

## ALL OF A SUDDEN

ONE thing leads to another. This colorless apothegm seems to sum up the obvious conclusion from a little research into a very practical problem—the shortage of timber in the United States, and the resulting inroads on our national forests. What appeared to be a reasonably good idea—more extensive use of other building materials—turned out to be naïve, although not entirely so. Our amateur investigator had said, "Why not go back to using adobe bricks in California?" Their virtues in economy, insulation, and do-it-yourself possibilities—adobe is dirt lying around in many places in California and the rest of the Southwest—and their visual charm has been celebrated by practically all the people who have looked up the subject, and maybe done a little personal experimenting with sun-dried brick. But if you talk to an architect who works in Southern California, you may be told that adobe is hardly practical in earthquake-prone regions. Then you check the building code and find that, nonetheless, adobe brick is allowed if you can afford to reinforce the construction with steel rods, as in all masonry in most of California, and use a brick compounded with an asphaltic additive which increases cohesive strength and resistance to erosion. The walls cannot be more in height than ten times their thickness, and the minimum thickness permitted is sixteen inches. Foundations must be conventional, and the mortar made with sand and cement. It is also necessary to put long reinforcing rods around all openings and tie the bond beams together so that, if an earthquake comes, the dwelling won't jiggle apart but move as a unit.

An engineer with a streak of nonconforming originality told us that bamboo works almost as well as steel re-rods for reinforcement, satisfying Mother Nature's requirements, if not the building code. (This is not a nature-loving piety, but a

conclusion of research done in a U.S. university.) He also told us that there are two-story residences in Los Angeles, built of adobe many years ago, which have been through all the bad earthquakes since and still have people living in them. (He won't say just where they are!)

So, one thing leads to another.

Mention of bamboo by our engineer consultant recalled a passage in Leopold Kohr's *Development Without Aid* (Christopher Davies, Llandybie, Carmarthenshire, U.K., 1973, £2.50) about building homes out of locally available materials—in this case the lowly reed, a pretty "useless" material by all familiar accounts, save in Chinese art. When imagination is applied to shortages and human need, practical difficulties may evaporate, or be made to in a reasonable length of time. Here Prof. Kohr is discussing the needlessness of slums in Puerto Rico, where he taught economics for years:

. . . as houses can be erected expensively with unfamiliar imported methods and equipment, they can also be built cheaply simply by making people assemble the material around them in the form of sturdy homes rather than shacks. One of the most beautiful, most distinguished most comfortable, most serene, most airy, most elegant, and most tropical of tropical country houses is the Puerto Rican home of the architect, Henry Klumb. Yet, as its owner likes to stress with justified pride, it contains not an ounce of stuff of which the huts of the lowliest slumdweller are not also made.

Prof. Kohr tells about a Puerto Rican community, Loiza Aldea, not yet entirely ruined by the invasion of North American construction techniques:

If it takes 15 years to acquire a unit of dwelling in the Soviet Union, and 5 in the United States, the cost in Loiza Aldea is probably in the neighborhood of two weeks. Thus, if the American housing standard is 3 times higher than the Russian, the

standard of Loiza Aldea is 140 times higher than the American, and 420 times higher than the Russian. . . Friends sometimes are shocked at hearing me call Loiza Aldea—a sylvan composition in bamboo full of enchanting half-naked children playing under palm trees near the ever rolling surf of the shimmering Atlantic—paradisiacal. But how do we envision paradise? As midtown Manhattan full of traffic jams, nightclubs' neon lights, . . . Cadillacs, service clubs, beauty parlours, health clinics?

Except for his inexplicable optimism concerning the cost of home construction in the United States—most mortgages on dwellings here now run for twenty to thirty years—Prof. Kohr's point is incisively made. He is arguing for standards, goals, satisfactions, on the material level, which equate with what is practically and locally available. He wants people in Trinidad to rise in "Trinidadian, not American, fashion," for Martinique "to become a better Martinique, not a greater France." He asks: "What exactly would an unassisted, unaffiliated development, carried out within the local framework of every region's own resources and habits, mean in terms of the four basic ingredients of the good life food, clothing, housing and social convivium?"

He is talking supreme common sense. Why, then, do we have a shortage of trees? Why are we going to run out of fuel? Why do our mortgages run twenty or thirty years? Why, indeed, do our business tycoons feel that they *have* to bribe foreign officials or betray thousands of stockholders and hundreds of thousands of employees?

Orneriness and cussedness and deplorable acquisitive drives are only a part of the trouble. Habit is the rest of it, perhaps the greater part. Habits are not innate. They are acquired and can be changed. For example, an intermediate technology adviser was asked to come to Kuwait to guide the Arab industrialists in some local construction. This was his report:

We found that many of the people we worked with were convinced of the superiority of European-designed buildings with very large areas of glass on the exterior, and constructed of steel and concrete. It

was very difficult to convince Kuwait clients that, on the basis of sophisticated thermodynamic analysis of the performance of a building, their old, pre-oil-age structures were in many ways much more efficient. We had to use not only advanced technology but advanced science to demonstrate that their old technology, or an advanced version of it, was in fact superior. It was a long process to persuade architects who had been thoroughly indoctrinated by Western architectural schools.

The pioneering Egyptian architect, Hassan Fathy, has had the same problem, over and over again. After he learned how to construct airy, healthful homes out of mud brick—which costs almost nothing—and had used them for some pleasant structures, one in particular, which cost only a little over four hundred dollars, he found that his departure from Europeanized habit was too much for "modern" Egyptians:

I used to admire it myself as I passed it every day in the train between Cairo and Meadi. I could see it out of the window in the distance, and I always made a point of looking out for it every time I went past. Then one day, as I looked out of the window, the house was not there. I looked again, I asked myself if I had made a mistake, if this was not the place, or if I had got into the wrong train, but I was quite right. The house had just gone. I went round to the site to see what happened, and there was my beautiful house, in bits all over the ground. Even at that moment I found time to notice how strong it was, and how the vault had come down in big pieces, like segments of an eggshell, tough and homogeneous as pieces of leather, for the mud bricks had set into a single monolithic shell.

They [a women's club] told me, with apologies, that it had unfortunately been necessary to demolish the house because it did not harmonize with the houses designed by their own architect, but they were sure I would understand. Their architect had sent one of his assistants, a young man hitherto chiefly distinguished for having put up a faithful copy of a Swiss chalet among the palm trees and camels on the road to the Pyramids, and he had produced his own version of cottages fit for peasants to live in. I saw his plans later, and they showed a row of twenty concrete houses, each consisting of two square rooms and a corridor ninety centimeters wide with a water closet at the end of it. There was not even a kitchen, let alone requirements like sleeping recesses and

cupboards, and the buildings were no more than a row of air-raid shelters. I quite saw that my house didn't harmonize with them.

It wasn't a total loss, however. Some Chileans had seen his mud brick dwelling and hired Fathy to erect some rest houses for a nitrate company near the Red Sea. Fathy's book, *Architecture for the Poor*, tells this and many other stories about the Egyptian designer's work and achievements in adding invention and skill to local, low-cost building materials like mud. Of course, the monstrous new Assuan dam, departing radically from ancient Egyptian engineering principles, has cut down the mud deposited on the shores of the Nile, along with killing the sardine schools at the mouth of the river, and spreading bilharzia, which blinds the peasants, but apparently there's still enough mud to make bricks for dwellings.

So, one thing leads to another, although our subject isn't really changing at all.

One of the architects we talked to about possible ways of cutting down on the use of trees for building homes told us something morbidly interesting. In Los Angeles, he said, a lot of old buildings are being torn down, not because they are worn out, badly built, or ugly, but because developers have erected too many office buildings in the city and can't seem to find tenants for them. There's too much office space available. So these old buildings have to go, to create a comfortable scarcity—another version of built-in (wrong word?) obsolescence, you might say. People will have to rent an office in a *new* building, since those nice old places are gone now, with the materials they were built of just wasted, thrown away. Our architect friend thought it would be far better to stop building for a while—*use* the old buildings, he said. They're fine.

Years ago, Theodore Roszak recommended the same solution for urban renewal. He told about a group in Philadelphia which was encouraging systematic restoration of old dwellings in slum areas—the well-built ones.

They sent teams into the slums who showed the people how to renovate their own homes. They gave them work at rebuilding, taught them trades, and the restored homes turned out to be very attractive, inspiring other householders on the block to improve their own places. Commenting, Roszak said (in *Peace News*):

It is too much to expect that the ideas here will be adopted by housing authorities under present conditions. There are too many vested interests and too much bureaucratic inertia behind the going system. Proposals like this can find no sympathy at the top. But perhaps they can develop a following at the bottom. What may be required is a widespread effort to mount non-violent resistance against those urban renewal projects which ignore the real problems of the slum dwellers.

Musing on such questions, and the effect on building requirements of a mobile population, our architect friend suggested that there may be something abnormal, out of balance, in all the moving around Americans do. How many more buildings do we need—how many more highway networks, service facilities for travel, and all that goes with industries devoted to transport—as a result of a somewhat pointless wanderlust? This is one of our habits—one we have been quite proud of—but are these trips really necessary, and do we gain anything from them? Maybe the fuel shortage will help us to change our ways.

Some years ago, E. F. Schumacher addressed himself to this question. Considering the "idolatry of giantism" which justifies and admires the growth of cities and massive industrial concentrations, he spoke of the efficiency of modern transport, noting what is for us a mere side-effect:

It makes people footloose. Millions of people start moving about, deserting the rural areas and smaller towns to follow the city lights, to go to the big city, causing a pathological growth. . . . While people, with an easy-going kind of logic, believe that fast transport and communications open up a new dimension of freedom (which they do in some rather trivial respects), they overlook the fact that these achievements also tend to destroy freedom, by making everything extremely vulnerable and extremely

insecure, unless—please note—conscious policies are developed and conscious action is taken, to mitigate the destructive effects of these technological developments. . . .

A large country, I am quite certain, can survive the age of footlooseness only if it achieves: a highly articulated *internal* structure. . . . So, when everybody and everything becomes footloose, the *idea of structure* becomes a really central idea, to which all our powers of thought and imagination must be applied.

This defines our problem: excessive complexity—inflexible complexity—without imagination. When a country has mainly a rural population, not too many people, with agriculture as the chief means of support, then the sort of problems we now have are virtually nonexistent. The ingenuity of people on the land, using local materials and a resourcefulness not yet made weak by all-displacing technology, keeps problems to a minimum. But now, it is becoming plain, we must compensate for our complexity with large doses of ingenuity. This is exactly what we are not doing.

On the matter of conserving trees: Metropolitan communities which have growing need of housing, daring to use a little imagination, might instruct engineers in their building departments to rewrite the code to accommodate various innovations. The use of adobe is one innovation, subject to certain limitations. Architects could make a lot of recommendations, and do, but they are not often heard or listened to. Why? Because municipal and county agencies have their duties defined for them in unimaginative and restrictive ways. It should be an *obligation* of city and county engineers to keep an eye on the economic problems of their region, such as, for example, the scarcity and penalizing prices of lumber, and to exert influence toward other solutions. It should be an obligation of all public servants to help break up the grip of habit, to stimulate intelligent ecological innovation—to support social and cultural trends that need encouragement, and to point out why others

should be stopped or turned in a different direction.

The fact that one thing leads to another—that the quest for practical solutions of problems brings us into contact with other problems, all requiring other solutions—eventually makes it evident that isolated problem-solving is in many ways a squirrel-cage of futility—we encounter the same lack of imagination each time around. For a long, long time we have been persuaded that the duty of public servants is to see that, if possible, every man has what he wants, and as much of what he wants as his talents, his competitive sagacity, and legality will allow. Today the roles of the private citizen and of the public servant are going to have to change. They will have to get busy and teach each other. It is becoming the duty of the public servant to help people to see for themselves—not just tell them—what is to their interest and the common good. This is common sense. People will either learn to live simpler, more sensible, less sensate lives, more imaginative lives, and enjoy themselves more as a result, or we are going to have a *deprived* society. We shall be either intelligent or deprived. That, quite plainly, is what our situation amounts to. The shortage of lumber is only an example—an example of the inadequate supply of intelligence, not trees.

It is a situation that has no "political" solution, save as a last-ditch remedy. Why should this be? Because political action, involving the strength of numbers, of mass opinion and mass influence, is stultifying to the imagination. Political ideas, slogans, programs, and platforms tend to be innocuous because of the vulgarizing necessities of mass communication and mass persuasion. Imaginative conceptions are reduced to formula by the political means, and thus lose their cutting edge, their individuality, their inspiration. Mass action is a substitute—a reductionist substitute—for local, individual intelligence, for small community resourcefulness. The same applies to mass production in industry, mass housing accommodations in large cities,

mass media, and everything else which is done in terms of the requirements, interests, needs, and wants of people so numerous they must be statistically defined. "Masses" of people are no longer people, but little pieces of them—reduced, abstracted aspects of them. The "moral" requirements of administering mass societies become, in large part, acts of covert or overt mutilation in the name of national interest or social welfare, whether the issue is a war or an anti-poverty program. The "mass" aspect of the program shuts out exercise of the imagination, except at the level of mechanistic manipulation, and turns everything that is done into dull, bureaucratic necessity. And it *is* necessity, now, under the circumstances we have allowed to develop. But it didn't have to be.

It is no accident that people who really care about how human beings develop—fine teachers and educators, sensitive psychologists, good writers, and artists without exhibitionist tendencies—people who understand something of human growth—practically never go into politics. They exercise an influence on the polls in other ways. They can't see that anything good would be left of what they want to do after all the intellectual and moral bills are paid to cover the cost of achieving power. By that time, with some few exceptions, you are tied hand and foot.

People of the insight and caliber we are speaking of recognize that the troubles which politics seek to remedy—when, indeed, there is an honest effort to find and apply a remedy—lie mostly in the confined outlook and habits brought forward from life in past years, under other conditions. It is a *general* problem, even if always encountered in terms of upsetting particulars.

It is a time for a fresh diagnosis of our *general* condition, with attention, if we can locate it, to the cause instead of the effects. Otherwise, we shall continue to convert our economic difficulties into big problems of Good and Evil, instead of looking at them as matters requiring intelligent application of what we already know.

Our economic problems have become moral issues, inflaming bitter antagonisms, not because economics is the ultimate area of human striving, but because we have claimed it is and let it become so—made it so. We are materialists in this respect, and being occasionally generous with our surpluses doesn't alter the moral quality of this preoccupying illusion. So economic theorists or practitioners become either sacrosanct prophets or dangerous subverters. All this makes economic problems virtually without solution. The theory itself makes businessmen into abstract forces irrevocably involved in the processes of unlimited acquisition. It makes reformers into crusaders against sin. Businessmen may be trapped in habit, they may be polarized into indignant self-righteousness by moralistic criticism and hostile political movements, but they are not the "enemy." They may be doing a lot of things wrong, but so is everybody else who is locked in position in a society which has only economics for its religion.

We have a Club of Rome to tell us what won't work at all in years to come, and a Sierra Club to tell us what the Army Engineers and the real estate developers and the industrial polluters and the lumber barons are doing that they shouldn't be doing—but what might happen if every one of all the mission-oriented reform organizations had a department devoted to imaginative alternatives, available to the business and political and commercial institutions which—all of a sudden, almost—are now in the wrong instead of the right?

There are some stubbornly bad people in the world, there's no doubt about that, but they may be not nearly so numerous as we think.

## *REVIEW*

### THE NEED FOR ROOTS

WHAT, indeed, are the cultural "roots" of which Simone Weil wrote in her extraordinary book of this title? Generalizations replying to such questions tend to be empty, but this may be only from lack of examples. In her book Simone Weil made many proposals for structuring a new France after the ordeal of World War II. She described institutions for ordering society, but the institutions were not the roots. The roots were the attitudes and vision out of which she wrote. It is very difficult to say what makes them grow.

A considerable number of Americans regularly read magazines which are devoted to social, economic, and ecological criticism. One of these, *Environment*, is especially good at reporting, from month to month, on the destructive trends in the policies of both industry and government. The best scientific intelligence—*independent* scientific intelligence—is exercised in the pages of *Environment*, informing its readers of the exploitive, irresponsible things in relation to health and the natural world that go on in our society. There is no lack of material for such a publication, and this, we find ourselves saying, is what happens when a society no longer has good roots—when its life is dominated by the feverish culture of "weeds," as Howard Odum has suggested.

But after you read *Environment* for a few months, you begin to wish for the day when you'll find the work of writers like Henry Beston, Aldo Leopold, and Wendell Berry in its pages. You recall Beston's *The Outermost House*, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, and Berry's *Unforeseen Wilderness* and say, perhaps a little impatiently—these people are talking about the "environment," too, and if we aren't able to absorb something of their spirit we'll never be able to nourish the right kind of roots. Then these evils—all the suffocating weeds—will go on and on. Weeds

can be overcome only through displacement by better growths.

The explanation for the dominance of devastating criticism may be that the modern genius is essentially analytical. It knows how to particularize extremes, not how to celebrate simplicities. This is as true in literature as in ecology. Just nine years short of a century ago, William Dean Howells spoke of a related difficulty in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. He made one of his characters say:

"You can paint a man dying for his country, but you can't express on canvas a man fulfilling the duties of a good citizen. . . . The commonplace is just that light, impalpable, aerial essence which they've never got into their confounded books yet. The novelist who could interpret the common feeling of commonplace people would have the answer to 'the riddle of the painful earth' on his tongue."

What Howells was calling for is a writer who is able to make his readers feel the wonder in the seemingly commonplace, the everyday good. This is a capacity which shines in Beston, Leopold, and Berry.

In 1899 William James published a little book, *On Some of Life's Ideals*, in which he explored various aspects of this question. To serve his purpose he quoted from Robert Louis Stevenson (*Across the Plains*), Whitman, and Tolstoy. These writers all had roots which enabled them to honor the ordinary, to identify the excellences hidden in the ordinary. Stevenson speaks of the working man—"cast among so many hardships, savagely surrounded, irremediably condemned to prey upon his fellow-lives,—who should have blamed him, had he been of a piece with his destiny, and a being merely barbarous?" Yet this man is nonetheless more than the external forces which burden him with so many obstacles. One finds him, Stevenson says—

without hope of change in the future, with scarce a pleasure in the present, and yet true to his virtues, honest up to his lights, kind to his neighbors, tempted perhaps in vain by the bright gin-palace, . . . often repaying the world's scorn with service, often

standing firm upon a scruple; . . . everywhere some virtue cherished or affected, everywhere some decency of thought and courage, everywhere the ensign of man's ineffectual goodness,—ah, if I could show you all this! If I could show you these men and women all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the last fight of virtue, still clinging to some rag of honor, the poor jewel of their souls.

This is a splendid rhetoric, but quite embarrassing to us today. We are no longer able to speak feelingly of "honor" and "virtue." They represent ideas which are not a familiar currency in modern thought. It does not seem natural to use these words in our prose. We like a vaguer language, referring to qualities such as "authenticity," and using terms having less overt connection with "morality." Perhaps the whole idea of the moral life requires embodiment in unused words.

James, in his time, however, pondered the question of where the moral qualities come from. After quoting the reflective account of some heroic working men written by an unskilled laborer who saw what the men did, how they behaved under stress, James muses:

If there were any such morally exceptional individuals, what made them different from the rest? It can only have been this,—that their souls worked and endured in obedience to some inner *ideal*, while their comrades were not actuated by anything worthy of that name. These ideals of other lives are among those secrets that we can almost never penetrate, although something about the man may often tell us when they are there.

The mystery remains; James will not pretend he knows why some men cleave to inner ideals, or where they get them. Such men are not, however, in the majority:

The barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life consist in the fact that it is moved by no such inner ideal springs. The backache, the long hours, the danger are patiently endured—for what? To gain a quid of tobacco, a glass of beer, a cup of coffee, a meal, a bed, and to begin again the

next day and shirk as much as one can. This really is why we raise no monument to the laborers in the subway, even though they be our conscripts, and even though after a fashion our city is indeed based upon their patient hearts and enduring backs and shoulders. And this is why we do raise monuments to our soldiers, whose outward conditions were even brutaller still. The soldiers are supposed to have followed an ideal, and the laborers are supposed to have followed none.

You see, my friends, how the plot thickens; and how strangely the complexities of this wonderful human nature of ours begins to develop under our hands. We have seen the blindness and the deadness to each other which are our natural inheritance; and, in spite of them, we have been led to acknowledge an inner meaning which passeth show, and which may be present in the lives of others where we least descry it. And now we are led to say that such inner meaning can be *complete* and valid for us also, only when the inner joy, courage, and endurance are joined with an ideal.

Well, James goes on, asking what an "ideal" is, offering one or two suggestive answers. But the puzzle for us is our reluctance, almost an inability, certainly an inhibition, to think and write in this way. While there are still men who cleave to inner ideals, we hardly have words to recognize them with. Nor have we any way of accounting for them. The situation is doubtless much as Hannah Arendt described it, interpreting Nietzsche's careless phrase, "God is dead!" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He meant, she shows—as he elsewhere explained—that when men no longer feel the reality of the supersensuous world—the origin of ideals in themselves—the loss of this higher world removes the ground for understanding even what happens in the physical world. As Nietzsche put it:

We have abolished the true world. What has remained? The apparent one perhaps? Oh no! With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.

Ideals may have been languishing at the close of the nineteenth century, leading to James's puzzled reflections, but the language of ideals was still available. Now even the language is practically gone. Interestingly, the modern poet,

Wendell Berry, wrote in the *Hudson Review* for the Spring of 1975:

The world that once was mirrored by the poet, has become the poet's mirror. This explains, I think, the emphasis upon personal terror and suffering and the fear of death in much recent poetry. When the self is one's exclusive subject and limit, reference and measure, one has no choice but to make a world of words. And this gives to one's own suffering and death the force of cataclysm.

But the difficulties are more than personal. For one thing, the subject of poetry is not words; it is the world, which poets have in common with other people. It has been argued that modern poets were forced to turn inward by the disposition of their materialistic societies to turn outward. But that argument ignores or discounts the traditions that have always bound poetry to the concerns and values of the spirit.

Without the inner sense of an enduring reality, poets and writers must try to "find themselves" in the world of flux—of the fashionable and the new. As Berry says:

That this eagerness to replace the old with the new justifies itself by the alleged uniqueness of the strains and demands of the modern world does not necessarily ennoble it: the modern world is after all largely the product of merchandisers, whose argument has been essentially the same.

Contemporaneity, in the sense of being "up with the times," is of no value. A competent wakefulness to experience—as well as to instruction and example—is another matter. But what we call the modern world is not necessarily, and not often, the real world, and there is no virtue in being up-to-date in it. It is a false world, based upon economies and values and desires that are fantastical—a world in which millions of people have lost any idea of the resources, the disciplines, the restraints, and the labor necessary to support human life, and who have thus become dangerous to their own lives and to the possibility of life. The job now is to get back to that other perennial and substantial world in which we really do live, in which the foundations of our life will be visible to us, and in which we can accept our responsibilities again within the conditions of necessity and mystery. In that world, all competently wakeful and responsible people, dead, living, and unborn, are contemporaries. And that is the only contemporaneity worth having.

If such themes are able to flower more frequently, and finally to bear fruit, writers of the future will not be reduced to mournful allusions to "the last fight of virtue, still clinging to some rag of honor," and reviewers will not quote them with melancholy nostalgia, as though these memories are all we know how to revive.



## COMMENTARY READING ON BUILDING

A FRIEND concerned with the questions raised in this week's lead article has offered reading suggestions, some related to alternative building materials, others of value to anyone interested in do-it-yourself building.

A good beginning would be to read *Architecture without Architects* (Museum of Modern Art) by Bernard Rudolsky. Available in paperback, this book becomes a treasure for anyone who owns it. It is an encyclopedia of time-tested design.

Lloyd Kahn's *Shelter* (Random House), reviewed in MANAS (April 10, 1974), is a similar volume. Every sort of construction for dwellings is pictured and described in this book.

*The Whole Earth Epilog* (Random House), edited by Stewart Brand, provides a bibliography on do-it-yourself construction.

Also noted in MANAS a while back is *Handmade Houses* (Scrimshaw Press) by Art Boericke and Barry Shapiro, which illustrates ingenious uses of "found" materials.

*Shelter and Society* (Praeger), edited by Paul Oliver, has the recommendation of our friend; also *Villages in the Sun* (Praeger) by Myron Goldfinger, and *Folk Architecture of the East Mediterranean* (Columbia University Press) by Daniel Paulk Branch.

To these suggestions we add *Dwelling* (Freestone, Box 357, Albion, Calif. 95410) by River, a book about homes constructed more or less by amateurs, some of them women.

Adobe is one way to build a house out of dirt. Rammed earth is another. *The Rammed Earth House* by Anthony F. Merrill (Harper, 1947) has an introduction by Clayton Anderson, who was Secretary of Agriculture in those days.

No inquiry into low-cost home construction using alternative materials should neglect *The*

*Owner-Built Home* by Ken Kern (Ken Kern Drafting, Sierra Route, Oakhurst, Calif. 93644). Of the rammed earth house Ken Kern says: "Inasmuch as there is nothing in bare earth to sell, no commercial group can be found to extol its merits."

## CHILDREN

### . . . and Ourselves

#### PRETENDING AND LEARNING

A FOUR-YEAR-OLD GIRL was taken by her mother to church one Sunday. To be sure she would be content and quiet, the mother provided her with a stubby pencil and some paper—not ordinary paper, the child observed with awe and delight. It was writing paper, the kind her mother called "stationery." The little girl decided that such valuable paper should not be used for just drawing pictures, but for a *letter*. There was a certain difficulty, however. The little girl did not know how to write words.

Considering, she reached another decision. She would do the next best thing—she would *pretend* to write a letter, coming as close as possible to the real action and product by putting together all the elements of true writing that she could. Writing, she reflected, conveys ideas from one person to another. That part she could not do. But she could imitate the appearance of writing. It went across the page in straight rows. The rows consisted of lines wiggling a little up and down. Some of the wiggles went higher, some lower. The straight rows had uneven breaks in them. Some sections of writing were very long; some very short.

After this analysis—effective but not formal, an ad hoc bumping around to decide what could be done—she filled all the writing paper with her rows of "writing." And proudly, after church, she showed it to her mother. The mother's reaction was that of most adults when noticing the pretending of children. She was amused and pleased; it had kept the child occupied.

What was not evident to the parent were the steps of thought used by the child in order to imitate handwriting. This elementary cognitive process is generally ignored by both parents and teachers in their observation of children's play. Most of children's play is pretending—role-playing, we say, when adults do it. With the exception of competitive games, children are involved in some form of imaginative pretending in all their free activities.

Overlooked by most adults is the fact that this pretending is an essential part of learning.

Grown-ups associate pretense with subterfuge or hypocrisy, but applied to children this confuses the act with the motive. Pretending, for the child, is looking ahead to the time when he will be able to do what older and bigger people do. This delighting anticipation, utterly sincere, impels the child to pick up a book and, as he turns the pages, to "read" the story out loud. (Sometimes the book is upside down.) If it is a story he knows by heart, all the better for real "reading." If there are pictures, he reads these too, to complete the story sequence. Unhappily, older children or adults—sometimes even teachers—say to him, "You're not reading; you're just pretending." The tone of voice, at best patronizing, often seems to imply that he is doing something wrong. Feeling the reproach, the child may stop pretending to read. In this way one of the most important steps in learning reading is weakened or lost.

If only the adult could have seen the play pretense as fore-vision, an expression of the desire to know, to grow, to achieve, and accepted it as natural, even to participating in the game! This playing out of possible future events or achievements is one example of the promethean side of the human being. Prometheus saw the future exactly as it would be. He took away from men their expectation of doom, giving them "hope." It remained for men to transform that hope into greater certainty by using their imagination.

Adults indulge playfully in various sorts of imagining the future. We may enjoy the futurist fantasies of science fiction, but hardly take them seriously. Perhaps we could learn from the child the value of pretending, by imagining a particular step in our own growth in knowledge for creating a better world. The child naturally assumes with confidence that sooner or later he *will* be reading, or writing, or driving, or whatever role has claimed his attention. He reviews what he knows of the elements of that future action, then mimics those elements as he sees them. His synthesis of them may be incomplete, but he learns better, little by little, from practicing the role. The valuable thing is the assumption of a

position or attitude toward the capacity. To be a fireman or a cowboy one must be brave and strong. To read one must get ideas from a book. To write one must set down the proper symbols.

While the child's analysis may be laughably immature, we might recall the adult acceptance, only a few years ago, of a future of unlimited resources, with the expectation of endlessly exploiting nature without any kick-backs, which was certainly less mature and less realistic than our children's anticipations of what they may some day accomplish easily.

What are the choices available to adults in their life of anticipation—of imagining the future? The choices come, with our hardly knowing it, in the stories and books we read, the films or plays we attend, from the psychic imagery we get from TV and other sources of suggestion. There is a great deal of involuntary futurism in the play of human fancy, out of which habits of thinking, reflexes of response, are daily being formed.

If we should decide to make an effort, as adults, to do selective role-playing as a contribution to a better human future—for ourselves and others—the resolve would be greatly strengthened by giving some care to the imagery we take into our minds. Children obtain their imagery from the behavior of grown-ups in everyday activities. As adults, we have a much wider range of possibilities because of the multiple levels of the adult environment and the complexities of "maturity." For this reason, our imagining of roles needs to be deliberate, not accidental or casual. Quite easily adults slip into trivial or even self-destructive modes of seeing themselves in the future. Moreover, we are exposed to an endless variety of spurious imagery intended to persuade us to realize dreams by buying gadgets and gimcracks, new automobiles, or going on tours. This, too, is a kind of play-pretending. But just as children enjoy wearing the hats and shoes of adults, adults could decide to try on the habits of human excellence—they could "pretend" to be heroes, and choose their heroes with greater care.

Meanwhile, the least we can do as parents and teachers is to understand and accept the dramatic

play of children as an essential of their growth. And if we accept without deprecation the make-believe reading of the young, or even the melodramatic posturing of adolescents, we may be encouraging stability in their learning processes.

Some thirty years ago, dramatic play was considered by leading educators to be an important part of a child's daily school experiences. Free play was encouraged among both young children and those in the middle grades. Alert teachers observed the action and listened carefully to conversations among the participants. From these observations teachers were able to conduct discussions which provided the children with opportunity to evaluate their own play. Children felt free to state concerns and grievances regarding the use of materials, relationships, and the action itself. They talked about what was "fair" and "unfair," and made suggestions. "If we didn't all try to get there at the same time, we wouldn't bump each other."

Out of dramatic play among older children came discussions regarding principles and motives. Children's learning of history was a combination of the cognitive and the affective. To role-play the experiences of an historical figure at his moment of serious decision was a dramatic way to know history. If, once again, we could give children opportunity to enjoy role-playing, dramatic play, "pretending" in the public school classroom, we might rediscover more of the essentials of the learning process.

TEACHER

## *FRONTIERS* At Time of Death

ERNEST MORGAN and the Celo Press (Route 5, Burnsville, North Carolina 28714) have made available a new—the seventh—edition of the useful *Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial* (\$1.50 postpaid). There is good reason for frequent revision of this pamphlet, since it contains an up-to-date directory of the funeral and memorial societies in the U.S. and Canada—groups which make possible simple, inexpensive funerals according to one's feeling of fitness—or burial or cremation with no ceremony, as some prefer. Membership in these cooperative societies affords access to low-cost mortuary service. The roster of societies lists minimum charges, location and telephone. The *Manual* also provides practical counsel on what to do at the time of death, with suggestions for those distant from any existing burial society, or who wish to handle all arrangements themselves—have a "do-it-yourself" funeral.

The first part of this pamphlet is devoted to what is termed "Death Education." As the author says, "Until one accepts the reality of death and thinks through the implications he has not really accepted life." This section might also have been called "Life Education," since death is an inevitable part of life. Mr. Morgan lists books about death and its meaning, and provides a number of questions and ideas for consideration. Ought we, for example, to fear death? How might one tell a child about the meaning of death? A theme suggested for reflection by a contributor is the story of the young mother who came to the Buddha, her dead infant in arms, begging him to restore the child's life. The Buddha asked her to bring him a mustard seed from a home where no death had occurred. By patient search she learned, little by little, of the omnipresence of death—that no one is immune. (This story is found in E. A. Burt's *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*.)

A funeral service may serve the survivors in various ways. It is a natural time for meditation on the meaning of death, and the philosophic literature of the world is rich in material for such reflections. One might recall, for example, the fearless attitude of Socrates toward death, expressed in the *Phaedo* and elsewhere. The question of pre-existence—as in Wordsworth's "On Intimations of Immortality"; and of rebirth—as in the *Bhagavad-Gita*—might have attention. Those interested in recent expressions could turn to a thoughtful book by John Haynes Holmes—*The Affirmation of Immortality*, in which, some years ago, this eminent pastor commented on a newspaper account of the funeral of a widely respected American:

May I respectfully contend that Mr. Wilkie played no such part as described in these quotations. . . . Mr. Wilkie was not taken to the church from the undertaking establishment, nor to the Pennsylvania station after the service. Mr. Wilkie did not lie in state, nor rest "in an open bronze coffin," nor did he speed west "toward the final resting place." It was Mr. Wilkie's body that did all these things. . . .

This apparently trivial matter of newspaper style and usage is, in its ultimate implications, momentous. It opens vast metaphysical questions of personal reality, and touches the whole substance of religious faith. To him who believes in immortality and is convinced that, while we *have* a body, we are a *soul*, there can be no compromise on this issue. It is the body that is raved, and laid in state, and borne to the grave, and at last buried. The man lives on untouched, unharmed, untended.

Here Dr. Holmes was repeating conceptions voiced by the greatest philosophers of the past. Socrates, after detailing the myth of immortality in the *Phaedo*, said: "Of course, no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them." He told his friends to comfort Crito, "and keep him from being distressed on my account when he sees my body being burned or buried, as if something dreadful were happening to me, or from saying at the funeral that it is Socrates whom he is laying out or carrying to the grave." Such misstatements, he said, have a jarring effect on the soul! Plato's account of the death of

Socrates may be the most moving and inspiring consideration of death in all Western literature.

Some reflections on death by Jacob Needleman (in his new book, *A Sense of the Cosmos*) seem an appropriate revival of the instruction of Socrates to his friends, on the day he died. This modern Socratic writes:

My life goes on and I sink back into the fears and lies that surround my attitude toward death. I cannot create an experience of death—but *can I not create this separation*, :this moment of existing in the presence of myself? And is this separation of pure awareness from all that I ordinarily take to be myself an analogy to what has been called—in language we no longer understand—the separation of "soul" and "body" in the moment of actual death at the end of life?

Here, perhaps, we have found an opening, a chink in the armor of the problem of death. But let us proceed cautiously. Nothing I can do from my own efforts can create that extraordinary state in which I stand for an instant face to face with the fact of death. Yet I can find an analogue to this experience. I can reproduce it in miniature and study the laws and the structure of my disappearance and the giving up of my clinging to my "self." *In a state of freedom from clinging to thought*—where an important thought is allowed to move on, forever beyond recall—one may have an experience analogous to that of death, which is the disappearance of my "self."

It is of course for each individual to verify this claim for himself. And we may surmise that such verification is not so simple as it may sound. . . .

There seems both inspiration and caution in the words of philosophers on this great question.