

## SOME LAWS OF NATURE

THERE are enough similarities between children and grown-ups for vital lessons to be learned by adults from child education. Actually, the differences between them have been largely exaggerated in order to accommodate the logic of democratic politics and to rationalize the administrative procedures of mass education. Adults, we assume, passed through some kind of magical change somewhere between the ages of eighteen to twenty-one, becoming responsible citizens who qualify for the benefits of democratic Equality and can be held accountable for what they do. Children, however, do not know what is good for them and have to be properly managed until they learn.

It simplifies things to limit discussion to the American past, enabling us to say that for a long time—for, say, the first hundred years of American history—the theory of responsible adulthood worked pretty well. A spacious continent absorbed the worst effects of the messes made by grown-ups. Two big oceans protected Americans from close contact with the troubles of the rest of the world. The rewards of natural riches stimulated the exercise of natural energies, and there remained new, untouched lands to which restless, independent men could migrate. By any calculation, policing requirements were slight. The contest was between Man and Nature, not between man and man. People could decide what they wanted and go after it, without getting into much trouble. From the viewpoint of our comparison, the first century of the American Republic's history was one big adolescent Ball. It seems likely that various happy accidents joined with youthful exuberance to produce results that have gravely been set down as evidence of the extraordinary virtue of the American people—who, like anyone else visited by good fortune, saw nothing remarkable in recognizing themselves and

their activities as an expression of a Higher Destiny. What is self-evident needs no justification. The facts are there for anyone to see.

Things are different now. The American continent is practically filled up. Its overgrown cities are crowded to bursting, and if you read the papers you know that due to ideological rivalries and territorial imperatives as well as population growth, the whole world suffers from a pronounced crowding effect, both psychic and physical. The borders of the great nations are increasingly defined by formidable armament, with practically cosmic devices under way for greater security against an unpredictable foe.

Pure suspicion is now the most costly luxury in the budgets of the great powers. Almost no one gets up to speak, today, in the assemblies of the nations without voicing grievance and resentment, and this is followed, whenever possible, by the formal rhetoric of *threat*.

Scowling, righteous hostility is the only admitted sign of national health, judging from current diplomatic practice, and all lesser goals give way to the determination to back this angry visage with the elaborate technology of destruction. Machines for killing claim the constant attention of skillful scientists, and year by year or month by month they are improved in capacity and range. Are we not *right*? the leaders exclaim when vast appropriation bills must be passed. What is life without truth and goodness? the people say to themselves, giving their reluctant consent.

This portrait is not exaggerated, if we allow for the omission of ineffectual pieties. Surely, no more books need to be written to point out the madness of all this hostility, war, and preparation for war, said to be the only means to both national

survival and bringing the misguided of the earth to righteousness and truth. The lessons of history are before us, the moral capital of the world close to exhaustion, and the denunciations of righteous men produce little more than further demonstrations of the law of diminishing returns. Is sheer collapse the only form of experience from which men will learn? If they will not learn it from repeated failures abroad, will they learn it from another kind of catastrophic failure at home?

It may be hard to say to ourselves that men who will not change their views from either reason or the lessons of experience had best be left alone. What can be done about people who recognize only the harshest methods of "persuasion," yet refuse to see that they do not persuade? There are, it may be, no *total* solutions for such problems. It seems clear that the desperate insistence on total solutions has already turned the entire world into an ideological battlefield. So it may be a question, now, of ignoring the appeal of these unworkable methods and putting all one's energies into less pretentious but at least practicable projects. Even if those who claim that there can be no real decisions except *command* decisions continue to rely on hostility and compulsion, other men can devote themselves to more rational pursuits. Talk, it seems, won't change the minds of righteous, angry men. Why not try letting them alone? There are other things to do.

For example, there are the things which were undertaken at the First Street School in New York by George Dennison a few years ago. The First Street School can be regarded as a microcosm of the world. It certainly had the world's ugliest problems represented in it. Poverty, racism, defensive hostility, and hair-trigger violence were there. It was a private school, privately financed, which no longer exists because the money ran out. Perhaps because of Dennison's book, *The Lives of Children* (Random House, 1969, \$6.95), some more money will be found to start something like it all over again. Here we shall use the book

simply for its lessons concerning the problems of the adult world, on the assumption that an ordinary review of such a book is of little value; it needs to be read.

Who is George Dennison? He was born in Pittsburgh in 1925 and has lived in New York City most of his adult life. He was in the Navy during World War II. He admires and understands Tolstoy and A. S. Neill, studied gestalt therapy under Paul Goodman, has worked with disturbed children, writes articles and plays, and lives part of each year in Maine. He has a wife and daughter.

The School was located on Sixth Street (where it moved from First Street) in Manhattan, just east of Second Avenue, with quarters in an old "Y." There were twenty-three children, three full-time teachers, one part-time (Dennison, who had his writing to do). Ages of the children were from five to sixteen or seventeen. The book tells mostly about the teen-agers, who were mainly Puerto Ricans, but also some Negro children. They were, you could say, products of the failure of the public school system. All were marked by various rejections and scarred by the native hostility of the city. Their personal being, when they started at First Street, seemed almost entirely made of defenses against what they had endured. Survival was the only issue, the governing reflex in all their behavior. All their coping had been with some kind of human invasion or violation. The first objective of the School, then, became the restoration of some semblance of a normal environment for these children. Sometimes a whole year of simple freedom was needed before any actual teaching could begin. The old, defensive reflexes had to wear out. Freedom finally changed the meaning of going to school for the children. Dennison writes:

To some persons it may sound odd to speak of richness of experience when there were only twenty-three children and very little in the way of educational gadgets. Yet this is exactly the case. The huge school does not create diversity of experience; it creates anonymity and anxiety, and an impersonal quality of *show* and *look*. For the children it is like

walking through a department store, looking at a thousand things but touching nothing. Among twenty-three children, under conditions of freedom and respect, there is a true abundance of experience. It is experience in depth, and it leads to decisive change.

What about "order"? Well, you can't have order usable in education until it begins to come from the children themselves. Any other kind would mean renewal of the mutilating past. Growing a usable order takes time. What about "authority"? Dennison's brief discussion of authority may be the most important thing in his book. It comes after the account of a long argument between two little girls over the ownership of a piece of cloth—settled by a phone call to a mother—with fifteen fascinated youngsters listening, and some equally engrossing dialogue about a voodoo charm. Dennison says:

If Susan [the teacher] had tried to save time by forbidding the interesting conversation about voodoo, she would first have had a stupid disciplinary problem on her hands, and second (if she succeeded in silencing the children) would have produced that smoldering, fretful resentment with which teachers are so familiar, a resentment that closes the ears and glazes the eyes. How much better it is to meander a bit—letting the free play of minds, adult and child, take its own very lively course! The advantages of this can hardly be overestimated. The children will feel closer to the adults, more secure, more assured of concern and individual care. Too, their own self-interest will lead them into positive relations with the natural authority of adults, and this is much to be desired, for natural authority is a far cry from authority that is merely arbitrary. Its attributes are obvious: adults are larger, are experienced, possess more words, have entered into prior agreements among themselves. When all this takes on a positive instead of a merely negative character, the children see the adults as protectors and as sources of certitude, approval, novelty, skills. In the fact that adults have entered into prior agreements, children intuit a seriousness and a web of relations in the life that surrounds them. If it is a bit mysterious, it is also impressive and somewhat attractive; they see it quite correctly as the way of the world, and they are not indifferent to its benefits and demands.

These two things, taken together—the natural authority of adults and the needs of children—are the

great reservoir of organic structuring that comes into being when arbitrary rules of order are dispensed with.

The child is always finding himself, moving toward himself, as it were, in the near distance. The adult is his ally, his model—and his obstacle (for there are natural conflicts, too and they must be given their due).

No elaborate analogies are required to see that the basic principles of good government—the only kind that can really be made to work—are in this simple discussion of "natural authority." Mr. Dennison is stating a *natural law*. It is not that small schools would be "nice," and that small communities would be good, if we could have them, but that it is insane to have anything else, and shameless to tolerate anything else. If the richest country in the world cannot find means to school the majority of its children except in seedbeds of hostility, under repressive conditions which become inevitable from submission to the arbitrary necessities of large organization, then we should have no difficulty in understanding why we do not abandon war as an instrument of national policy. A country so indifferent to children cannot possibly care about human good anywhere, at home or abroad, and all talk of a "good life" and "freedom" is habit become pretense. People may "believe" in it, but it is nonetheless pretense.

All the natural causes of a good social life are discoverable in the relations of teachers with children. Adults are only somewhat older children. The only authorities who can really serve them are people who will *not* compel them. There may be a great many people who won't believe this, but nothing can be done about that. Trying to *make* people believe in things they are not ready to or won't believe in has never worked. All you get, from compulsion, in the long run, is a large prison population and a high crime rate; and, of course, a big army and a proud navy. And then, being practical as well as righteous and tough, you see that you can't really afford to have the right kind of schools for the children. Not now. And so it goes.

It goes so far that a point is reached where the important lessons of life are learned only from the heart-breaking *salvage* operations which become necessary—not only in the schools but throughout society, and not only in our society but in all societies. The distinctive genius of the present portion of the twentieth century lies in the intelligence and compassion of men who are engaged in salvaging misused, torn, and broken human beings. Is there any doubt about this?

We have another long passage to quote from Mr. Dennison, this one about José, a thirteen-year-old with a six-year record of complete failure wherever he had been to school. He wanted to learn but was afraid even to try any more. Dennison spent weeks being just "George" to José, never a teacher. Then, finally, he let José know that it was time for him to learn to read.

When I thought the time was ripe, I insisted that we begin our lessons. My insistence carried a great deal of weight with him, since for reasons of his own he respected me. . . . He did *not* feel that his own motives were no concern of mine. No child feels this. This belongs to the hangups of adolescence and the neuroses of the hippies. . . .

My own demands, then, were an important part of José's experience. They were not simply the demands of a teacher, nor of an adult, but belonged to my own way of caring about José. And he sensed this. There was something he prized in the fact that I made demands on him. This became all the more evident once he realized that I wasn't simply processing him, that is, grading, measuring, etc. And when he learned that he *could* refuse—could refuse altogether, could terminate the lesson, could change its direction, could insist on something else—our mutual interest in his development was taken quite for granted. We became collaborators in the business of life.

Any compulsion would have ruined the restoration of José. Dennison would have fallen into the class of *just* a teacher, a compeller, and José had a long-established routine of rejection for dealing with people like that. The freedom and the waiting worked:

What he prized, after all, was this: that an adult, with a life of his own, was willing to teach him.

How odd it is to have to say this! What a vast perversity of the natural relations of children and adults has been worked out by our bureaucratized system of public education! It was important to Jose that I was not just a teacher, but a writer as well, that I was interested in painting and had friends who were artists, that I took part in civil rights demonstrations. To the extent that he sensed my life stretching out beyond him into (for him) the unknown, my meaning as an adult was enhanced, and the things I already knew and might teach him gained the luster they really possess in life. This is true for every teacher, every student. No teacher is just a teacher, no student just a student. The life meaning which joins them is the *sine qua non* for the process of education, yet precisely this is destroyed in the public schools because everything is standardized and the persons are made to vanish into their roles. This is exactly Sartre's definition of inauthenticity.

One sees why John Holt called this book the best thing yet on child education.

It is important to recognize that the absence of compulsion at the First Street School did not mean long days of nothing but flabby "permissiveness." Only the idea that authority must mean coercive authority could lead to this conclusion, which amounts to giving up on the ideal of a humane civilization. This ideal was reclaimed by the teachers of the First Street School, who earned a natural authority:

It boils down to this: that two strong motives exist side by side and are innately, not antagonistic, but incongruous. The one is that we adults are entitled to demand much of our children, and in fact lose immediacy as persons when we cease to do so. The other is that children are entitled to demand that they be treated as individuals, since that is what they are. The rub is this: that we press our demands, inevitably, in a far more generalized way than is fitting for any particular child. And there is nothing in the process that is self-correcting. We must rely on the children to correct us.

Good things are forged out of the differences between childrens' and teachers' motives, a conflict which cannot be avoided and is one of the means to growth. It should be observed that Dennison seems to have understood A. S. Neill better than most. He is no imitator of Neill; he

cites him as a reference, never as an authority. He writes:

I must admit that I have mentioned conflict just here because I have always been annoyed by the way some Summerhillians speak of love, of "giving love" or "creating an atmosphere of love." I have noticed, not infrequently, that the "love" of such enthusiasts is actually inhibited aggression. But this is by the way. The point itself is worth making: we cannot give love to children. If we do feel love, it will be for some particular child, or some few; and we will not give it, but give ourselves, because we are much more in the love than it is in us. What we *can* give to all children is attention, forbearance, patience, care, and above all justice. This last is certainly a form of love; it is—precisely—love in a form that can be given, given without distinction at all, since just this is the anatomy of justice: it is the self-conscious, thoroughly generalized human love of mankind. . . . The absence of justice demands a generalized suspicion of others and alters the sense of reality down to its very roots.

We don't need much more than these ideas for the principles of reordering society in a way that would put an end to authoritarian manipulation—the habit of controlling others which, once established, leads directly to the insanities of war. The psychology of adults is mostly the psychology of children, writ large. The defiance of the first principles of education in our dealings with grown-ups cannot help but perpetuate all the evils we now endure and increase the threat of the ones we fear.

Anyone should be able to see this. It's so *obvious*. Yet there are many people who apparently *won't* see it. So there are no universal remedies. There is only the remedy practiced by Mr. Dennison. If he practiced by Mr. Dennison. If he cannot help all the world, he will work to help a few children, or only one. Indifference to children is behind the troubles of the world, and getting at those troubles means starting with the young. Without waiting or trying to convert anybody, people can follow Dennison's example and refuse to break the laws of nature in pursuing the project of education. By this means more people may come to see that the same laws apply in relation to adults.

## REVIEW

### RENEWING THE AMERICAN DREAM?

THE fire drawn by what seemed a wholly unobjectionable and perceptive editorial by Wallace Roberts in the *Saturday Review* for last Dec. 27 makes it fairly evident that righteousness continues to be the preferred substitute for reason in areas where political suspicion can sniff out evidence of error. Mr. Roberts began with the idea that back of the various protests and resistance fronts of the young is a deeper hungering—"a groping attempt to find a new American Dream, a faith or an idea that could provide society with a rationalizing coherence and private lives with meaning." This is entirely reasonable no one with any acquaintance among the present-day young can believe that their protests adequately define their longings. It would be more accurate to say that the terms of appropriate definition do not yet exist.

Hoping, perhaps, to make a contribution in this direction, Mr. Roberts wrote:

The search is necessary because sometime during the past ten or fifteen years the ideals and hopes of the liberal, social myth that gave birth to and nourished a growing country were, in effect, realized, and, at that moment, the Dream lost its ability to explain the experiment and to inspire its participants.

One could quarrel with Mr. Roberts by suggesting that the failure of the Dream occurred much longer ago than ten or fifteen years; however, he might agree, simply adding that somewhere in the fifties even its *memory* lost all glamor. He continues:

The Dream was based on the assumption that society is perfectible through the beneficence of materialism and through the application of universalism increased prosperity would not only make life easier and more enjoyable, it would also improve its quality. Society would be a nobler place, and we would be more humane men.

The corollary was the belief that certain general values should be accepted by everyone for his own good and that the application of strategies based on these values would do for society whatever

unrestrained economic growth could not. The values were those implied in the clichés of the Dream: the melting pot, Protestant ethic, rugged individualism, Yankee ingenuity, Horatio Alger, land of opportunity, one nation, indivisible.

Put in this way, the Dream may lack the visioning Walt Whitman gave voice to, but the account seems without serious offense. However, Mr. Roberts went on to say: "It was also assumed that, when there were occasional, not too serious malfunctions, all that was needed was a new law, increased government spending, or a master plan." With this sentence Mr. Roberts loses his credentials as American-Dream interpreter for one *SR* reader, a correspondent who claims to be old enough to remember it before certain latter-day perversions, and who writes (in the Jan. 17 issue):

Our forefathers were not starry-eyed romantics. They did not aspire to a perfect society—by any means. The clichés Mr. Roberts quotes were not part of the Dream, but grew out of events that occurred during the history of our country. . . . As for passing laws to adjust malfunctions, the keystone of the American Dream is the protection of citizens *from* laws. The real American Dream is a nation of free individuals. In this country every man should live as he pleases. He should choose his objectives according to his values and use his own ingenuity to obtain them, his only limit being the freedom of other citizens. This is a tough philosophy and not for weaklings. No citizen is responsible for anyone but himself and his family. Every man must rise or fall by his own efforts.

Well, this is also a widely accepted version of the American Dream, again without Whitman's lifting horizons, and Mr. Roberts' critic hopes the young of America will go back to it, although no hints of how this might be possible are given. The fact is that Mr. Roberts was not writing politically; Welfare-State liberalism, while it intruded, was not especially admired; his point was simply that the young are going to have to find a new inspiration, something more enduring and sustaining than the "good vibrations" provided by rock festivals.

Actually, it seems a great pity to continue the old argument for and against the Welfare State in

the pages of a useful magazine. The case against the all-powerful and all-beneficent state was sufficiently stated more than a hundred years ago by Herbert Spencer. Yet all that stating it did for Spencer was make him a very unpopular philosopher. The fact that he was right is what seems to be coming out now. Why? Mainly because the affairs of state have become too grisly for human beings to bear. Why wasn't Spencer heard a hundred years ago? Probably because people still thought they could solve human problems by finding the correct political system and putting the right administrators in power.

In that case, why isn't he carefully listened to, today? Doubtless because, as most people look at the world, it seems that without an all-powerful State, society would revert to unimaginable barbarism, worse than life under the Medieval robber barons or even the Chinese warlords of a later date. It has become pretty difficult, in short, to think of highly organized social existence without a lot of policing and regulation and a lot of experts to tell us what to do. We feel, that is, almost wholly dependent upon the State, even though its behavior grows more shocking every day.

The important thing to consider now is the possibility that the argument about the State is the wrong argument. The only way to replace that argument successfully is by developing a body of thought and examples of practice which show human beings to be capable of orderly life with or without or *in spite of* State authority. State authority or State control will not go away until it is proved superfluous and left without nourishment. Not even Spencer's arguments, sound as they were, and are, can have effect, so long as any alternative to State power remains practically unimaginable.

It would be pleasant, at this point, to be able to recommend some books which show that the ingredients of strong, healthful, harmonious human communities are not dealt with in political treatises or revealed through political arguments.

Unfortunately, such books do not exist. Authentic human communities *evolve* natural social order. This is the minimum finding of Spencer, who went about as far as one can go in demonstrating the failure of merely political solutions for human problems, while not offering anything further on the question. Spencer at least makes good reading for evidence that the books we need have yet to be written.

Spencer's *The Man Versus the State* was reprinted in 1945 by Caxton, with a splendid introduction by Albert Jay Nock. Here, in several essays, Spencer shows the transformation of the original libertarian Liberalism into the Welfare-Statism of the present. The early British liberals began by repealing bad laws—laws which "enhanced the State's coercive power over the citizen." Then, fascinated by their successes, the Liberals changed; they decided to turn their achievements into a sure thing by transferring to the State the power they had so lately removed from the hands of Privilege—on the grounds that a legislature, unlike a monarch, is a *good* authority. Nock writes:

Spencer must be left to describe in his own words . . . how in the latter half of the last [nineteenth] century British Liberalism went over bodily to the philosophy of Statism, and abjuring the political method of repealing existent coercive measures, proceed to outdo the Tories in constructing new coercive measures of ever-increasing particularity. This piece of British political history has great value for American readers, because it enables them to see how closely American Liberalism has followed the same course. It enables them to interpret correctly the significance of Liberalism's influence upon the direction of our public life in the last half-century, and to perceive just what it is to which that influence has led, just what the consequences are which that influence has tended to bring about, and just what are the further consequences which may be expected to ensue.

Spencer's essential criticism of Statism is that legislators are simply not wise enough to control human life to the extent that, once given the power, they always attempt to control it. Their excuse, their supreme justification, is that they are

"doing good." Spencer would argue that legislators do not really know enough about doing good and they will not take the time to learn; moreover, the pressures of public opinion under which they operate will hardly permit long-term impartiality or even the exercise of common sense. Much of Spencer's book is devoted to proving this case against Statism with historical facts.

As we said, Spencer is unpopular. He is unpopular because an argument against a popularly accepted means of attempting to do good is invariably assumed to be an argument against doing good. This is of course the weakness of all criticism of Statism save the anarchist criticism, and the anarchist criticism is legitimately regarded as incomplete. What remains to be pointed out—and reading Spencer and anarchist thinkers puts one in the position of being *able* to point it out—is that *all* political questions are really the least part of the study of human good, and that their obsessive claim to attention may be largely responsible for our social failures. It is obvious enough that preoccupation with power is behind this obsessive claim. So long as people believe that social good cannot be achieved without enforcements of power, heavy political suspicion will intrude in every serious investigation of the problems of the times, and thus, by degradation of dialogue, some form of political partisanship will be offered as the one true solution for practically everything.

Conservatives who appreciate Spencer embrace the politics of nostalgia, offering no reasonable answer to the Statists who point to the real sufferings and needs of very large numbers of people. Only one conservative writer that we know of, Richard C. Cornuelle, in *Reclaiming the American Dream* (Random House, 1965), has admitted this. But his book is hardly addressed to the American people, unless successful and influential businessmen are taken to represent the entire population. All that can be learned from such books is that the political argument cannot

be settled or won by anyone, and to continue it is a ridiculous waste of time.

What is needed, then, is effective thought about human community which reduces political considerations to a minimum—which means no more than reducing the role of power to a minimum. For a start, very likely, power needs to be ignored entirely, simply to get the point across. In a contest with an obsession you can't bother with little qualifications. Obsessions are peculiarly experienced in colonizing "little qualifications."

We should conclude by pointing out that an excellent beginning of a body of thought about community in which power has no significant role is found in the writings of Arthur E. Morgan. His work makes a fine foundation to build upon. And people interested in a more contemporary version of the American Dream will find a surprisingly complete expression of it in Morgan's book *The Long Road*, which may be obtained for a dollar from Community Service, Inc., Yellow Springs, Ohio 45387.



## *COMMENTARY* SPENCER'S POSITION

ONE need not, in profiting from a reading of Herbert Spencer, adopt or defend all his views. Yet his first principles seem acceptable. He begins the final chapter in the book referred to in Review by saying:

The great political superstition of the past was the divine right of kings. The great political superstition of the present is the divine right of parliaments. . . .

"But surely," will come in deafening chorus the reply, "there is the unquestionable right of the majority, which gives unquestionable right to the parliament it elects."

Yes, now we are coming down to the root of the matter. The divine right of parliaments means the divine right of majorities. The fundamental assumption made by legislators and people alike, is that a majority has powers which have no bounds. This is the current theory which all accept without proof as a self-evident truth.

Spencer challenges this doctrine on both theoretical and practical grounds. His practical criticism is an attack on utilitarian theory, which argues that government is entitled to supreme power because it serves the general good, and that the requirements of the common welfare are not obscure—that they can be "determined by simple inspection of the immediate facts and estimation of probable results." Spencer objects, declaring that the common good does not become apparent from simple inspection, which may overlook countless hidden factors and result in ruinous mistakes. This, incidentally, is precisely the present contention of aroused ecologists, who point to devastating misapplications of technology. Spencer shows that the persuasions under which utilitarian theory is applied are typically partisan, attended by emotional urgency, and often represent concealed self-interest.

But who shall exercise power, if not the State?

Obviously, this argument is without solution and is made endless from the assumption that the power to coerce is not only the chief scourge but also the main objective of human beings. The lesson of this dilemma may be simply that the drive for power is an *unnatural* objective for human beings, but we shall probably not be able to see this until other objectives lay sufficient claim upon our lives.

## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves LEARNING FROM CHILDREN

SOME weeks ago there was quotation here from a teacher who spoke of how threatened young people are made to feel because of their *ignorance*. Education, he argued, should not make people insecure it should not, that is, place so much stress on the ignorance of students.

But is the trouble really in recognizing the universal condition of ignorance? Doesn't it lie, instead, in the false supposition that teachers are *not* ignorant? A wise man, after all, is not a man who has eliminated ignorance, but one who has learned how to *cope* with it, who does not fear it.

Toward the end of John Holt's most recent book, *The Underachieving School* (Pitman, 1969, \$4.95), there is a talk he gave in England in which this is the main point. He makes this point over and over again. Education is not filling the vacuum of student-ignorance with endless facts. This project can never succeed and its pursuit condemns the student to eternal inferiority. He can't *ever* catch up with those who know more facts than he does. As John Holt says:

Well, the question then is, if piling up bodies of knowledge and expert data—if packing our heads full of ideas faster and faster—is not the answer, what is it, then, we have to do? In this connection I think of a letter a student of mine wrote me when she was in college. I had taught this girl in what we call the ninth grade, ... and again in the eleventh grade. . . . When she was in her second year of college she wrote me a letter, talking of many things, and at one point she said "What I envy about you, John, is that you have everything all taped." This is American slang by which she meant that I had everything all figured out, in its place, organized, and so forth. Now, I don't blame her for feeling this. This is precisely the picture that most educators try to give children of what it means to be educated; that you have everything all taped. You not only know everything, you know where it fits and how its parts relate to each other. This poor girl, in her confusion and ignorance and bafflement, wrote how much she envied me. I supposedly had everything figured out. I wrote her

back and said, "You could not possibly be more mistaken. The difference between you and me is not that I have everything all taped, it's that I know I don't and I never will, I don't expect to and I don't need to. I expect to live my entire life about as ignorant and uncertain and confused as I am now, and I have learned to live with this, not to worry about it. I have learned to swim in uncertainty the way a fish swims in water." It seems to me that it is only in this way that it is possible to live in the kind of rapidly changing world that we live in. We are obliged to *act*, in the first place, and in the second place to act intelligently, or as intelligently as possible, in a world in which, as I say, we know very little, in which, even if the experts know more than we do, we have no way of knowing which expert knows the most. In other words, we are obliged to live out our lives thinking, acting, judging on the basis of the most fragmentary and uncertain and temporary information.

This is the general human situation, and Mr. Holt has recognized it, made peace with it. His letter to the girl in college was a way of explaining this and of saying, also, that practicing the virtues is the only way to get along in a world where ignorance is inevitable. But why did the girl *think* he had everything taped? Perhaps it was because, in her experience, John Holt approached the encounters of life with some measure of courage, justice, prudence, and moderation, making it *seem* that he always knew exactly what to do. She intuited that he knew something important, but when it came to explaining this to herself, she made a big mistake—a mistake which, we must say, she had been *taught* to make. She thought it was because he knew a lot of facts!

But Holt was only practicing what he had learned from small children. In this talk, he goes on to explain that children face the world more or less as Socratic philosophers face it. They do this, that is, until they are taught to be afraid of their "ignorance." The child, Mr. Holt says,

doesn't feel that he has to have it all taped. He is not only able but eager to reach out into this world that doesn't make any sense to him, and take it in. And furthermore, he doesn't even feel a neurotic compulsion to get it taped, to get it all patterned, structured, conceptualized, so that he can say, this is

this, and this fits this, and this happens because of this. He is willing to tolerate misunderstanding, to suspend judgment, to wait for patterns to emerge, for enlightenment to come to him. I think children learn by a process of continuous revelation much more than by analysis. And indeed, for facing situations of enormous complexity traditional methods of analytical thinking are really of no use to us. Where you have a hundred variables, none of which are under your exact control, how do you, by systematic, analytic process, get the thing organized? It can't be done, and the enormous strength of children's thinking lies in the fact that they don't try to do it.

Well, how does a *scientist* deal with this situation? Quite simply. He keeps on eliminating variables until he has something that he can handle with systematic analysis. He abstracts from experience until he can control or measure the factors which are involved, or seem to be involved, and then he makes a theory of their interplay, and he tests the theory in practice until he is positive he is right. That is the way the scientific project of finding out becomes so specialized, and the explanation of why what has been found out by science is so often impossible to apply to the problems of daily life. We try to apply our scientific knowledge, of course. But the now insistent complaint that science is *reductive*, that it over-simplifies, has been one result of the attempt to apply knowledge involving only a small number of variables to situations in which a great many more factors are present.

But even the idea of science and how scientists go about making great discoveries has been misrepresented to us. It isn't knowing an enormous number of facts that leads to scientific discovery—although facts certainly play a part—but the practice of special virtues that are the key to learning about natural processes. Mr. Holt discusses this in his talk:

Quite recently a book that many of you know, particularly the scientific people, *The Double Helix*, has received a lot of attention at home. I've ordered it. I haven't got a copy yet, so I haven't read it. I mean to. I even probably will. So far I've only read reviews of it, but they have interested me because a number of them have pointed out that Watson and

Crick were totally ignorant of a great many important fields of knowledge which one would have supposed they needed to know, which in fact they did need to know, in order to discover what they did about the DNA molecule. By our usual standards of looking at these things they were hopelessly unqualified to discover this. This is to say, by traditional ways of deciding what qualifications are. Now of course they were supremely well qualified, because they brought to their task qualities which are not picked up in school and in fact rarely survive school: a deep and wide-ranging curiosity; a profound, not to say arrogant confidence in their own ability to learn things and to figure things out; a very considerable resourcefulness at finding out how to find out things. And armed with these valuable resources, and a not inconsiderable amount of knowledge, they were able to discover what they discovered.

But what *is* it, then, that we should teach the young? Well, the fact is that it is far more important to try to infect them with the virtues they need than it is to "teach" them anything at all. So the best teaching is not "transmitting," but a way of being with the young—a way which, one suspects, will never be put into precise words. A similar difficulty pervades other basic inquiries. For example, we can't ever finally define justice, but, given enough time and experience, we can usually tell when we are in the presence of just men. A teacher is recognized by the same indefinable means.

## *FRONTIERS*

### A Continuing Struggle

A BEAUTIFUL wall and appointment calendar for 1970 speaks for the cause of the grape-pickers of California's vast agricultural valleys, now on strike against the big farms which raise table grapes. The leader of the strike is Cesar Chavez, who has been working in behalf of his fellow American-Mexican agricultural workers in California for the past twenty years. As an account of his life puts it, "He has an unshakable conviction that non-violent action will liberate his people from a century of poverty." The calendar sells for a dollar and may be ordered from the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, now a part of AFL-CIO. The address is Box 130, Delano, Calif. 93215. The calendar is beautiful not by reason of any extravagance, but through tasteful layout and splendid photographs of Chavez and others. Chavez is a Gandhian in his approach to the solution of social problems. Those who know something of the story of Danilo Dolci's labors in Italy will want to inform themselves of Chavez' similar undertakings.

A page at the end of the calendar tells his life story:

Cesar was born in Yuma, Arizona in 1927, the son of a small farmer. After losing their land in the great depression, the family of seven migrated to California and started moving with the crops. Cesar first worked in Delano when he was ten years old.

His family shared the farm workers' vicious cycle of poverty. As migrants they lived in tents, hovels and trailers. They often ran out of money, food and clothing. They were exploited by labor contractors. Cesar attended more than thirty schools before dropping out of the eighth grade to help support his family. He continued his education on his own through reading.

At times his family worked in Delano. Cesar married Helen, a Mexican-American girl whose family were resident vineyard workers in that city. . .

During World War II Cesar served in the Navy. In 1952, through the insistence of a priest friend,

Cesar met Fred Ross, an organizer for Saul Minsky's Community Service Organization, which was working among the Spanish-speaking in California. He took a job as an organizer for CSO and in 1959 became its director. When CSO was unable to help him create a farm workers union, Cesar resigned. He returned to Delano, withdrew his life savings of \$1200 and started the National Farm Workers Association. Often depending on what his wife could earn in the fields, Cesar traveled throughout 87 communities and labor camps gathering a core of vineyard workers and their families. He learned to keep books by reading a government manual. He started a credit union. By 1965, the year of the strike, the NFWA had enrolled 1700 families.

Today Cesar Chavez lives in a small, four-room house in Delano. He, his wife and eight children, like all of the Delano strikers, receive \$5 per week spending money, food from the strike kitchen or store and the payment of rent, utilities and basic bills.

In 1968, to keep his movement on a non-violent course, Cesar went on a 25-day fast. The late Senator Robert Kennedy, visiting him then, called him "one of the heroic figures of our time." On Sunday, March 10, Cesar said to nearly 8,000 workers gathered to break bread with their leader:

"When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So, it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men."

Readers who have come to maturity in recent years are not likely to be aware of the troubles of California agricultural labor. They were not brought up on the high drama in the novels of John Steinbeck, and know little of the supporting scholarship of Carey McWilliams, documenting the agonizing story of people who do exhausting stoop labor in the sun, and who are denied both respect and hope by a great many employers. Back in 1948, the first year of publication of *MANAS*, one of the editors visited the headquarters of the strike of farm workers against the DiGiorgio Farms. This strike was a heroic effort to bring the modest benefits of labor

organization to the most neglected of American workers—the migrant crop-picker. The strike failed. Three MANAS articles came out of the experience: "Men Without Land" (May 12, 1948) "Why Men Strike" (July 7, 1948), and "The Agricultural Revolution" (Aug. 25, 1948). In those days the migrants who followed the crops were the men and their families who had lost their farms in the dust bowls of Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. Then it was the Farm Labor Union—formerly the Southern Tenant Farmers Union—which tried to win them wages better than eighty cents an hour and tolerable working conditions and living quarters.

This is now recalled because the story of the strike led by Cesar Chavez reports that a contract was signed by the UFWOC with the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation in 1967. While this contract is no longer in force, due to a change in ownership of the DiGiorgio interests, the union now holds contracts with twelve big wine-grape growers, under which workers are paid a minimum of \$2.00 an hour and earn much more on a piece-work basis during the harvest season.

The nation-wide boycott of table grapes asked by Cesar Chavez and the members of his union was a last resort to bring the growers of this fruit to deal with the union. Begun in 1968 and resumed in 1969, the boycott is an attempt to make the growers feel the pressure of public opinion. The last words in the calendar relate to the 1969 boycott:

Due to its effectiveness, in June, 1969, ten Coachella Valley table grape growers began negotiations. However, negotiations broke down over the issues of pesticides, a threat to farm workers' health and a factor in their life-expectancy, which is only 29 years, as opposed to 70 for other citizens. Disagreement on the incentive wage also helped stop discussions.

The grape boycott is clearly an extension of the strike. Just as the strike receives the support of religious and civic leaders and organizations, the boycott is being carried out by a coalition of people and groups committed to social justice. The grape boycott will continue until growers agree to recognize

the basic rights of their workers to bargain collectively for humane working conditions and just wages.

One thing more needs to be said. It is a far cry from the Jeffersonian ideal of a self-sustaining, self-reliant agrarian society to the conditions which prevail in California, where industrial methods of farming have made labor problems almost inevitable, except under the most enlightened management. Plainly, the solution of militant labor for the inequities of economic exploitation of the land and of men is only a second-best. It creates an adversary psychology in economic relationships and blocks the evolution of a more constructive and cooperative social ecology. Yet the big ranchers, jeeringly called "windshield farmers" because they need to drive around in a car simply to inspect their enormous holdings, give the workers no other alternative, and the vigilante temper of their policies promises nothing but continued conflict to coming generations. Meanwhile, California agriculture is technologically too "advanced" for the survival of small farms. The high cost of good land dictates continuous "mining" operations, and distribution and consumption are geared to these methods of agricultural production. A new kind of reformer is needed to figure out what, in the long run, to do about all this. Yet those who, moved by Cesar Chavez' Gandhian spirit, go to Gandhi's writings for a very different way of conceiving the foundations of a truly human society, may find a few clues. Here and now, one can say only that Chavez and his co-workers are doing what is possible in what must be called an extreme situation. They need help and support.