VOLUME XLI, NO. 14
APRIL 6, 1988

THE ENIGMA OF BEING HUMAN

IN a book which came out in 1965 (Stanford University Press), Abraham Heschel wrote:

> One thing that sets man apart from animals is a boundless, unpredictable capacity for the development of an inner universe. There is more potentiality in his soul than in any other being known to us. Look at the infant and try to imagine the multitude of events it is going to engender. One child named Johann Sebastian Bach was charged with power enough to hold generations of men in his spell. But is there any potentiality to acclaim or any surprise to expect in a calf or a colt? Indeed, the enigma of human being is not in what he is but in what he is able to be.

We can all agree with this passage in *Who Is Man?* yet other questions throng in the wake of the wonder it excites. One is: Why have the Bachs been so few? Why was there only one Shakespeare? One Socrates, contrasted with the thousands content to allow the Athenians to condemn him to death?

And why is it, as Ortega took note, that among hundreds of students in a university class, only one or two are so constituted that they question what is said in the texts they are given to study and insist upon finding out for themselves, and in this way make discoveries which alter and renew the sciences which other students take for granted as complete and true?

An example of this complacency is the bland assumption, today, that all we have to explain the differences among human beings are the factors of heredity and environment, and that these indeed *must* be adequate since no other element contributing to quality and character exists. Yet, over the years, maverick scholars have pointed to the fact that some other causal factor is required to throw light on the appearance of human excellence, that neither heredity nor environment can in any way account for the sudden appearance of genius. And again, how can we explain the quality of rare humans who seem to come in bunches, as among the Athenians in the time of Plato, or as the extraordinary individuals who gathered in Florence in the time of Lorenzo to launch the revival of learning in Europe; or the men who a little later produced the Elizabethan age in England; and those who, two centuries after in America, became the Founding Fathers of the United States?

Then there are those who have strangely mixed characters, of whom, in *The Human Situation,* W. Macneile Dixon provides a striking example:

> What, one wonders, do our reformers propose to do with men in whom the opposites are in startling evidence, with a man, let us say, like Charles James Fox, who made his great speeches in the Commons on nights between those he spent in gambling and drinking? "The most brilliant debater," said Burke, "the world ever saw'—"all fire and simplicity and sweet temper,' in Creevey's words, "perfectly exempt, in Gibbon's, "from any taint or malevolence or vanity or falsehood." This man spent a quarter of a million on cards and wine before he was twenty-five, and fiercely resented any interference with his personal habits. He would lose £16,000 on Tuesday night, and speak in the House on Thursday on the *Thirty-Nine Articles,* sit up drinking the remainder of the day at White's, and win £6000 before leaving for Newmarket on Friday. This was also the man who fought all his life for every liberal principle, for toleration and Catholic emancipation, and who during office abolished the slave trade. What do you propose to do with such a human volcano? Would you replace him by some bloodless respectability?

Along with individuals of great talent and both even and uneven character is the great mass of more or less neutral people who are made uncomfortable by those who question and challenge authority. All these, as Willis Harman recently pointed out, are in the somewhat hypnotic state of the mass mind, who feel at sea and torn apart in a cycle of seething change such as the present. Heredity and environment do seem enough to account for this great majority, and as our social sciences are content to base their theories on "averages" more than upon dramatic exceptions, which they commonly ignore, most people find their theories acceptable.

Yet as A.H. Maslow pointed out in *Farther Reaches of Human Nature,* the best human beings, and not just averages, should be used by those who want to find out what human beings are and what they are capable of.

> If we want to answer the question how tall can the human species grow, then obviously it is well to pick out the ones who are already tallest and study them. If we want to know how fast a human being can run, then it is no use to average out the speed of a "good sample" of the population; it is far better to collect Olympic gold medal winners and see how well they can do. If we want to know the possibilities for spiritual growth, value growth, or moral development in human beings, then I maintain that we can learn most by studying our most moral, ethical, or saintly people.
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> On the whole, I think it fair to say that human history is a record of the ways in which human nature has been sold short. The highest possibilities of human nature have practically always been underrated. Even when "good specimens," the saints and sages and great leaders of history, have been available for study, the temptation too often has been to consider them not human but supernaturally endowed.

Maslow, as we know, devoted his life to the study of exceptional people, admirable people, people whom he came to regard as in some sense model humans. He called them "self-actualizers," individuals in whom the best qualities came to the surface and determined the pattern of their lives. By studying them he reached certain conclusions. He said, for example:

> For instance, it is empirically characteristic of self-actualizing people that they have far less doubt about right and wrong than average people do. They do not get confused just because 95 per cent of the population disagrees with them. And I may mention that at least in the group I studied they tended to agree about what was right and wrong, as if they were perceiving something real and extrahuman rather than comparing tastes that might be relative to the individual person. In a word, I have used them as value assayers or perhaps I should better say that I have learned from them what ultimate values probably are. Or to say it in another way, I have learned that what great human beings value are what I will eventually agree with, what I will come to value, and I will come to see as worthy of, as valuable in some extrapersonal sense, and what "data" will eventually support. . . .
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> Perhaps it will help to say these same things from another angle. If, as I think has been demonstrated sufficiently, the human being is a choosing, deciding, seeking animal, then the question of making choices and decisions must inevitably be involved in any effort to define the human species. But making choices and decisions is a matter of degree, a matter of wisdom, effectiveness, and efficiency. The questions then come up: Who is the good chooser? Where does he come from? What kind of life history does he have? Can we teach this skill? What hurts it? What helps it?
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> These are, of course, simply new ways of asking the old philosophical questions, "Who is a sage? What is a sage?" And beyond that of raising the old axiological questions "What is good? What is desirable? *What should be* desired?"
>
> I must reassert that we have come to the point in biological history where we now are responsible for our own evolution. We have become self-evolvers. Evolution means selecting and therefore choosing and deciding, and this means valuing.

Obviously, Maslow has been of great help in getting us closer to the answer to the question, "What is man?" Man is a valuing being. He decides what is good to think, good to do; but he may or may not do it. In other words, different sets of values compete in him. This competition results in the dialogue of the human being with himself, of which Socrates took note. For one thing, there are values which we prefer not to think about and to judge, once we have adopted them, since to think about them is to question their value, and we *like* them and withdraw from the possibility of feeling that we ought to exchange them for others.

In her paper, "Thinking and Moral Considerations" (*Social Research,* Autumn, 1971), Hannah Arendt speaks of the "soundless dialogue" each human holds with himself. As she says:

> For Socrates, this two-in-one meant simply that if you want to think you must see to it that the two who carry on the thinking dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends. It is better for you to suffer than to do wrong because you can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?

Not even a murderer. What kind of dialogue could you lead with him? . . .

Conscience, as we use it in moral or legal matters, supposedly is always present within us, just like consciousness. And this conscience is also supposed to tell us what to do and what to repent of; it was the voice of God before it became the *lumen naturale* or Kant's practical reason. Unlike this conscience, the fellow Socrates is talking about has been left at home; he fears him, as the murderers in *Richard III* fear their conscience—as something that is absent. Conscience appears as an afterthought, that thought which is aroused by either a crime, as in the case of Richard himself, or by unexamined opinions, as in the case of Socrates, or as the anticipated fear of such afterthoughts, as in the case of the murderers in *Richard III.* This conscience, unlike the voice of God within us or the *lumen naturale*, gives no positive prescriptions—even the Socrates *daimonion*, his divine voice, only tells him what *not* to do. . . . He who does not know the intercourse between me and myself (in which we examine what we say and what we do) will not mind contradicting himself, and this means he will never be either able or willing to give account of what he says or does; nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can be sure that it will be forgotten the next moment. . . .

For the thinking ego and its experience, conscience that "fills a man full of obstacles," is a side-effect. And it remains a marginal affair for society at large except in emergencies. For thinking as such does society little good, much less than the thirst for knowledge in which it is used as an instrument for other purposes. It does not create values, it will not find out, once and for all, what "the good" is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct. Its political and moral significance comes out only in those rare moments of history when "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," when "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity." . . .

When everybody else is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action. .

If thinking, the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue, actualizes the difference within our identity as given in consciousness and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always much too busy to be able to think. The manifestation of the wind of thought is no knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down.

For Hannah Arendt, the meaning of *thinking* is restricted to the dialogue one holds with oneself. All the rest is but the pursuit of information to be put at the service of the acquisitive drive or to feed the hunger for abstract knowledge about how the world works. We could say, then, that thinking is always a matter of self-definition, for in deciding what is right, what is beautiful, we are indeed defining ourselves. This is the way in which we become what we think.

So we have taken another step toward defining ourselves, which is the project of our discussion.

Can we put into other words the account given by Heschel of the human being? The human, he said, is not what he is but what he is able to become. So let us say that a human being is one who is able to extend the radius of the self. His reality is the reality of his becoming.

In the Platonic philosophy, it is said that there are two kinds of units or monads. There are monads which are moved by external forces; and there are self-moving monads. Humans, apparently, are constituted of both. To overcome the lethargy of the monads which require external force in order to move may be regarded as the project of human evolution. And we have only one word with which to define the dynamic principle by which this is accomplished—*mind.* Our task is to make our entire organism responsive to the directions of mind, so that there is no longer a conflict between the body and its desires and the will of the indwelling intelligence. But when poets and sages speak of man they generally refer only to his moving intelligence, as in Hamlet's memorable speech in scene 2 of the second act:

> What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!

These flattering terms, it may be, are used because they have the capacity to inspire, while an account of the dull lives of ordinary people would only depress us by their realism to despair. Yet now, as Maslow says, "We have become self-evolvers," which means a candid facing of the obstacle which impedes our development. So now we must begin to include in our definition of the human being all the elements of our compositeness, our weaknesses as well as our strengths.

One broad advantage of thinking in this way about human differences is that it provides a rational ground for understanding the periodic appearances of great religious teachers—the Buddhas and Christs of history. Such beings are then recognized as the result of self-evolution to an extraordinary degree, beings in whom the sense of self has grown to include all other humans and forms of life, and their wisdom has grown to the point where they know when and how to bring the elements of understanding to others. This evolution has been through intimate embodiment in bodies and circumstances which provide the experience needed for growth. An illustration of this is found in the fourth chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita,* in which Krishna, the spiritual teacher, explains to his disciple, Arjuna, how it was that he had been the teacher of a king who lived long before Krishna was born in this life. He says to the young prince:

> "Both I and thou have passed through many births, O harasser of thy foes. Mine are known unto me, but thou knowest not of thine. . . . I produce myself among creatures, O son of Bharata, whenever there is a decline of virtue and an insurrection of vice and injustice in the world; and thus I incarnate from age to age for the preservation of the just, the destruction of the wicked, and the establishment of righteousness. . . . In whatever way men approach me, in that way do I assist them but whatever the path chosen by mankind, that path is mine, O son of Pritha. . . .
>
> "Seek this wisdom by doing service, by strong search, by questions, and by humility; the wise who see the truth will communicate it unto thee, and knowing which thou shalt never again fall into error."

Well, we are not much closer to defining the human being than we were at the beginning, although the reason for this inability may have been made evident. We cannot define the human being because humans are subjects, not objects. We are definers, and when we turn to ourselves, we are able only to tell what we do, not what we are. A subject is an intelligence who can say "I am" but must stop there. Our attempts at self-definition are always limited to some finite aspect of ourselves—that is, to some vehicle or limiting aspect of the self.

This, we could say, reveals the nature of divinity, or all we can say about divinity. And we then of course find this ridiculous, feeling that we are anything but divine.

There is only one remaining recourse: the logic of paradox. The best source of instruction in this lies in the work of Lao tse. For example:

> When the superior scholar hears of Tao, he diligently practices it. When the average scholar hears of Tao, he sometimes retains it, sometimes loses it. When the inferior scholar hears of Tao, he loudly laughs at it. Were it not thus ridiculed, it would not be worthy of the name of Tao.
>
> He who is enlightened by Tao seems wrapped in darkness. He who is advanced in Tao seems to be going back. He who walks smoothly in Tao seems to be on a rugged path.
>
> The man of highest virtue appears lowly. He who is truly pure behaves as though he were sullied. He who has virtue in abundance behaves as though it were not enough. He who is firm in virtue seems like a skulking pretender. He who is simple appears as unstable as water.

We add one further paradox: The man who knows himself is content with his ignorance.

REVIEW
THREE BOOKS

IN *Crossing to Safety*, a tale of two families, Wallace Stegner generates a sense of reality that involves the feeling and wonder of the reader. Two couples are joined in life by a sudden affection when they first meet, which lasts to the end. The narrator is the husband who becomes a successful teacher and writer, while the other husband, who has all that a man could desire for material well-being, is managed by his wife who seems right in everything she decides and does. The story tells how these people learn to understand each other and how their lives work out. The prose is exquisite. Here is a sample from the first chapter:

> My feet take me up the road to the gate, and through it. Just inside the gate the road forks. I ignore the Ridge House road and choose instead the narrow dirt road that climbs around the hill to the right. John Wightman, whose cottage sits at the end of it, died fifteen years ago. He will not be up to protest my walking in his ruts. It is a road I have walked hundreds of times, a lovely lost tunnel through the trees, busy this morning with birds and little shy rustling things, my favorite road anywhere.
>
> Dew has soaked everything. I could wash my hands in the ferns, and when I pick a leaf off a maple branch I get a shower on my head and shoulders. Through the hardwoods along the foot of the hill, through the belt of cedars where the ground is swampy with springs, through the spruce and balsam of the steep pitch, I go alertly, feasting my eyes. I see coon tracks, an adult and two young, in the mud, and maturing grasses bent like croquet wickets with wet, and spotted Amanitas, at this season flattened or even concave and holding water, and miniature forests of club moss and ground pine and ground cedar. There are brown caves of shelter, mouse and hare country, under the wide skirts of spruce.

The book is everything that a novel should be. There is integrity in the way the characters develop, a spare honesty of description, and an authenticity in all that happens. The peace that is achieved is the only safety that we can have, for the characters, for the reader. As story-telling, the book is ideal. Stegner is the author of other fine books. He taught at Stanford for many years. The publisher is Random House, the price $18.95. To say anything more would only diminish the reader's enjoyment.

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SEVERAL months ago (October 14) we reviewed here W. D. Ehrhart's account of his return to Vietnam, where he had fought as a marine who had enlisted in 1966. At 37, now a Vietnam Veteran Against War, he went back to that country, only to experience much pain, not the release he had hoped to gain. He related this experience in a Pendle Hill pamphlet. Now a much longer report on what happened to him in this second visit to Vietnam has been made available in a book, *Going Back*, published in paperback by McFarland & Co., in Jefferson, North Carolina, at $14.95.

On this return visit, he had two American companions. One was John Balaban, who had worked in Vietnam as a conscientious objector during the war, teaching linguistics at a university which was destroyed by the Tet Offensive. The other American was Bruce Weigl, who had been in the Army in the late 60s, later becoming a poet and teacher. In Hanoi they interviewed—or were interviewed by—a General Chi, who had joined Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh as a soldier in 1945.

> Who were the best soldiers? Bruce asks. The general throws back his head and laughs heartily. He makes a sound like a good-natured growl, and I wonder if he's weighing the potential for embarrassment that an honest answer might yield. "If the Americans were the best soldiers," he finally replied, "we could not defeat them." He goes on to explain that individually, the Americans were physically stronger and had better weapons and supplies. Many fought strongly and bravely. In a just war, the United States military could not be defeated, he says, citing World War Two as an example, but an unjust war automatically leads to defeat; The United States lost because the war was unjust. He tells a story about an American colonel, shot down over the north, who asked to meet the pilot who had downed him. The colonel, 50 years old, was surprised to see that his adversary was so young. How could such an

inexperienced pilot have defeated him? "I was more determined than you," the general recounts the young pilot's' reply. . . .

American soldiers could not fight the way Vietnam soldiers could fight, he says, because they lacked surprise, they lacked the support of the people, and they lacked force of will. The Vietnamese people possessed the "heroic spirit" of the independence struggle. American soldiers were misled; they were told they were fighting communism, but they could not understand who they fought, or how, or what for.

This "heroic spirit," the general explains, predates Marxism-Leninism. It is inherent in the will of the people, and Vietnamese history demonstrates this time and time again. Still, the long struggle for independence could not have been won without Marxism-Leninism. Marxism-Leninism teaches the Vietnamese to distinguish between the progressive American people and the reactionary United States government. It allows the Vietnamese to determine the strengths and the weaknesses of the United States government. It provides the "correct line" in fighting—knowing how to fight against the enemy and how to overcome difficulties. "When we have the right line," he says, "we are supported by the progressive peoples of the world, including the American people."

The virtue of this book lies in its capacity to convince the reader of the humor and humanity of the Vietnamese people.

* * *

IN *The Wishing Tree,* published in paperback by Harper & Row last year at $9.95, Christopher Isherwood tells how he was converted to Vedanta, the philosophical religious sect of India. The book begins with his coming to America in 1939, accompanying W.H. Auden. But the Isherwood, who this time came to New York from England, was a somewhat changed man.

For one thing, I had just realized—while we were crossing the Atlantic—that I was a pacifist.

Maybe it would be more exact to say: I realized that I had always been a pacifist. At any rate, in the negative sense. How could I have ever imagined I was anything else? My earliest remembered feelings of rebellion were against the British Army, in which my father was a regular officer, and against the staff of my first boarding school, who tried, with the best of intentions, to make me believe in a glamorized view of the 1914-18 war and of my father's death in it. My father had taught me, by his life and death, to hate the profession of soldiering. I remember his telling me, before he left for France, that an officer's sword is useless except for toasting bread, and that he never fired his revolver because he couldn't hit anything with it and hated the bang. He was killed while leading an attack, carrying only a swagger stick with which he was signaling directions to his men. I adored my father's memory, dwelling always on his civilian virtues: his gentleness, his humor, his musical and artistic talent. Growing up into the post-war world, I learnt to loathe the old men who had made the war. Flags, uniforms, and war memorials made me tremble with rage because they filled me with terror. I was horribly scared by the idea of war and therefore subconsciously attracted to it. . . . If war came I would refuse to fight. That was all I had left to go on with: a negation. For, as I now began to realize, my whole political position, left-wing antifascist, had been based on the acceptance of armed force.

Now comes a review of the values he had cherished—art, and no exploitation of the common man. Religion—the religion he had been brought up with—he hated, including both God and his Son. Now, in America, Isherwood was wholly at sea. In what could he believe? He had known Gerald Heard in London years before and Heard was now in Los Angeles with Aldous Huxley, where Huxley was writing for the films. So Isherwood joined them in California. Through them he came into contact with Vedanta, which intrigued him. Heard introduced him to Swami Prabhavananda and Isherwood took instruction from him.

I said I hated the word *God.* He agreed that you could just as well say "The Self."

I asked how one could be sure that meditation wasn't just a process of autohypnosis. He replied: "Autohypnosis or auto-suggestion makes you see what you want to see. Meditation makes you see something you don't expect to see. Autosuggestion produces different results in each individual. Meditation produces the same result in all individuals."

> I told him that I had always thought of such practices as nothing but a lot of mumbo jumbo. He laughed: "And now you have fallen into the trap?"

To make a long story short, this was the way in which Christopher Isherwood began to study a profound metaphysical philosophy. In one place he answers the question, What *is* Vedanta?

> Vedanta is a philosophy evolved from the Vedas, those Indian scriptures which are the most ancient religious writings now known to the world. More generally speaking, the term *Vedanta* covers not only the Vedas themselves but the whole mass of literature which explains their teachings. The Bhagavad Gita and the works of Shankara belong to Vedanta.

It is indeed difficult to quarrel with what Christopher Isherwood learned from Vedanta.

COMMENTARY
WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR PAIN?

HOW shall we make peace with the idea and fact of the great differences among human beings? That is the question raised at the beginning of this week's lead article: "Why have the Bachs been so few? Why was there only one Shakespeare? One Socrates . . .?"

One example of a sort of answer to this question is found in the decision of John Holt, spoken of at the end of this week's "Children" article. He asked himself, "Can the schools be reformed?" and decided that it was just about impossible, leading him to the idea that it would be best for parents to teach their children at home. Being an intelligent man, he knew perfectly well that not all parents could or would do this, yet that was what he decided to work for. You could say that he resolved to do what seemed to him right and best, regardless of whether or not all other humans would do the same.

You could also say that this is a foundation reason why freedom is not merely desirable but essential. A free society is a society in which each member chooses his own level of effort, formulates his own ideal, and is free to work toward its realization no matter what other people—even the great majority—decide to do. This means of course that fools as well as persons of high intelligence are free to chart their own path and live their own lives. And it also means that we all need to learn to be patient and tolerant of the decisions of other people. Yet one can be both patient and tolerant and still propose the advantage of other ways. This is one of the instructions of history. Among the Greeks, for example, as Edith Hamilton has pointed out, Euripedes was the first to condemn slavery, but it took thousands of years for the whole of society to adopt this point of view.

Today, another great issue is becoming to occupy the foreground of debate—the issue of war and peace. It is said that wars will cease when men—men and women—refuse to fight them or have anything to do with them. This seems true enough, but as yet not enough people have joined with the peace-makers to make war impossible. When will that happen? Nobody knows, yet the number of people who decide to reject war keeps on growing. What are the conditions for outlawing war?

For an answer one might read Tolstoy and Gandhi—or, perhaps best of all, Thoreau. Why Thoreau? Because he had overcome fear. A man who no longer fears has no hesitancy in rejecting war. He does not even have to think about it. "I would not run around the corner," he wrote, "to see the world blow up." And as Marilyn Ferguson put it (see Frontiers), he "looked for a form of government beyond democracy, one in which individual conscience would be respected by the state as 'a higher and different power,' the context for all authority." He said: "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. They only can force me who obey a higher law than I."

Not many people today are ready to take this position, yet it is certainly worth considering. As Maslow is quoted as saying in the lead article: "If we want to know the possibilities for spiritual growth, value growth, or moral development in human beings, then I maintain that we can learn most by studying our most moral, ethical, or saintly people."

What is the value or importance of being moral or ethical? One answer to this question is given by Hannah Arendt, in a paragraph quoted in the lead:

> When everybody else is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action.

Here, as she explains, she is speaking of "the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this indeed may prevent catastrophes, at least for myself, in the rare moments when the chips are down."

Can we learn from the painful collaboration of history in our education? The question might rather be: Can we learn any other way?

It seems evident that most of us learn only through pain. Even the Tolstoys and the Gandhis had to endure pain, and while Thoreau gives little evidence of actual suffering, he doubtless had his share.

What we do with our pain may be the best information we have about the differences among human beings.

CHILDREN

. . . and Ourselves

TEACHERS AND PUPILS

TOWARD the end of *How Children Fail* (1964), John Holt reflects:

> We teachers, from primary school through graduate school, all seem to be hard at work at the business of making it look as if our students know more than they really do. Our standing among other teachers, or of our school among other schools, depends on how much our students seem to know; not on how much they really know, or how effectively they can use what they know, or even whether they can use it at all. The more material we can appear to "cover" in our course, or syllabus, or curriculum, the better we look; and the more easily we can show that when they left our class the students knew what they were "supposed" to know, the more easily we can escape blame if and when it later appears (and it usually does) that much of that material they do not know at all.

He offers in evidence of this his experience in his last year of high school, when the students stayed around an extra week to cram for the college board exams. The ancient history teacher told them to work intensively on fifteen topics, which, he predicted, would probably be the subjects the ancient history exam would be about. They took his advice and got very familiar with those topics, and it turned out that his list "comfortably covered every one of the eight questions we were asked."

> So we got credit for knowing a great deal about ancient history, which we did not; he got credit for being a good teacher, which he was not; and the school got credit for being, as it was, a good place to go if you wanted to be sure of getting into a prestige college. The fact was that I knew very little about ancient history; that much of what I thought I knew was misleading or false; that then, and for many years afterwards, I disliked history and thought it pointless and a waste of time; and that two months later I could not have come close to passing the history college boards, or even a much easier test. But who cared?

It took a while for Holt to recover from the bad habits acquired in school.

> When I began teaching I thought, naively, that the purpose of a test was to test, to find out what the students knew about the course. It didn't take me long to find out that if I gave my students surprise tests, covering the whole material of the course to date, almost everyone flunked. This made me look bad, and posed problems for the school. I learned that the only way to get a respectable percentage of decent or even passing grades was to announce tests well in advance, tell in some detail what material they would cover, and hold plenty of advance practice in the kind of questions that would be asked, which is called review. I later learned that teachers do this everywhere. We know that what we are doing is not really honest, but we dare not be the first to stop, and we try to justify or excuse ourselves by saying that, after all, it does no particular harm. But we are wrong; it does great harm.

First of all, it is dishonest, and the students know it. The teachers get the students through by being expert predicters. By such means children and students learn what teachers want and will reward, not knowledge, but its appearance. School, the smart students discover, is something of a racket which they need to learn how to beat. They study the teachers and figure out how to please them.

> My first English teacher at prep school gave us Macauley's *Essay an Lord Clive* to read, and from his pleasure in reading it aloud, I saw that he was a sucker for the periodic sentence, a long complex sentence with the main verb at the end. Thereafter I took care to construct at least one such sentence in every paper I wrote for him, and thus assured myself a good mark in the course.

Not only does the examination racket harm by making students feel that that an honest search for understanding is not what they are supposed to do in school; it also discourages the serious student who is determined to find out all he can.

> The student who will not be satisfied merely to know "right answers" or recipes for getting them will not have an easy time in school, particularly since facts and recipes may be all that his teachers know. They tend to be impatient or angry with the student who wants to know, not just what happened, but why it happened as it did, and not some other way. They rarely have the knowledge to answer such questions,

and even more rarely have the time, there is all that material to cover.

In short, our "Tell-'em-and-test-'em" way of teaching leaves most students increasingly confused, aware that their academic success rests on shaky foundations, and convinced that school is mainly a place where you follow meaningless procedures to get meaningless answers to meaningless questions.

Holt recalls a book on race stereotypes, the author of which had been for a time in a German concentration camp during the war. There he and the other inmates found it advisable, to develop a "camp personality" which enabled them to resist without getting into trouble.

They adopted an air of amiable dull-wittedness, of smiling foolishness, of cooperative and willing incompetence—like the good soldier Schweik. Told to do something, they listened attentively, nodded their heads eagerly, and asked questions that showed they had not understood a word of what had been said. When they could not safely do this any longer, they did as far as possible the opposite of what they had been told to do, or did it, but badly as they dared. . . .

After the war, the author did a good deal of work, in many parts of the world, with subject peoples, but not for some time did he recognize, in the personality of the "good black boy" of many African colonies, or the "good nigger" of the American South, the camp personality adopted during the war by himself and his fellow prisoners. . . . Subject peoples both appease their rulers and satisfy some part of their desire for human dignity by putting on a mask, by acting much more stupid and incompetent than they really are, by denying their rulers the full use of their intelligence and ability, by declaring their minds and spirits free of their enslaved bodies.

Does not something very close to this happen often in school? Children are subject peoples. School for them is a kind of jail. Do they not, to some extent, escape and frustrate the relentless, insatiable pressure of their elders by withdrawing the most intelligent and creative parts of their minds from the scene? Is this not at least a partial explanation of the extraordinary stupidity that otherwise bright children so often show in school? . . .

To a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid. A dismal thought, but hard to escape. Children of one, two, or even three throw the whole of themselves into everything they do. They embrace life, and devour it; it is why they learn so fast, and are such good company. Listlessness, boredom, apathy—all these come later. Children come to school curious; within a few years most of that curiosity is dead, or at least silent.

Holt's absolute honesty brings him to these realizations. His early books were largely criticisms of the schools, both private and public, in this country. His later books propose to parents that they simply ignore the schools and teach their children at home. To encourage parents in this direction ten or twelve years ago he started a magazine, *Growing Without Schooling*, which has been continued after his death and *is* filled with reports from parents on how they are teaching their own children. It is ideal reading for parents who have begun to think along these lines. At present it comes out every two months. The address is 729 Boylston Street, Boston, Mass. 02116. A year's subscription is $20.

In *Teach Your Own* Holt tells why he decided against schools:

While the question "Can the schools be reformed?" kept turning up "No" for an answer, I found myself asking a much deeper question. Were the schools, however organized, however run, necessary at all? Were they the best place for learning? Were they even a good place? Except for people learning a few specialized skills, I began to doubt that they were. Most of what I knew, I had not learned in school, or in any other such school-like "environments" or "learning experiences" as meetings, workshops, and seminars. I suspected this was true of most people.

So he launched his campaign for "teaching your own."

FRONTIERS

The Ground of Optimism

JEREMY TARCHER, a Los Angeles publisher, has issued a new edition of Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, which he first published in 1980. The edition has a new Afterword and other new material, including a Foreword by John Naishitt, author of *Megatrends.* Most impressive, given in the Afterword, is the account given of the overwhelming success of the first edition:

> Within weeks after publication, leaders of the Solidarity Movement in Poland had ordered ten copies. The book became a text in a variety of college courses. It was published in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, Portugal, and Spain. Discussion groups were started in prisons, churches, government agencies, and even in a South African village.

Naisbitt says in his Foreword:

> Rarely has a book articulated and documented what so many of us were secretly thinking. It brought to mind Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," which makes the point that true genius is saying what is in your heart. That is the genius of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. . . .The book was ahead of its time. Because the spirituality phenomenon has gathered momentum, the book's insights and precepts are truer today then when it was published seven years ago.
>
> Some have criticized Marilyn Ferguson as too optimistic. In this I look to Albert Camus for counsel. Camus said that there is only one philosophical question: suicide. And if you decide not to take that course, optimism is the necessary condition to get through life. Pessimists are of no help at all. The optimism of *The Aquarian Conspirary* is an affirmation of life's possibilities.

What is the book about? It is a report on the people of America who have begun to look within themselves for answers to their questions. The title is to be taken literally. Conspiracy means "breathing together," and Aquarian is meant to suggest a new beginning. In her first chapter Marilyn Ferguson says:

> The Aquarian Conspirators range across all levels of income and education, from the humblest to the highest. There are school teachers and office workers, famous scientists, government officials and lawmakers, artists and millionaires, taxi drivers and celebrities. Some are open in their advocacy, and their names may be familiar. Others are quiet about their involvement, believing they can be more effective if they are not identified with ideas that have all too often been misunderstood. . . .
>
> In the beginning, certainly, most did not set out to change society. In that sense, it is an unlikely kind of conspiracy. But they found that their *lives* had become revolutions. Once a personal change began in earnest, they found themselves rethinking everything, examining old assumptions, looking anew at their work and relationships, health, political power and "experts," goals and values.

She goes to Edward Carpenter, the nineteenth-century visionary, for an example of a pioneer conspirator. He said:

> If you inhibit thought (and persevere) you come at length to a region of consciousness below or behind thought . . . and a realization of an altogether vaster self than that to which we are accustomed. And since the ordinary consciousness, with which we are concerned in ordinary life is before all things founded on the little local self . . . it follows that to pass out of that is to die to the ordinary self and the ordinary world.
>
> It is to die in the ordinary sense, but in another, it is to wake up and find that the "I," one's real, most intimate self, pervades the universe and all other beings.
>
> So great, so splendid, is this experience, that it may be said that all minor questions and doubts fall away in the face of it, and certain it is that in thousands and thousands of cases, the fact of its having come even once to an individual has completely revolutionized his subsequent life and outlook on the world.

This is the sort of experience with which Marilyn Ferguson's book is concerned and which she reports as taking place in the present.

Yet the changes in the present have roots in the past. As this writer says:

> Revolutionary thinkers do not believe in single revolutions They see change as a way of life.

Jefferson, Mill, Tocqueville, and many others were concerned about creating an environment hospitable to change within a relatively stable political system. They wanted governments in which a healthy unrest would make for continuous renewal, in which freedoms would be continually enlarged and extended. Thoreau, for example, looked for a form of government beyond democracy, one in which individual conscience would be respected by the state as "a higher and different power," the context for all authority.

Society puts its free spirits in prison, he said, when instead it should "cherish its wise minority." But there is a way out: Anyone who discovers a truth becomes a majority of one, a qualitatively different force from the uncommitted majority. In their unwillingness to practice the virtues they preached, Thoreau found the inhabitants of his town "a distinct race from me." Jailed for refusing to pay taxes because he opposed the war against Mexico, Thoreau observed that even behind walls of stone and mortar he was freer than those who had jailed him. "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. They only can force me who obey a higher law than I." . . .

"A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority. . . . but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. . . . Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine."

The transformative effect of social movements on both participants and society can be seen in the effects of the protest and counterculture of the 1960s. A counterculture is a living, breathing theory; speculation about the society's next phase. At its worst, it can seem lawless and strange, an experiment that fails to bridge the old and the new. At its best, it is a transforming leadership, deepening the awareness of the dominant culture. The first colonists to dissent from British rule were a counterculture: so were the Transcendentalists.

The price of this book is $10.95. Since 1980, half a million copies have been sold.