

WISDOM AT WALDEN

[This is Part II of the four-part series on Henry David Thoreau, by Richard Groff.—Editors.]

THOREAU was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, and died there in 1862. He was graduated from Harvard College with the class of 1837. He had not distinguished himself as a scholar, nor had he prepared for any particular career. He had cultivated, however, a perhaps unequaled ability to be absorbed in and delighted by the rich life of nature in the woods and fields and streams surrounding his native town, and retained the precious gift of appreciating as long as he lived.

About this time he first met Emerson, fourteen years his senior and coming into his own as a leader of thought. Emerson sensed the youth's promise, though he had as yet neither written nor done anything of consequence, and within a year was referring to him (to the bewilderment and surprise of many) as "*the man of Concord.*" It is also true, however, that in later years Emerson came to be somewhat impatient with Henry's lack of outward ambition: "Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party."

A life long bachelor, Thoreau earned his living as a manual laborer mainly, though he also had some income from manufacturing pencils and surveying. Fortunately he did not depend upon his lectures and writings to supply his bread. Even one of his austere habits would have found that impossible. From his youth until shortly before his death he faithfully kept a voluminous Journal in which he recorded nature data, and notes on his experiences, reading and thoughts. His was a life of intense devotion to experiencing the richness of day-to-day events as he found them. This he cultivated as a high art.

On July 4, 1845, Thoreau took up residence at nearby Walden Pond in a cabin he had built. In a famous passage in *Walden* he declares, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."² This experiment in living continued two years, after which he returned to Concord. He left the woods, he tells us, for as good a reason as he went there, that he had several more lives to lead and could spare no more time for that one. Nevertheless, what Thoreau learned during this venture in "plain living and high thinking" influenced him to the end of his days and comprises the core of his prophetic point of view, which we are here considering.

Surely Emerson has earned his place as America's greatest moral teacher, and Thoreau's philosophic and inspirational debt to his fellow townsman is not to be discounted. But Thoreau more than repays the obligation by bringing to Transcendentalism his unsurpassed gift for incarnating Emerson's exalted conception of human powers. The philosophic outlook of each was firmly grounded. The two diverge in that Emerson's career centered on being a public expounder of spiritual truths, while Thoreau identified more with the tangible, day-to-day living of the good life. He is Emerson's "Man Thinking"—and seeing, and hearing and feeling, too. Thoreau is the proof of Emerson's pudding. He lived his life in conscious obedience to the highest principles, no mean achievement in his, our, or any other day.

With many, the phrase that first comes to mind at the mention of Thoreau is "the simple life." But that simplifying his wants was altogether an end in itself is an erroneous idea which he is at pains to point out in a letter to one

of his correspondents: "To what end do I lead a simple life at all, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives?—and so all our lives be *simplified* merely, like an algebraic formula? Or not, rather, that I may make better use of the ground I have cleared, to live more worthily and profitably?"³

One of Thoreau's discoveries in the Walden woods was that it may be easier to enjoy creative leisure when poor than when wealthy. He was not stricken by poverty but rather apprenticed himself to her to learn what she might have to teach. Intentional poverty, he found, is free of the business details and anxieties which plague the lives of those for whom the expression "high standard of living" carries only economic implications. Such a man avoids the world of commerce not because he is unequal to it but because he is above it. Life and time are worth too much to squander them in the idle pursuit of material riches. Thoreau reminds us that after we have obtained the minimum in food, clothing and shelter—and the minimum here, he shows us, is considerably lower than we are accustomed to think—we must then choose whether to spend our surplus vitality on superfluities for the body or necessities of the soul: "There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living."⁴ Having cast the mote of economic bondage from his own eye, Thoreau sees clearly the absurd contradictions in the lives of his idly industrious neighbors who slave-drive themselves, "making yourselves sick, that you may lay up something against a sick day."⁵ Vividly he portrays the inverted values of society: "No man ever stood lower in my estimation for having a patch on his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience."⁶

While at Walden Thoreau built his own house and raised his own food. Concerning this aspect of his effort to be a whole and not a fragmented

man, he says: "There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and their families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds usually sing when they are so engaged? But alas! We do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes."⁷

Instead of solving his own problem of livelihood by increasing his income, Thoreau did it by decreasing his wants ("For a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone"⁸) and supplying them by wholesome work with his hands: "For myself I found that the occupation of a day-laborer was the most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty or forty days in a year to support me."⁹ "I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. . . ."¹⁰ The essay "Life Without Principle" sets forth his profound and eloquent thoughts on the subject of right livelihood.

Thoreau's experiment at Walden was no neurotic's withdrawal from a world which had proved too much for him. It was no "retreat" at all but an *advance* into a little-explored realm of great potential meaning for man. It argues no shortcoming in an intelligent person when he chooses to remove himself for a time from the established disorder of everyday life. It is only the sane, after all, who command the perception to recoil at the palpable irrationalities of a chaotic world. One must distinguish sharply between those —neurotics, psychotics, and common criminals—who deviate from the norms of society because somehow they cannot measure up to them, and those extraordinary persons —prophets and men of principle—who do not conform to common standards because they perceive and

obey laws of a higher order of life. Confirmed equalitarians may object to this stressing of levels of being, but the facts, it seems, do not readily lend themselves to any other interpretation.

In a justly famous passage, the man best qualified to do it evaluates the Walden venture: "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."¹¹

Along with Whitman, Thoreau might say "I loaf and invite my soul." Richness crowded upon richness for his every hour, it seemed: "It requires more than a day's devotion to know and to possess the wealth of a day."¹² And: "Really to see the sun rise or go down every day, so to relate ourselves to a universal fact, would preserve us sane forever."¹³ Seeing the boundless delight which Thoreau took in his daily walks amid the everyday wonders of the natural world is enough to give pause to those of us too busy making a living to take time out to live, or who pass by opportunities for responding spontaneously to simple beauty in favor of complaining how dull and empty life seems. This man could spend from dawn till noon completely absorbed in what poured into his receptive senses while sitting quietly in his own doorway. He lived perpetually in the present moment (Emerson said he had no "wake") and marvelled at its inexhaustible content. "What right have I to grieve," he asks, "who have not ceased to wonder?"¹⁴

It is sometimes difficult, though possibly not of first importance, to distinguish between Thoreau's interest in natural phenomena for their intrinsic beauty and in their under-the-surface implications for the seeker. One thing seems certain, however: that no one who had not purged himself of much that is unworthy could possess such receptivity to the subtle grandeur of a lake as Thoreau reveals in one meditation. This is no parlor poet, no dilettante naturalist who can write: "In such a day, in September or October, Walden

is a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh: a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush,—this the light dust-cloth,—which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and be reflected in its bosom still."¹⁵

The sage of Walden was not a philosopher in the sense that he set forth a systematic view of life and the universe in the light of human reason; for he did not. But he was something a good deal more significant—a prophet of values in living and an enduring inspirer of all who would assault the loftiest peaks of their dreams, and of those who seek only to make their day-to-day lives more rich and meaningful. Thoreau is a thinker in the tradition of the Perennial Philosophy. For his insights are rooted in that one core of basic teachings about the nature and destiny of man within the spiritual heritage of every great religion and culture the world has known, the common denominator which relates every genuine man of wisdom with every other, no matter how separate they may at first seem.

While he formulates no system of philosophy, Thoreau offers the record of the life he lived in obedience to his highest intuitions of truth. "To live like a philosopher is to live, not foolishly, like other men, but wisely and according to universal laws."¹⁶ He was one of those few *men of principle* who are determined to put first things first. In the ancient and etymological sense of the word he was a philosopher, a "lover of wisdom." Before one can love wisdom, however, one must believe that wisdom exists; that man has a faculty for valid knowledge and sound judgments about

life and need not either accept the arbitrary standards of some external authority or retreat into cynicism or know-nothing-ism. But let the man speak for himself: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live, according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust."¹⁷

For institutional Christianity Thoreau had little use. It seemed, as generally practiced, a pathetic attempt to capture and preserve a living truth which could only be apprehended freshly, in a direct and immediate way, or sometimes through the medium of the world of nature. Group ritual could never substitute for individual meditation. The church passed itself off as a vehicle of prophecy when in reality it was little more than another social institution. Thoreau observes: "As a snowdrift is formed where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up."¹⁸ And again: "We do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth."¹⁹ He was irritated by "ministers who spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject."²⁰ He could find no evidence of a theological superstructure in the sky and was severe on those who did: "Pray, what geographer are you, that speak of heaven's topography? Whose friend are you, that speak of God's personality? . . . Tell me of the height of the mountains of the moon, or of the diameter of space, and I may believe you, but of the secret history of the Almighty, and I shall pronounce thee mad."²¹ Your scheme must be the framework of the universe; all other schemes will soon be ruins."²² If the mediums of dogma or professional middlemen obstructed Thoreau's view of the heavens, they would have to go. He went instead to the recorded teachings of the prophets themselves. In the midst of one spirited denunciation of institutional Christianity he remarks, "The reading which I love best is the scriptures of the several nations."²³ Thus he

condemned what was ignorant and fraudulent in the religious tradition without rejecting what was of value in it.

For Thoreau, as for Emerson and Whitman, the great secrets of life were not revealed centuries ago, once and for all. Revelations as dazzling as any of old were waiting only for the man capable of them. For time and eternity, he sees, are not like parallel railroad tracks with the latter only a little longer than the former at both ends, but are of a different nature altogether. "In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a state, or even acquiring fame, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change or accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now renews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future."²⁴

The careful craftsmanship and dignity of Thoreau's prose, its elevated tone, integrity, and earthy figures of speech, its dry wit,—all reflect the character of the writer. In Thoreau if anywhere the style argues the man. Typical of vivid Thoreauvian imagery is his remark, "New ideas come into this world somewhat like falling meteors, with a flash and an explosion, and perhaps somebody's castle roof perforated."²⁵ *Walden* (1854), though not widely read a century ago, is today recognized as an undisputed American classic. Thoreau's satire is based upon a well developed sense of the ridiculous. He constantly points out the incongruities between appearance and reality: "Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but religiously follows the new."²⁶ In a homely figure he makes memorable some of his Concord neighbors, whom he characterized as "newly shingled and

clapboarded,"²⁷ but if you knock, no one is at home. Emerson recorded in his journal for February 17, 1838: "Everything that boy says makes merry with society, though nothing can be graver than his meaning." Even with the weightiest of metaphysical issues he can manage a humorous epigram: "Thus men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up."²⁸

Most thinkers have their own terminology which the reader must first master; but Thoreau, except of course in his meditative and imaginative flights, speaks directly in plain language, hammering his points home with such vigor that it is impossible to misunderstand him. He needs only readers, not interpreters, and as for restating his thoughts, one would as soon attempt to paraphrase Shakespeare or the New Testament. Apply to him his own statement: "The words of some men are thrown forcibly against you and adhere like burrs."²⁹

Thoreau said what he had to say. If there were few within range of his written and spoken words who could value what he was saying, that was of secondary importance. He would not dilute his message in hopes of making it more palatable to others, for he knew better than to cultivate reputation at the expense of character:

Fame cannot tempt the bard
Who's famous with his God;
Nor laurel him reward
Who has his Maker's nod.³⁰

That Thoreau's blistering indictments of human foibles have led some readers to write him off as a misanthrope is indeed unfortunate. If reproving man's shortcomings out of a love of his possibilities be misanthropy, then God Himself must answer to the charge. No one who has read the final chapter of *Walden* can forget this exultant hymn to man as he may yet become. As deep as Thoreau dives to exhibit and pillory human folly, so high does he soar to celebrate man's slumbering potential. Hear his affirmations of faith: ". . . be a Columbus to whole new

continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state. . . ."³¹ "Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him and the divine being established."³²

"No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles. If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,—that is your success."³³ "Some are dinning into our ears that we Americans, and moderns generally, are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients, or even the Elizabethan men. But what is that to the purpose? A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pigmy that he can?"³⁴

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(To Be Continued)

NOTES

The complete *Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 20 vols., Boston Houghton Mifflin and Co, 1906, have long been out of print, but numerous selections of his representative writings are available. For a full length biography see H. S. Canby's *Thoreau*, Boston Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1939, recently re-issued as a Beacon Press Paperback (BP 65). An excellent critical biography is J. W. Krutch's *Henry David Thoreau*, New York William Sloane Associates, 1948.

2. *Walden*, Ch. II.
3. Letter to Harrison Blake, Sept. 26, 1855.
4. "Life Without Principle."
5. *Walden*, Ch. I.
6. *Walden*, Ch. I.
7. *Walden*, Ch. I.

8. *Walden*, Ch. II.
9. *Walden*, Ch. I.
10. *Walden*, Ch. I.
11. *Walden*, Ch. XVIII.
12. "Life Without Principle."
13. "Life Without Principle."
14. Letter to Mrs. Lucy Brown, March 2, 1842.
15. *Walden*, Ch. IX.
16. Thomas Carlyle and His Works."
17. *Walden*, Ch. I.
18. "Life Without Principle."
19. "Life Without Principle."
20. *Walden*, Ch. VI.
21. *Week*, "Sunday."
22. *Idem*.
23. *Idem*.
24. *Walden*, Ch. III.
25. Letter to Daniel Ricketson, August 18, 1857.
26. *Walden*, Ch. I.
27. Lyceum lecture, April 11, 1838, as quoted in Canby, p. 96.
28. "Life Without Principle."
29. *Journal*, as quoted in Canby, p. 96.
30. "Inspiration," a posthumous poem.
31. *Walden*, Ch. XVIII.
32. *Walden*, Ch. XI
33. *Walden*, Ch. XI.
34. *Walden*, Ch. XVIII.

REVIEW

MOMENTS OF UNDERSTANDING

JOHN HERSEY'S novel, *A Single Pebble*, is a sensitive book. (Knopf, 1956; Bantam, 1961.) It tells a story of the tides of life and emotion in pre-Communist China, and is autobiographical to some extent, since Hersey was himself born and reared in China. The protagonist—he is really only a witness—is a young American engineer sent to study the dangerous alterations in flow of the great Yangtze River. Looking for a possible dam site, he travels in a Chinese junk and comes to discover, among other things, that any such tampering with the great natural forces of the river that has been the very life of a people struck the Chinese boatmen with horror and a vast unease. They could not comprehend the young engineer, not because they could not comprehend his plan, but because they could not understand his emotions. He lived in an entirely different world.

By the voyage's end, though, the Westerner found himself strangely reluctant to part from these ignorant and superstitious folk. There was a strange dignity about them, and he felt as if he had almost found out what gave them their endurance and courage. As the boat crosses the river for the final landing, the youth describes his feelings:

Then in that unstable sampan, in mid-current, I felt the beginnings of something I had never experienced before at that age, a feeling very deep that I would have found hard then to define—something close to anger, yet close as well to love, a feeling in which pain and joy were mixed; something like determination; perhaps the very first stirring of understanding in me, though I was terribly troubled still by the many things I did not understand. This strange new feeling was, at any rate, more a physical sensation than anything else in those first moments, an upsurge in my chest of elation-with-despair, of a palpable ache that somehow gave me comfort. I know now, for I have experienced it often, that this feeling was really a kind of wishing—that things could be different, that I could be a better person, that the world could be a better place; and with the wishing, a feeling of sadness, regret, and even, it may be, of hopelessness. Many of my friends say they

have had this feeling, too, it seems to be a common sensation of our anxious era, which rushes along as swiftly as the Great River in flood. The feeling quickly passed that time, supplanted by a rush of the misery of parting—of leave-taking from a place that demanded awe, from an experience I could never forget, and from human beings whom I had come close to understanding.

For us, this passage and the book as a whole are a reminder that most of us, in a life "which rushes along as swiftly as the Great River in flood," have built too many barriers to understanding another people, another culture, another person.

Pieter C. Kors points out, in the May issue of *Psychiatry* (in "The Existential Moment in Psychotherapy"), that the basic sicknesses termed "insanity," are always a reflection of "inability to accept others on a mature basis of equality." Dr. Kors continues:

In existential terms, it is the inability to see the other as a fellow man, thrown into the world like himself in a certain place and at a certain time and having, like himself, to make the best of it. Maturity, in existential language, means accepting these circumstances of the human situation with all their consequences. It means taking the past upon one's shoulders and projecting one's self from the present into the future; past, present, and future are extensions from the typical here-and-now situation of a human being. It means realizing that the other person has exactly the same difficulties with his own past, his own present, and his own future, that he has to struggle with his own responsibilities. The other is seen in this light as one sees one's self—caught in a struggle from which there is no escape. This can create a sphere of togetherness, forgiveness, and acceptance. One realizes that one needs to bear his own sorrows and accept his own responsibilities.

We have several times quoted Dr. Carl Rogers, to the common benefit of editors and readers. In a lecture at the University of Wisconsin (March 13, 1960), Dr. Rogers discusses his own experiences with "the problem of understanding":

I come now to a central learning which has had a great deal of significance for me. I can state this learning as follows: *I have found it of enormous*

value when I can permit myself to understand another person.

The way in which I have worded this statement may seem strange to you. Is it necessary to *permit* oneself to understand another? I think that it is. Our first reaction to most of the statements which we hear from other people is an immediate evaluation, or judgment, rather than an understanding of it. When someone expresses some feeling or attitude or belief, our tendency is, almost immediately, to feel "That's right," or "That's stupid," "That's abnormal," "That's unreasonable," "That's incorrect," "That's not nice." Very rarely do we permit ourselves to *understand* precisely what the meaning of his statement is to him. Perhaps I can make this even sharper by suggesting a procedure of which you may have heard. The suggestion is that the next time you find yourself in an argument with a friend or your spouse, that you initiate this rule: That neither party can present his views until he has first understood the preceding statement of the other. To test whether *you have* understood his statement, rephrase it or summarize it in a way that is satisfactory to *him*. Perhaps you recognize how terribly difficult you will find this to be. It may help you to realize how rarely you have tried to *understand* another person from within his own internal frame of reference. I believe this is because understanding is risky. If I let myself really understand another person, I might be changed by that understanding. And we all fear change. So as I say, it is not an easy thing to permit oneself to understand an individual, to enter thoroughly and completely and empathically into his frame of reference. It is also a rare thing.

To understand is enriching in a double way. I find when I am working with clients in distress, that to understand the bizarre world of a psychotic individual, or to understand and sense the attitudes of a person who feels that life is too tragic to bear, or to understand a man who feels that he is a worthless and inferior individual—each of these understandings somehow enriches me. I learn from these experiences in ways that change me, that make me a different and, I think, a more responsive person. Even more important perhaps, is the fact that my understanding of these individuals permits them to change. It permits them to accept their own fears and bizarre thoughts and tragic feelings and discouragements, as well as their moments of courage and kindness and love and sensitivity. And it is their experience as well as mine that when someone fully understands those feelings, this enables them to accept those feelings in themselves. Then they find both the feelings and

themselves changing. Whether it is understanding a woman who feels that very literally she has a hook in her head by which others lead her about, or understanding a man who feels that no one is as lonely, no one is as separated from others as he, I find these understandings to be of value to me. But also, and even more importantly, to be understood has a very positive value to these individuals.

Here, certainly, is "advice" which might be taken and applied at the conference table as well as in the home, at "summit meetings," as well as in the psychological workshop—in all our reading and thinking. We have a "New China" as it now exists because of many failures of understanding. We have an embattled world, obviously, for the same reasons.

COMMENTARY

THE NON-POLITICAL LIFE

THERE is a common and quite plausible indictment of the man who chooses to go through life without giving much serious attention to what is happening in the world. He is, people say, cultivating his person while neglecting larger responsibilities. He is refusing to be involved in the agony of the times.

Well, these comments have their truth. This truth grows, you could say, in direct proportion to the capacity of the man to think useful thoughts about the problems of the world and to take useful action of some sort.

But there is another way of looking at such matters. It is a fact, for one thing, that there are large numbers of people who have such weighty personal difficulties that they can feel no more relation to the issues of State than they do to a storm which is reported by the papers as wandering over the wastes of the Atlantic ocean. Then there are people whose long observation of the conduct of national affairs has made them deeply pessimistic. Finally, there is the view that the longing for a perfect State is a substitute solution for the problem of creating better, if not perfect, men—a problem with which we have not done so well.

We know of a man who was for years a social worker in Chicago. He labored with all his energies in behalf of the young people in a depressed section of the city. Then, almost overnight, everything he had accomplished was wiped out by a ruthless act of the law-makers. Of course, you could say that not *everything* was wiped out. Some people must have carried away with them something of the beneficence of this man's work, but the *social* value of what he had created was destroyed. So he took his family and came to California to start a new kind of life as a small farmer. He became a very good farmer, just as he had, no doubt, been a very good social worker. After a while, other people began to follow his example, and a little community of thoughtful farming folk developed. Their children grew up in a rich and free cultural atmosphere. The ugliness of the world has not gone away, but some important

qualities of life are flourishing where these people are.

What we are really trying to get at, here, is some kind of definition of the circumstances on which the good life depends. Is it really true that we have to stamp out a long catalogue of evils before we can begin to live the good life?

The proposition we should like to defend is the proposition that insisting on the Right Circumstances before you begin to live the good life is a prime cause of the evils that are supposed to be stamped out.

Right now the chief evil right-thinking men want to stamp out is Communist influence and Communist governments. But the Communist movement was begun by men who wanted to stamp out evils, and if you are willing to read the social and economic history of the nineteenth century, you will be obliged to admit that the evils were real, and you may even agree that it was right to want to stamp them out.

What seems to turn these well-intentioned efforts into abortive failures is the tendency of some men to become *professional* stampers-out of evils; once they get going, the good life for them turns into nothing but a stamping-out operation and they lose all understanding of people with other inclinations. By that time, they have the power, and the stamping out goes on and on.

So it is natural, and even fortunate, that non-political philosophies begin to emerge which are totally partisan to the claim that the good life, or what you can get of it, has to be lived here and now. We can learn something from people who are determined to *ignore* political power, even if it is true that they are living unbalanced lives. And there is always the question of what is a balanced life, in a world so twisted out of its natural shape by the forces which political and technological power has released.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

THE EDUCATION OF THE EGO

A FEW years ago, when we first began hearing the phrase "attitudinal psychology," an article in *Philosophy East and West* suggested a provocative basis for comparative study. The author, N. Mishra, attempted to show that the explorations of men such as David Riesman and Erich Fromm duplicated traditional Hindu philosophy in terms of the proposition that the human ego comes to self-knowledge only through refinements of *attitudes*. These attitudes, or "mental attributes," are called "samskaras" in Sanskrit—each one representing a limited degree of enlightenment, but at the same time often representing a freezing, at that point, of the abilities of the "soul." Of course, for the Indian philosopher, the doctrine of pre-existence and of successive rebirths on earth is taken for granted, so the teaching of *samskaras* simply gives definition to work toward fulfillment of destiny during a long evolutionary pilgrimage.

When David Riesman speaks of three attitudinal orientations which can be observed at both the individual and the cultural level—tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed—he implies that all three must be transcended. The "autonomous" man is one who, because he does not fixate at one particular level of responses to his mental and physical environment, will develop both integrity and responsibility. The tradition-directed man identifies with his culture: its values are his values, and his sense of responsibility is accomplished by the culture rather than by the person. The inner-directed man is one who professes to be moved by presumed absolute truths of moral behavior. Consequently, the sort of religion which is dominant in the inner-directed attitude often deters people from getting to know one another, sympathizing and learning from each other.

Some paragraphs in the April *Unitarian Register* take up the subject of "Private Religion" to show how dangerously egocentric "inner direction" is likely to become. The Rev. Harold J. Quigley, a former Presbyterian Minister who is now a Congregationalist, tells how a pastor of his own youth played havoc with the "attitudes" of those under his influence:

He wanted us to enlarge our targets of resentment from the people responsible for our misfortune to all folk as Christ-killers, to the world as wicked, and to culture as uncreative. He saw no home in the world for us but recommended the deepening of our homelessness by becoming commuters to his unreal world. Furthermore, in his desire that we exile ourselves from reality, humanity, and love of the seen, he invited us to engage ourselves in the general loathing out of which other orphans were spawned.

The minister I have described typifies what I call "private religion." Everything about him was egocentric. He was a myth-maker who brought up rationalizations out of his own dark moods. His tendency was one of reaction. Externally life frustrated his wish for the power and the glory. As a form of retaliation against a non-appreciative and non-receptive society, he predicted such a society would come to "eternal death." In using this description, "eternal death," he revealed the dark fatalism of his own inner life. Internally—within his own body, which he despised—there existed a fascination with what was taboo. To escape the inner agony of the resulting guilt, he had to court an existence of non-life where no accusing voice could reach him. To drown out his own voice of judgment and to annul society's claim upon him, he charged wickedness against the iron hand of inheritance and blackened society's name as "the Christ-killer." For its wickedness (its crucifixion of him) he said society was doomed. The projection of his judgments revealed him, not the nature of social history.

"Private religion," in summary, is a conspiracy. It argues skillfully its friendship for man, its position as the defender and its function as a minister, while it secretly is not submissive. It presents itself as omniscient, even when it has no concrete social aims. It fights change, yet it claims the authority to change people and alter the eternal fate of those who accede to its dogmas.

The distinctive role of "private religion" is performance. It specializes in the "act" of purity in its creeds, the "act" of perfection in its words, and the "act" of greatness in its rituals. It turns from the present, fostering the fiction of an unparalleled moment in history when the founder lived. It asserts that withdrawal from life in this world and acceptance of the hate program are the means whereby the submissive person identifies himself with the hero, with his history, and with his acclaim.

This is strong language. But Dr. Quigley is trying to illustrate the dangers of rigid categories in ethics and morality. For the most part, the usually healthy agnosticism of the age of science has done away with the influence of such men, but its replacement is too often an aimless if harmless sociability. Here we have the other-directed man—who conforms to group opinion and taste because he wishes to be liked in this world rather than saved in the next. Yet, according to Riesman, this is nevertheless a step upward. Commenting on Riesman's analysis in the June *Harper's* Eric Larrabee observes:

There is an important difference, at the same time, between Riesman's view and the conventional indictments of American conformity. In describing how a modern industrial society like our own favors the other-directed—the person highly sensitive to, and dependent on, the opinions of others—he has tried to lessen their stifling pressure by showing how other-direction can encourage autonomy. Considerateness, taste, charity, tact—these by-products of a concern for others are highly desirable. One can perfectly well be other-directed without sacrificing individual integrity, just as one may for convenience conform as to inessentials, in order to retain freedom as to things that matter. Riesman freely contends, in a passage too seldom quoted, that the chances for autonomy are in many ways greater for the other-directed than the inner-directed, since the tradition of hard, compulsive self-sufficiency is a shadowy and misleading guide for the twentieth century. Autonomy is of course not a place to arrive but a way of traveling, and "when people ask, as they sometimes do, how they can become autonomous, the answer cannot be put in words." Riesman adds: "That the question is asked is a good sign, like any fundamental question about human existence; it is a sign that complacency has worn thin and that the

search for what the religious call grace has been renewed."

A thoughtful and loving parent certainly wishes his children to become autonomous and responsible at the same time, and the process by which such education is achieved is obviously any means to reach increasing awareness of attitudes and their consequences. The mere conformist is going nowhere, whereas the rebel who reacts against conformity on a merely emotional basis falls back into some of the traps of inner-direction—and a purely egocentric code of right and wrong. However, the conformist seems to be in the worse shape so far as his own inner evolution is concerned, because he can't learn anything except more conformity. Our children and our children's children are obviously going to have to find their own way through the social *samskaras* of our time—in order to build some worthwhile tendencies of their own.

FRONTIERS

Law as Education

THE idea that the primary role of law in the human community is to *teach* is one that we, along with a lot of other people, have never quite understood, and have not tried very hard to understand. Teaching, we have preferred to think, is always a proceed of the kind of alchemy that happens between two people. The teacher goes through the motions of teaching, but keeps his eye on the stars, and the pupil goes through the motions, too, until, if the alchemy works, he looks up and sees the stars for himself.

But the law, we understand now, offers the kind of teaching that is held in cultural solution. Law is the instrument by which the social or political community may cause the individual to recognize the bearing of principle upon his life and relations with others. The anarchists ought to give some attention to this idea. The anarchists, we have long felt, possess fifty-one per cent of the political truth. The question is whether the anarchists can make their share of the political truth work without giving serious attention to the other forty-nine per cent.

We are obligated to Robert M. Hutchins, of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, in Santa Barbara, Calif., for the ground of this argument. In an address delivered in Washington, D.C., last June, in honor of Supreme Court Hugo L. Black, Mr. Hutchins said:

The Founding Fathers meant us to learn. They meant us to learn how to form a more perfect union, to establish justice to insure domestic tranquility, to provide for the common defense, to promote the general welfare, and to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity. They founded a political community; a community learning together to discover and achieve the common good, the elements of which they set forth, but did not elucidate, in the Preamble. The reliance on us to continue learning is evident in every line of the Constitution and in the brevity of the whole.

The Constitution is to be interpreted, therefore, as a charter of learning. We are to learn how to develop the seeds the Fathers planted under the conditions of our own time. This political botany means that nothing we have learned and no process of learning could be unconstitutional. What would be unconstitutional would be limitations or inhibitions on learning. . . .

Learning is a rational process. Law is an ordinance of reason, directed to the common good. The process of deciding to make or not to make a law, or the process of reaching a judicial conclusion, is to be criticized in terms of its conformity not to local or popular but to universal standards of reasonableness. If the Constitution is to teach us, and we are to learn under its instruction, the dialogue that goes on about its meaning must be about what is reasonable and unreasonable, right and wrong, just and unjust. The question is not what interests are at stake, not what are the *mores* of the community, not who has the power or who is the dominant group, not what the courts will do or the legislature has done, but what is reasonable, right and just.

Certainly conformity to the precise words of the laws and the Constitution is not enough. It is well to remember that Hitler was called Adolf Legalité. Everything he did, like everything that is being done in South Africa, was strictly according to law. Critics of President Eisenhower were correct in saying that his defense of the desegregation decision was ineffectual. He should have said not merely that the decision was the law of the land, but also that it was based upon reason, right, and justice. . . .

When it comes to learning through the political community, the object is to learn how to be a responsible citizen, enjoying liberty under the law. The freedom of the individual must be protected, but in addition the citizen must grow in responsibility if our country is to become conscious of itself as part of Humanity and to think Humanity in order to organize it. Individual freedom and liberty under law are not incompatible, and they are both indispensable.

Law is a great teacher. It does not represent that minimum of morality necessary to hold the community together. It stands rather for such moral truth as the community has discovered that can and should be supported by the authority of the community. The conception of law as coercion, or the command of the sovereign, or the expression of power, or what the courts will do leads to the conclusion that every effort should be made to avoid law and that it is proper to do anything that nobody

can compel you to abstain from doing. Some such misconception must have been in the mind of our government when it organized a foray into Cuba in violation of our own laws and in violation of international law. This fiasco suggests either that our officials are hypocritical when they make obeisance to the Rule of Law or that when they use the words "Rule of Law" they do not know what they are talking about. . . .

To speak of the law as a teacher or an instrument of the learning process is the only defense of law which is beyond criticism. If you say, for example, that law is an instrument of justice, you can easily be convicted of speaking nonsense. What is justice? Under the rule of justice, you get what is coming to you. But *what* is coming to you? Do twelve good men and true or a man in a black cloak know? Of course they don't. Nor do the law-makers. All these people know is what they may decide to do to you in the name of justice.

But if a judge gets up and says: "I do not know what justice is, nor do my honorable colleagues. As dispensers of justice, we are totally inadequate. But we are nonetheless obliged to act to limit human behavior according to the best definitions we can make of the common good. Even these definitions are imperfect, so what we do is deeply fallible and involved in error. But what is not involved in error is our determination to provide the conditions for learning—our learning, your learning, everybody's learning. That is the best meaning of the law"—

If the judge says this, who can quarrel with him? No one, surely, who has any knowledge at all of the common human condition.

The idea behind the laws which were violated when our government "organized a foray into Cuba" is the idea that social communities which have political integrity, such as nations, have the right to define their own conditions for learning, and that it is wrong to interfere with their decisions.

This is such plain common sense that there must have been extraordinary provocation to make us depart from it. What was that provocation? Quite obviously, it was fear. From this circumstance it is again shown that fearful men find it difficult to attend to principles.

This brings us to a need which lies beyond the scope of the law as teacher. The law is a teacher of only men who do not fear; or if they fear, whose love of principle is greater than their fear. How do you produce such men?

For an answer to this question, you must address yourself to Socrates and his few but illustrious friends. You always get back, finally, to Socrates and his friends, when you pursue the fundamental questions.