and endeavors—of our condensation and acceleration of objects: but nothing is gained: nature cannot be cheated; man's life is but seventy salads long, grow they swift or grow they slow. In these checks and impossibilities, however, we find our advantage, not less than in the impulses. . . .
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> Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind, of natural objects, whether inorganic or organized. Man imprisoned, man crystallized, man vegetative, speaks to man impersonated. . . . Every moment instructs, and every object: for wisdom is infused into every form. It has poured into us as blood, it convulsed us as pain; it slid into us as pleasure; it enveloped us in dull, melancholy days, or in days of cheerful labor; we did not guess its essence, until after a long time.

Why are there not more men like Emerson, who surely knew how to learn from nature, and how to conform his life to the cosmic order?

It may be that today there is too much noise. "America," John Lahr writes, "has become a society of exciting distractions." In the same issue of *Harpers'* (*January*) another writer describes the distortions by the press, even the serious press, of what Islam means and what Islamic people are like. "Islam," he says, "is only what holds the West's oil reserves; little else counts, little else deserves attention." This is but one of our many problems, and the article, "Inside Islam," by Edward W. Said, is fully occupied with listing the misconceptions and misinformation about Iranians and Arabs that have been spread around. Where should one turn for a better understanding? Since de Tocqueville, as evidenced by the frequency with which he is quoted, is still, after a hundred

and fifty years, a good source for understanding Americans, we wondered if a somewhat later writer of the nineteenth century, Charles M. Doughty, would not be worth going back to for reading about Islam and the Arabs. Turning to *Arabia Deserta,* Doughty's account of two years spent in Arabia, wandering and living with Arabs, we got as far as T. E. Lawrence's introduction (the two volumes are now available in a Dover edition, of appropriate size and excellence). Lawrence, who also knew the Arabs well, wrote in 1921:

> Common rumour makes them as unchanging as the desert in which they live; but more often they show themselves singularly receptive, very open to useful innovations. Their few vested interests make it simple for them to change their ways; but even so it is astonishing to find how wholeheartedly they adopt an invention fitted to their life. Coffee, gunpowder, Manchester cotton are all new things, and yet appear so native that without them one can hardly imagine their desert life.
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> Consequently, one would expect a book such as *Arabia Deserta,* written forty years ago, to be inaccurate today in such little respects, and had Doughty's work been solely scientific, dependent on the expression rather than the spirit of things, its day might have passed. Happily the beauty of the telling, its truth to life, the rich gallery of characters and landscapes in it, will remain for all time, and will keep it peerless, as the indispensable foundation of all true understanding of the desert.

Doughty did not go to Arabia in quest of the cosmic order, but to find ancient monuments and copy their inscriptions. It is a question whether one who tries to seek that order out, as one looks for gold or uranium, will find much of anything. But that such inquirers as Doughty show by their lives that they have made some discoveries is undeniable. And the record of what they did is free from "noise."

This, surely, is the beginning of any serious search—to get rid of the noise.

# *REVIEW*
## ACTION OR GROWTH?

AS preparation for war continues in the United States—and everywhere else—it seems a good idea to take another look at a little book published in 1944 and reviewed here during the first year of MANAS—in 1948. The book is *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (Allen and Unwin) by B. H. Liddell Hart. Hart is a historian and journalist of military affairs. As World War II wound down he asked the plaintive question of his title. Hart has plenty of credentials. He was a captain in the British army in World War I, a correspondent for the *London Times,* military adviser to the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* and consultant to the British cabinet. His book is filled with sagacity and common sense.

It is also filled with evidence that modern nations keep on making terrible mistakes, sometimes costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of human beings. In fact, after you read his report on the conduct of war and his generalizations about human nature at the "leadership" level, there remains little reason to *expect* nations to learn from history. Nations, it becomes evident, have no interest in learning much of anything. The real question, then, is why people entrust them with so much power. While institutions may be individual human beings writ large, and much that people do in person is reflected in national behavior, it is also true that the restraints felt by individuals, simply because they are human, are mostly absent in institutions such as nations. We establish nations with only a part of ourselves—by no means the best part—and then, having other things to do, leave the conduct of its affairs to elected and appointed officials. After a while they mistake sovereignty for welfare and build up behavior patterns that cannot be changed except by a major cataclysm—which is no way to make a new beginning.

If, while we are still in the twentieth century, we are able to learn that it is virtually impossible for *nations* to learn anything from history, the twenty-first may afford a chance to survive.

Mr. Hart shows mainly that individuals *do* learn from history, but remain unable to influence national affairs. We have selected some quotations to show the value of his book. In the first few pages he writes on the unwelcome character of truth.

> We learn from history that in every age and every clime the majority of people have resented what seems in retrospect to have been purely matter of fact comment on their institutions. We learn too that nothing has aided the persistence of falsehood, and the evils resulting from it, more than the unwillingness of good people to admit the truth when it was disturbing to their comfortable assurance. Always the tendency continues to be shocked by natural comment, and to hold certain things too "sacred" to think about. I can conceive of no finer ideal of man's life than to face life with clear eyes instead of stumbling through it like a blind man, an imbecile, or a drunkard—which, in a thinking sense, is the common preference. How rarely does one meet anyone whose first reaction to anything is to ask: "Is it true?" Yet, unless that is a man's natural reaction, it shows that truth is not uppermost in his mind, and unless it is, true progress is unlikely.

"True progress" seems least of all likely for nations. Why don't we face it and begin to devise some other form of human association? A few people are already working along these lines, taking back what responsibility they can and developing community-style social relationships as more important than "nationality," but to ween the great majority of their dependence on the state will take a particular kind of education.

The criticism of historians is a help. Barbara Tuchman has pointed out that the only thing you can be sure of in regard to national policy is that it will be stupid. She wrote in *Esquire* for last May:

> Why did Lyndon Johnson, seconded by the best and brightest, progressively involve this nation in a war both ruinous and halfhearted and from which nothing but bad for our side resulted? Why does the present Administration continue to avoid introducing effective measures to reduce wasteful consumption of oil while members of OPEC follow a price policy that

must bankrupt their customers? How is it possible that the Central Intelligence Agency, whose function it is to provide, at taxpayers' expense, the information necessary to conduct a realistic foreign policy, could remain unaware that discontent in a country crucial to our interests was boiling up to the point of insurrection and overthrow of the ruler on whom our policy rested? It has been reported that the CIA was ordered *not* to investigate the opposition to the shah of Iran in order to spare him any indication that we took it seriously, but since this sounds more like the theater of the absurd than like responsible government, I cannot bring myself to believe it.

The conscription of men for war was begun by Napoleon. The British were slow to adopt it, but, as Liddell Hart says, the Nazi system seemed to persuade many Englishmen of its value. But as a historian he points out:

> Such a system entails the suppression of individual judgment—the Englishman's most cherished right. It violates the cardinal principle of a free community: that there should be no restriction of individual freedom save where this is used for active interference in others' freedom. . . . It was an advance in British civilization which brought us, first to question, and then to discard, the press-gang as well as the slave-trade. The logical connection between the two institutions, as violations of our principles was obvious. Is the tide of our civilization now on the ebb? In respect of personal service, freedom means the right to be true to your convictions, to choose your course, and decide whether the cause is worth service and sacrifice. That is the difference between the free man and the State-slave.
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> Unless the great majority of a people are willing to give their services there is something radically at fault in the State itself. In that case the State is not likely or worthy to survive under test—and compulsion will make no serious difference. . . . We ought to realize that it is easier to adopt the compulsory principle of national life than to shake it off. Once compulsion for personal service is adopted in peace-time, it will be hard to resist the extension of the principle to all other aspects of the nation's life, including freedom of thought, speech, and writing. We ought to think carefully, and to think ahead, before taking a decisive step towards totalitarianism. Or are we so accustomed to our chains that we are no longer conscious of them?

The impression grows that the principles of a good life for individuals are the exact opposite of the rules adopted for the welfare of the State. War, as Randolph Bourne affirmed, is the health of the State. Force is its major tool. It is rather interesting to find a military scholar saying:

> The more I have reflected on the experience of history the more I have come to see the instability of solutions achieved by force, and to suspect even those instances where force has had the appearance of resolving difficulties. But the question remains whether we can afford to eliminate force in the world as it is without risking the loss of such ground as reason has gained. Beyond this is the doubt whether we should be able to eliminate it, even if we had the strength of mind to take such a risk. For weaker minds will cling to this protection, and by so doing spoil the possible effectiveness of non-resistance. Is there any way out of the dilemma? There is at least one solution that has as yet to be tried—that masters of force should be those who have mastered all desire to employ it. That solution is an extension of what Bernard Shaw expressed in *Major Barbara* thirty-three years ago: that wars would continue until the makers of gunpowder became professors of Greek—and he here had Gilbert Murray in mind—or the professors of Greek became the makers of gunpowder. And this, in turn, was derived from Plato's conclusion that the affairs of mankind would never go right until either the rulers became philosophers or the philosophers became the rulers. If armed force were controlled by men who have become convinced of the wrongness of using force there would be the nearest approach to a safe assurance against its abuse.

The only hope for the future, Liddell Hart concludes, lies with the spread of effective individual thinking. Here the use of compulsion is completely ridiculous. No one can force a human to think. You may, however, be able to weaken his thinking. As Hart observes at the end of his little book:

> For collective action it suffices if the mass can be managed; collective growth is only possible through the freedom and enlargement of individual minds. . . . Once the collective importance of each individual in helping or hindering progress is appreciated, the experience contained in history is seen to have a personal, not merely a political, significance. What can the individual learn from history—as a guide to living? Not what to do, but

what to strive for. And what to avoid in striving. The importance and intrinsic value of behaving decently. The importance of seeing clearly—not least of seeing himself clearly.

Finally, there is this "counsel of perfection":

He has to learn how to detach his *thinking* from every desire and interest, from every sympathy and antipathy—like ridding oneself of superfluous tissue, the "tissue" of untruth which all human beings tend to accumulate, for their own comfort and protection. And he must keep fit, to become fitter. In other words, he must be true to the light he has seen.

In other words, he must do what he can to realize an ideal that is quite impossible for States even to consider, much less to work toward. In our time, the State has become the "superfluous tissue," as anyone can see. Getting rid of it will be a project in which conventional politics will be no help at all.

# *COMMENTARY*
## A POET'S THEORY OF PROGRESS

IT is impossible to read Emerson without being fascinated by his sense of certainty. In the essays quoted on page 7, he declares that "Nature is the incarnation of a thought," and his expansion of this idea seems a virtual alchemy of words. How does he know all that? Yet his claim is not an invention but a statement of what he feels from the depth of his being. Is it conceivable that all real knowledge comes to us in this way? That reason and logic but sanction what is so beheld, which then seems to others the result of some wonderful process of deduction?

Poets, no doubt, would agree, but poetic vision is a guide only to poets. Perhaps we err in not listening to them more closely. It is not impossible that the poets, taken at their best, are actually the unconscious legislators of the future, as Shelley declared, and as Harold Goddard agreed, saying that they "know what is coming." More lately an eminent ethologist has suggested that there is now reason (from certain finding of depth psychology) "to interpret the revelations granted to poets as sources of scientific information." We may not know how the ethologist reached this conclusion, but since he is Konrad Lorenz it might be taken seriously.

It would certainly be well to take Emerson seriously. In a lecture in 1838 he said that men should put their trust in *ideas,* not circumstances, because circumstances have their origin in ideas. He spoke of the vast and imposing preparations for war, which make men suppose that these massive installations "will not yield in centuries to the feeble, deprecatory voices of friends of peace."

> Thus always we are daunted by appearances; not seeing that their whole value lies at bottom in the state of mind. It is really a thought that built this portentous war establishment, and a thought shall melt it away. Every nation and every man instantly surround themselves with a material apparatus which exactly corresponds to their moral state, or their state of thought. Observe how every truth and every error, each a *thought* of some man's mind, clothes itself with societies, houses, cities, language, ceremonies, newspapers. . . .
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> The standing army, the arsenal, the camp and the gibbet do not appertain to man. They only serve as an index to show where man is now; what a bad, ungoverned temper he has; what an ugly neighbor he is; how his affections halt; how low his hope lies. . . . It is avarice and hatred; it is that quivering lip, that cold, hating eye, which built magazines and powder houses.
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> It follows of course that the least change in the man will change his circumstances; the least enlargement of his ideas, the least mitigation of his feelings in respect to other men if, for example, he . . . should come to feel that every man was another self with whom he might come to join, as left hand works with right. Every degree of ascendancy of this feeling would cause the most striking changes of external things: the tents would be struck; the men-of-war would rot ashore; the arms rust, the cannon would become streetposts; the pikes, a fisher's harpoon; the marching regiment would be a caravan of emigrants, peaceful pioneers at the fountains of the Wabash and the Missouri. And so it must and will be; bayonet and sword must first retreat a little from their ostentatious prominence; then quite hide themselves, as the sheriff's halter does now, inviting the attendance only of relations and friends; and then, lastly, will be transferred to the museums of the curious, as poisoning and torturing tools are at this day.

There is not great difference between what Emerson says and the measured hopes of Liddell Hart in Why *Don't We Learn from History?*

# CHILDREN
## . . . and Ourselves
### INDIVIDUALITY IN COMMUNITY

A WRITER in the Topanga Canyon (Calif.) *Messenger* for last Nov. 26, Rasa Gustaitis, discussing what the world, especially our part of it, will be like when children now ten or twelve years old have reached maturity, declares that the schools must change. She is right, of course, in that the schools will need to be very different. It is a question, however, whether planning such changes is the thing to do. Miss Gustaitis seems aware of this. She says:

> To expect the schools to lead the way (in the necessary retooling) would be foolish. Schools reflect their society rather than lead it by and large, and right now the entire school system is crumbling because of its own inability to change. The opportunity waits within the crisis.

Which crisis, and opportunity for whom?

> Worldwide, the future readout is for shrinking shares of diminishing resources. The Global 2000 Report to the President, latest of many alarming bulletins about what is ahead states that by the time today's 10-year-olds are 30, there will be less available water, less fertile land, less clean air, less wilderness. One fifth of the species with whom we now co-inhabit the planet will probably be extinct. There will be less natural diversity, less leeway for waste and conflict, and the gap between those who have and those who hunger is expected to widen.

The threat of diminishing food supply suggests that the work of Frances Moore Lappé and her colleagues at the Institute for Food and Development Policy is about the most important adult educational activity now going on. A reading of *Food First,* which she wrote with Joseph Collins, will persuade most readers of this, and a later publication, *What Can We Do?* is filled with practical suggestions telling what some people are already doing to help increase the food supply in the world. (The Institute is at 9588 Mission St., San Francisco, Calif. 94110.)

Meanwhile, at the suggestion of a reader, we call attention to the five pages that Jeremy Rifkin devotes to agriculture in *Entropy* (reviewed in MANAS for last Nov. 19). He presents a curious contrast: the present American ability to produce 20 per cent of the world's wheat and feed grains, half of it for export, with the exhaustion of our soil.

> According to the Council for Agricultural Science, "A third of all cropland is suffering soil losses too great to be restrained without a gradual, but ultimately disastrous, decline in productivity." The National Academy of Science now estimates that one third of all valuable U.S. farmland topsoil is already gone forever. As the topsoil erodes, more chemical fertilizers have to be added just to make up for the deficit. In 1974, it would have taken $1.2 billion worth of chemical fertilizers to replace the natural nutrients lost through soil erosion. Our farming technology, then, is caught in a vicious spiral of greater energy infusions in the form of fertilizers and pesticides and greater losses in the form of soil erosion and pest resistance.

Rasa Gustaitis continues with anticipations of changes in our lives:

> What these near certainties will mean to the quality of life of today's children is not so clear, however. A lot will depend on what changes occur in values and lifestyles. There is the prospect that life could be meaner, more frightening, and less free. But it is also possible that the current stress will allow a breakthrough to new possibilities, based on perceptions of interdependence.
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> In view of all this, it is clear that the most basic of all basics is preparation for change. Skills need to be cultivated that lead to creative acceptance of change and allow individuals to shape their course and to choose their destiny.

This seems a way of saying that we need above all to teach the young how to land on their feet, how to rely on themselves, how to bypass the conventional expectations of the passive majority. But there is no conceivable reason for abandoning the three Rs. These are tools of self-reliance, and have been for more than a thousand years. John of Salisbury, who died in England in 1180, said: "Those to whom the system of the Trivium has

disclosed the significance of words, or the rules of the Quadrivium have unveiled the secrets of nature, do not need the help of a teacher in order to understand the meaning of books and to find the solution of questions."

Happily, children can all learn these things at home, and the rest is up to them. The home can be a school, also the community. Ed Marston, who used to teach college physics, but then edited a weekly newspaper in Colorado—feeling, perhaps, that this work is more fruitful than working in a university—wrote a book, *The Dynamic Environment,* in which he shows how the basic sciences can all be taught from examples of the technology of cities—how their power, transport, water supply, sewerage systems, and other services work. Of course, to provide children with this sort of education, parents must become self-reliant and inventive, too. A spur in this direction is given by Rasa Gustaitis' down-to-earth report:

> No longer can we rely on institutions like government and corporations for stability and integrity. This is clear in Flint, Michigan, the city with the country's highest unemployment rate. How Flint residents see themselves and their role in life now is shaped by the city's dependence on General Motors and the auto industry.
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> But now that GM is not expected to be hiring anyone in the foreseeable future, many young people are adrift, feeling hopeless, seeing no role for themselves in society.

Called for is a deliberate attempt at the restoration of Yankee ingenuity. Which brings to mind a recent letter in which a reader said:

> I knew a fellow (when we lived in New Mexico) who gave up a lucrative position back East, came to the mountains, built himself a solar type home. He drew his own plans, no previous training, but a lot of reading. Several government agencies looked it over, a couple offered him a job. His impression was that they were all talk, and knew little or nothing about the subject they were being paid to tell others about.

It is easy enough to write about "systems" of education. Systems treat children like marbles or ballbearings. But the kind of inventiveness they need as part of their home environment is not easy to tell about at all. Each child is different, each parent is different. This recalls a scene in an old book with a forgotten title, a story of revolutionary times. A farmer on Long Island was plowing his field, a copy of John Locke on Civil Government balanced on one of the handles of his plow. He could glance at it as he went along, and even get through a few pages. As he absorbed what Locke said, he planned how to tell it to his children after dinner. America will need parents like that. If the schools break down, and they are likely to, there will be at least some children eager to listen to and question a parent like that. But now, instead of going back to Locke, the text might be Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America*

If there are to be new schools, and there will, we may be sure, this advice in the Topanga *Messenger* article seems good:

> Among the usable treasures up there in the attic is the old potluck dinner tradition, legacy of an earlier time when cooperation was required for survival. In a potluck, as in the society of the future, individual competitiveness yields to individuality within community. The planners of a potluck, like the planners of a changing society or a changing school system, must be open-minded, leaving as much as possible to participants. . . . As to particulars of the curriculum, much of it needs to be rebuilt—with fresh perspective—from the very liberal arts fare that is now being discarded in the name of practicality.

And for those who take seriously their parental responsibility to their children, a subscription to John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* (308 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116—$10 a year) would provide plenty of ideas on what to do.

# *FRONTIERS*

## Busing in Kenya

UNHAPPILY, our office atlas map of Kenya, on the east coast of Africa, is too small to identify the Taita Hills, about seven and a half miles from the town of Voi, so we can't really say where in Kenya the rural neighborhood called Mraru, consisting of eight small villages, is located, but wherever it is, the women of Mraru are making history of a sort. Back in 1970, forty-seven of them got together and formed a club (affiliated with the national women's organization called Maendeleo ya Wanawake (in Swahili, "Women's Progress"), and, having an active person, Mrs. Eva Mwaluma, to chair their gatherings, they planned some action to improve their condition. It happens that in Kenya the rural adult population is 70 per cent women, since the men go off to the cities in search of paying jobs. This leaves the women to solve all everyday problems, some of which are difficult to bear. The regional market is in Voi, too far to bring goods to sell on foot, and too far to walk carrying a sick child to the clinic there.

This is the beginning of a story told by Jill Kneerim, "Village Women Organize: The Mraru Bus Service," in the first of a pamphlet series titled *Seeds* (sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and the Population Council). The background is this:

> There aren't many buses to Voi, and almost all are fully loaded by the time they reach Mraru. If there is any space it goes to the men, not women, Men first: that is the tradition in the countryside of Kenya, and for the women the tradition is to resign themselves to it. But in 1971, the Mraru women decided to do something else. They decided to buy their own bus.
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> This sounds like an unusual decision, and it was. How could a handful of rural women with no regular incomes, in a country where few women own property, collect enough money for the down payment on a vehicle and then persuade a bank to lend them the balance? It sounded like a daydream. But six years later, with the bus paid for and running a regular route to Voi every day, the Mraru Women's Group had declared a dividend to its early shareholders and was building a retail shop with its profits.
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> The Taita women in Mraru are not wealthy or well educated or in any other way noticeably different from village women in other parts of Kenya, or even other parts of the world. Virtually all of them raise large families and produce the family's food in *shambas,* small plots owned by their husbands. They earn some cash by selling maize or cassava root or goats they have bred (when they can get these goods to market) or from trade, buying small quantities of goods at wholesale which they can sell at retail. In a good year, a typical woman in Mraru may make 1,000 Kenya shillings, about US $130, which she usually spends on the family: school fees for the children, the food she doesn't grow herself, corrugated roofing for the house.

The spunky ladies of Mraru—Jill Kneerim's photographs, on every page of the pamphlet, convince you of their resourcefulness—started saving their money for a bus. They set the value for one share in the enterprise at 200 shillings (about $27). How could these practically incomeless women save?

> Like many other groups of women in Kenya who form savings societies, they met every month, and each member contributed what she could afford. Those without money brought eggs, hens, fruits—anything of value. These contributions were given a cash value and entered in the record book along with cash payments for the month. At one typical meeting, they collected 793 shillings. Next day the funds were deposited in the Mraru Maendeleo ya Wanawake savings account at the post office in Voi.
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> Small things accumulate. By 1973, they had saved 27,000 shillings ($3,600). That was sufficient capital for Mrs. Mwaluma to go to Mombasa, some 170 kilometers away to place an order for a bus with the Cooper Motor Corporation. This was the beginning of a long process. Construction of the bus body would take time and would not begin until an order was placed. The Cooper branch manager figured out the costs. The bus, an 11,760-pound British Leyland diesel with an aluminum body and seating for 21 passengers, would cost 111,780 shillings, including finance costs (about $15,000). Cooper would need a down payment of 47,800 to release the bus. The group would have to raise

> 21,000 shillings more just for the down payment. In addition, they would have to get a very substantial loan to cover the remainder of the purchase price, and their only collateral was their determination to succeed. The bus itself would not be considered collateral because rough, over-crowded roads and reckless drivers make vehicles too vulnerable.

What could they do? They put on fund-raising parties—*harambees,* they are called, a custom established by Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta *(harambees* means "join together" and is the country's national motto)—and more women joined the group, bringing in cash. Friends talked to a national credit union and they obtained a loan, but they still didn't have enough money. But by then they had won admirers.

> The sense of excitement about what the Mraru Group had achieved so far was not surprising. After all, the group had started with no assets, no special talents, and no wealthy members, yet it had saved an incredible 41,000 shillings in just three years. Now it was on its way to persuading a bus company and a bank to break tradition by lending money to a group of women.

A friend in Mombasa personally guaranteed a loan for the final 7,000 shillings and the ladies got busy raising money to pay it back. So they got the bus and in May, 1975, it started running between Mraru and Voi, making several trips a day. It was a good bus with a rack on top to carry things like charcoal and crates of chickens to market. The group began to make money and in a year and a half had paid off all debts.

> By 1977 they had 12,000 shillings in the bank and were accumulating more all the time. The group then declared half the money as a dividend and targeted the remaining funds for a new enterprise, a *duka* or retail shop in Mraru. The dividend, distributed in proportion to each woman's shares, was a stunning success. Women who had never owned anything in their lives, and many who had pursued this project despite their husbands' disgruntled complaints, now were receiving a return on their investment.

So they acquired more members and built the store. The bus, of course, wore out, and while the store was a success, it didn't coin money the way the bus did. So now they are again saving for another bus. It's just, Jill Kneerim says, a matter of time.