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MATTERS OF WORDS

SERIOUS journalism can easily become a self-destructive profession. The problem is the comparative ineffectuality of words, which are the currency of the journalist. Yet there is a consoling Persian maxim which says: "Truth is of two kinds—one manifest and self-evident; the other demanding incessantly new demonstrations and proofs." Those who try to repeat the second kind of truth are the ones who may become discouraged, since what they say seems to have such little lasting effect, although it is rather ignored than disputed. We have for example a new book we have been reading, *Seeds of Peace*, identified as "A Catalogue of Quotations" compiled by Jeanne Larson and Madge Micheels-Cyrus, issued by New Society Publishers (276 pages) at $12.95 in paperback. The book is filled with unforgettable phrases, wise sayings, shocking facts. "The pioneers of a warless world," Albert Einstein said, "are the young men who refuse military service." And our former president, John F. Kennedy said, "War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation that the warrior does today." During the brief years of his life, Percy Shelley learned enough to say, "Man has no right to kill his brother. It is no excuse that he does so in uniform; he only adds the infamy of servitude to the crime of murder." Reflecting, Frederick the Great remarked: "If my soldiers began to think, not one would remain in the ranks."

This devastating comment by Frederick recalls another observation by an American, Henry David Thoreau, who is several times quoted in *Seeds of Peace*, but not this remark of his after watching some Canadian soldiers drill: "It is impossible to give the soldier a good education, without making him a deserter."

We could go on quoting. Some of the passages are particularly appealing, like the Kenyan proverb: "Treat the earth well . . . it was not given to you by your parents . . . it was lent to you by your children." And some are amusing, like the letter to the President by a nine-year-old San Francisco boy: "Please wear mittens in the White House so you won't be able to put your finger on the button." Then there is Ammon Hennacy's sardonic "Being a pacifist between wars is as easy as being a vegetarian between meals." Yet eventually, you may get intellectual or moral indigestion. So many words, good words indeed, some of them, but still just words.

But why, with all these good words, are we, if not making war, continually preparing for it, until, finally, our readiness brings war about? The good words include a wide variety of common sense. Mark Hatfield, the Senator from Oregon, declared:

> We are ready to kill to keep our automobiles running. We're ready to kill to keep up our materialistic, wasteful economy . . . I am sick and tired of 18-year-olds being coerced into bearing the burden of the failure of politicians to face the tough economic choices needed to end our dependency on foreign oil.

And Major General Smedley Butler, well-known Marine Corps officer, said more than fifty years ago:

> I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service. . . . And during that period I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for big business, for Wall Street and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism . . . I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers . . . I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras "right" for American fruit companies in

1903. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints.

In his warm-hearted, friendly way, Will Rogers said: "You can't say that civilizations don't advance, for in every war they kill you in a new way." A former deputy director for research for the CIA, Herbert Scoville, remarked:

> Not in one single nuclear weapons category have the Soviets demonstrated technological superiority. We have more strategic nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union. But you never hear this because the myth of U.S. inferiority is being spread to try and panic the public.

Writing in 1985, Sid Lens describes the consequences:

> The arms race has been self-propelling. Around the country thousands of scientists and engineers are developing weapons to counter weapons the Russians are expected to have eight to ten years from now. These people have a strong stake in continuing the arms race. So too have the Pentagon and the 22,000 prime contractors and 100,000 subcontractors who grow rich from military procurement. Others with an economic stake include the leadership of many unions whose members look to jobs from military production; academia which looks to research and development funds; the mayors and newspaper editors of cities who want defense contracts for investment in their areas, the "think tanks" that are paid large sums to devise a rationale for the arms race. Cementing together this military-industrial complex is the deliberately implanted thesis that "you cannot trust the Russians."

Those who rely entirely on history declare that war is a natural activity of human beings. Those who rely on vision say that war results from a corruption of human nature and believe that evolution from violence and the war-making tendency is both possible and necessary. In these terms, the issue comes down to the nature of man. Is human evolution only biological, or is it mainly social and moral? Why are our managers and rulers persuaded that there is no moral evolution, that we will be as we always have been? Why do we seem always to choose such leaders? What weaknesses or blindnesses of the people enable such leaders to win elections? Why are peace-lovers always in a minority, although now, it seems, a growing minority? What is the "normal" rate of growth in the moral aspect of human beings? *How* do people grow? Can virtue be taught?

These are questions which even the best words do not answer; and, unfortunately, they are questions seldom directly asked. The answers to questions that we *can* find answers for all seem to supply us with decisions that can be used for either good or evil purposes. This is a way of saying that the answers are concerned with finite matters, goals that can be reached by using appropriate techniques. Can such answers lead the way to peace? Alfred Nobel thought they could. He said:

> I should like to invent a substance or a machine with such terrible power of mass destruction that war would thereby be made impossible forever.

And to the pacifists of his time, he said:

> Perhaps my dynamite plants will put an end to war sooner than your congresses. On the day two army corps can annihilate each other in one second all civilized nations will recoil from war in horror.

Was he right or wrong? Have we now reached the point in our "evolution" where war should have become impossible according to his theory? We have in a comparatively short time made people used to words which seem to render nuclear war almost palatable. In a book called *Nukespeak*, there is this passage:

> In the thirty-six years since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a new language has evolved. . . . Nukespeak is the language of nuclear development. . . . atrocities are rendered invisible by sterile words like "megadeaths," nuclear war is called a "nuclear exchange." Nuclear weapons accidents are called "broken arrows" and "bent spears." Plutonium is called a "potential nuclear explosive." The accident at Three Mile Island was called an "event," an "incident" . . . and a "normal aberration." India called its nuclear bomb a "peaceful nuclear device."

In this way we turn words against ourselves, suggesting that the finalities implied by words may be in some sense false, if they have the motive of

persuasion behind them. We may find the right words useful in formulating our thinking, yet must also retain the power to be unmoved by them. This is indeed a paradox, a part of the puzzle of human nature.

There are, naturally enough, some twenty entries from Gandhi in *Seeds of Peace,* which leads us to another book we have been reading lately, *Fighting Fair,* by Mark Juergensmeyer (Harper & Row paperback, $7.95), a revised edition of an earlier work, *Fighting With Gandhi.* The author sets out to acquaint the reader with the elements of Gandhi's struggle throughout his life, and how he evolved what he regarded as a "fair" mode of conflict. At the outset, however, this writer lost our sympathy by giving an illustration of a conflict between two property owners over the title to a piece of land between their holdings. Such a conflict is easy to imagine and it serves the writer in developing his analysis, but what is not easy to imagine at all is that Gandhi would or could take part in such a struggle. His life was all taken up in service to the people—which for him meant the poor—of India. He would never, we think, have taken part in a squabble over the ownership of a piece of land, so that the example seems far removed from the sphere of action it is intended to help explain. Such a controversy was wholly lacking in the dignity of the issues which claimed Gandhi's attention. Toward the end of the book, the writer offers imaginary dialogues he has invented between Gandhi and Marx, Gandhi and Freud, Gandhi and Reinhold Niebuhr, and, finally, he presents an imaginary exchange of letters between the ideal Gandhi—*Mahatma* Gandhi—and the imperfect human, Mohandas Gandhi, who lived a heroic yet imperfect life The ideal Gandhi reproaches the human Gandhi for his shortcomings, and Gandhi defended himself as well as he could. Gandhi's opponents come off rather well in these dialogues, and from the exchange of letters we learn how Juergensmeyer differs in some measure with Gandhi, without being very much impressed. One does not, one thinks, pick at geniuses, but is content to be grateful and to learn from them. At the end of the book Juergensmeyer says:

> Because Gandhi's ideas sometimes were inconsistent with his own actions, and because there are gaps in Gandhian theory, we have had to fight a bit with him. But I trust the conflict has not been destructive. . . . Not that all the difficulties have been resolved. Many of you, no doubt, will still bridle at what Gandhi's critics have long seen as a utopian strain in his notion of society, a perfectionism in his view of human nature, and an only thinly disguised desire for power in his political actions. If you agree with Gandhi's critics, and find these characteristics objectionable, you may want to alter Gandhi's approach further—perhaps change it substantially—before you appropriate it.
>
> Even so, I hope you will agree that there is much wisdom to be found in what Gandhi thought and did.

Well, there seem two points in this conclusion that might have further attention—the "utopian strain" in Gandhi's idea of society, and the "perfectionism in his view of human nature." Did Gandhi ask too much of his fellow men? Were his hopes for the transformation of Indian society unreasonably optimistic?

How can these questions be answered, if indeed there are answers to them?

Something of an answer, however, may be obtained from what Gandhi said in 1949. We quote from *Selections from Gandhi,* edited by Nirmal Kumar Bose, published by Navajivan in 1949:

> "You desire to have India's freedom in order to help the Allies?" was Mr. Edgar Snow's question, and the last question: "Will Free India carry out total mobilization and adopt the methods of total war?"
>
> "That question is legitimate," said Gandhi, "but it is beyond me. I can only say Free India will make common cause with the Allies. I cannot say that Free India will take part in militarism or choose to go the non-violent way. But I can say without hesitation that if I can turn India to nonviolence I will certainly do so. If I succeed in converting forty crores (a crore is ten million) of people to nonviolence, it will be a tremendous thing, a wonderful transformation.

"But you won't oppose a militarist effort by civil disobedience? Mr. Snow pertinently asked.

"I have no such desire. I cannot oppose Free India's will with civil disobedience. It would be wrong."

Another questioner asked:

Q. But what about your non-violence? To what extent will you carry out your policy after freedom is gained?

A. The question hardly arises. I am using the first personal pronoun for brevity, but I am trying to represent the spirit of India as I conceive it. It is and will be a mixture. What policy the National Government will adopt I cannot say. I may not even survive it much as I would love to. If I do, I would advise the adoption of non-violence to the utmost extent possible and that will be India's great contribution to the peace of the world and the establishment of a new world order. I expect that with the existence of so many martial races in India, all of whom will have a voice in the government of the day, the national policy will incline towards militarism of a modified character. I shall certainly hope that all the effort for the last twenty-two years to show the efficacy of non-violence as a political force will not have gone in vain and a strong party representing true non-violence will exist in the country. In every case a Free India in alliance with the Allied powers must be of great help to their cause, whereas India held in bondage as she is today must be a drag upon the war-chariot and may prove a source of real danger at the most critical moment.

Gandhi also said in 1942:

The *whole* of India is not non-violent. If the whole of India had been non-violent, there would have been no need for my appeal to Britain, nor would there be any fear of a Japanese invasion. But my non-violence is represented possibly by a hopeless minority, or perhaps by India's dumb millions who are temperamentally non-violent. But there too the question may be asked: "What have they done?" They have done nothing, I agree; but they may act when the supreme test comes, or they may not. I have no non-violence of millions to present to Britain, and what we have has been discounted by the British as non-violence of the weak. And so all I have done is to make this appeal on the strength of bare inherent justice, so that it might find an echo in the British heart It is made from a moral plane, and even as they do not hesitate to act desperately in the physical world and take grave risks, let them for once act desperately on the moral field and declare that India is independent today, irrespective of India's demand.

These quotations are all from Gandhi's weekly, *Harijan*. They reveal him as an uncompromising idealist, yet also a man of great common sense. Still, it must be asked, did he expect too much of his countrymen? Perhaps we should say that maybe he did, but is that so great a fault? To say that he did is something like the charge of the Grand Inquisitor to the returned Jesus in Dostoevsky's Legend in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But we can also say that he did not know what they were capable of, but felt it was worth a try. Will anyone say that his effort and appeal were wholly without fruit? Or will there be many who will not admit that the Indian people were vastly benefitted by his heroic attempt? That even his failure, which he readily admitted, did not serve in some measure to educate all the world as to what may some day prove the authentic path to peace? And surely, even a small acquaintance with the decisions he made in his life is enough to dispose of the claim that he sought power for himself, which is more than ridiculous.

It is certainly true that Gandhi regarded all human beings as having moral potentialities far beyond the common opinion of the time. Yet it is more than an amateur's guess to say that attributing excellences to human beings, although not yet in evidence, is a sound educational method that often helps to begin their expression. And even if Gandhi was over-optimistic, his mistake did little harm compared to a similar mistake by leaders who seek to free their people by methods that cannot work for people both untrained and unarmed for war. Moral power is a force in human affairs, however reluctant at times we may be to admit it. Gandhi may have made mistakes; he often spoke of them; but shouldn't we be glad that an imperfect man was able to accomplish so much good?

In a way, the discussion of Gandhi's "limitations," whatever they were, brings us back

to the enduring question about the rate of human progress and what we can legitimately expect of one another? And equally, to the way real progress is identified and where, we might say, it is "stored." Are we now competent to answer such questions?

A statement by some Vietnam veterans (in *Seeds of Peace*) gives one reply:

> They want to call us heroes for serving the country. They offer us recognition and honor, even a national monument. Heroes for serving a country that burned down villages and shot anything that moves. Recognition for being agents and pawns of a ruthless death machine that systematically tortured and butchered civilians, that rained flaming jelly gasoline and poison chemical gas on old men, women, and children. Receiving a past due debt of honor for using the most advanced, blood-curdling, and flesh-tearing weapons of terror the world has ever known. A monument for being the tools of a modern imperialist army that vainly attempted for over ten years to crush, grind and pulverize the people and land of Vietnam into the Stone Age, an army that finally sank to a well-deserved defeat at the hands of a just and determined people's war.

Well, these too are words, composed to outrage the reader and sear his heart. They accomplish this purpose very well. But would we like them to be unsaid? What then would we put in their place?

REVIEW
A WONDERFUL STORY

IN *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields,* published by Harper & Brothers in 1898—very nearly our favorite book—Lafcadio Hearn begins the volume by telling a story which he calls "A Living God," a tale of the Japanese people, their religion, their customs and qualities. But before he tells it, he gives it a wonderful frame made by his imagination out of the stuff of Japanese belief. The Japanese of his time had many gods—all their distinguished ancestors had become gods to whom worship was due—but only a very few were *living* gods, still alive in bodies. What it might be like for those who have become gods is suggested by Hearn, first, by giving a picture of a Shinto shrine or temple. All the shrines, he says, are made of unpainted wood, which soon turns, "under the action of rain and sun, to a natural grey, varying according to surface exposure from the silvery tone of birch bark to the sombre grey of basalt."

> So shaped and so tinted, the isolated country *yashiro* may seem less like a work of joinery than a feature of the scenery,—a rural form related to nature, as closely as rocks and trees,—a something that came into existence only as a manifestation of Ohotsuchi-no-Kami, the Earth-god, the primeval divinity of the land.
>
> Why certain architectural forms produce in the beholder a feeling of weirdness is a question about which I should like to theorize some day: at present I shall venture only to say that Shinto shrines evoke such a feeling. It grows with familiarity instead of weakening; and a knowledge of popular beliefs is apt to intensify it. We have no English words by which these queer shapes can be sufficiently described,—much less any language able to communicate the peculiar impression which they make. Those Shinto terms which we loosely render by the words "temple" and "shrine" are really untranslatable;—I mean that the Japanese ideas attaching to them cannot be conveyed by translation. The so-called "august house" of the Kami is not so much a temple, in the classic meaning of the term, as it is a haunted room, a spirit-chamber, a ghost house; many of the lesser divinities being veritably ghosts,—ghosts of great warriors and heroes and rulers and teachers, who lived and loved hundreds or thousands of years ago. . . . and when you remember that millions of people during thousands of years have worshiped their great dead before such *yashiro*,—that a whole race still believes those buildings tenanted by viewless conscious personalities,—you are apt also to reflect how difficult it would be to prove the faith absurd.

Hearn says that whenever he is alone in a Shinto shrine, he has the feeling of being haunted and cannot help but wonder about "the possible apperceptions of the haunter."

> And this tempts me to fancy how I should feel if I myself were a god,—dwelling in some old Izumo shrine on the summit of a hill, guarded by stone lions and shadowed by a holy grove. Elfishly small my habitation might be, but never too small, because I should have neither size nor form. I should be only a vibration,—a motion invisible as of ether or of magnetism; though able sometimes to shape me a shadow-body, in the likeness of my former visible self, when I should wish to make apparition.

Hearn devotes pages to developing this experience, how he receives the devotions of the peasants, the offerings, and hears the prayers of youths and maidens in love, but then says:

> But I can never become a god,—for this is the nineteenth century; and nobody can be really aware of the nature of the sensations of a god—unless there be gods in the flesh. Are there? Perhaps—in very remote districts—one or two. There used to be living gods.

This brings Hearn to his story, for which he has now prepared the minds of his readers.

> Certain persons, while still alive, were honored by having temples built for their spirits, and were treated as gods; not, indeed, as national gods, but as lesser divinities,—tutelar deities, perhaps, or village gods. There was, for instance, Hamaguchi Gohei, a farmer of the district of Arita in the province of Kishu, who was made a god before he died. And I think he deserved it.

Hamaguchi was an old man when the story begins. He lived and farmed high on a hill above the village to which he belonged, which lay along the shore, with dwellings at intervals up the hill. He was rich and the headman of the village, respected by all. He had a good view of the sea, which is of importance to the story, since Japan is sometimes overtaken by vast tidal waves called *tsunami.* The *tsunami* of 1896 was nearly two hundred miles long and swept the northeastern provinces, "wrecking scores of towns and villages, ruining whole districts, and destroying nearly thirty thousand human lives."

One autumn afternoon, late, Hamaguchi saw the preparations for an evening of merrymaking in the village below. He was alone save for his ten-year-old grandson, the rest of the household having gone to take part in the fun. The heat of the day was still oppressive, making what we call "earthquake weather," and presently a mild earthquake came, probably "'the after-tremor of some immense seismic action very far away." Little attention was paid to it, but Hamaguchi looked out to sea and saw that the water *"was running away from the land."* None of the people below appeared to guess what that monstrous ebb signified. But Hamaguchi, old and experienced, knew and called to his grandson.

> "Tada!—quick!—very quick! . . . Light me a torch." . . . The child kindled a torch at once; and the old man hurried with it to the fields, where hundreds of rice-stacks, representing most of his invested capital, stood awaiting transportation. Approaching those nearest the verge of the slope, he began to apply the torch to them,—hurrying from one to another as quickly as his aged limbs could carry him. The sun-dried stalks caught like tinder; the strengthening seabreeze blew the blaze landward; and presently, rank behind rank, the stacks burst into flame, sending skyward columns of smoke that met and mingled into one enormous cloudy whirl. Tada, astonished and terrified, ran after his grandfather, crying,—
>
> "Ojisan! why? Ojisan! why?—why?"
>
> But Hamaguchi did not answer: he had no time to explain; he was thinking only of the four hundred lives in peril. For a while the child stared wildly at the blazing rice then burst into tears, and ran back to the house, feeling sure that his grandfather had gone mad.

Hamaguchi went on firing his crop, until it was all gone Then he just waited, to see the response. Before long the acolyte in a temple on the hill set a big bell booming, and then, from both the bell and the fire and smoke the people in the village came up the hill, swarming like ants to help however they could. The water was still moving out to sea, and when the first party of helpers arrived from the village he told them, "Let it burn, lads! . . . let it be. I want the whole *mura* here."

And the people kept on coming, for they all loved Hamaguchi. Men, boys, women, girls, and mothers carrying their babies—they all came. And Hamaguchi waited until the people said, "All are here, *or* very soon will be. . . . We cannot understand this thing."

> "Kita!" shouted the old man at the top of his voice pointing to the open. "Say now if I be mad!"
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> Through the twilight eastward all looked, and saw at the edge of the dusky horizon a long, lean, dim line like the shadowing of a coast where no coast ever was,—a line that thickened as they gazed, that broadened as a coast-line broadens to the eyes of one approaching it, yet incomparably more quickly. For that long darkness was the returning sea towering like a cliff, and coursing more swiftly than the kite flies.
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> *"Tsunami!"* shrieked the people; and then all shrieks and all sounds and all power to hear sounds were annihilated by a nameless shock heavier than any thunder, as the colossal swell smote the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills, and with a foam-burst like a blaze of sheet-lightning. Then for an instant nothing was visible but a storm of spray rushing up the slope like a cloud, and the people scattered back in panic from the mere menace of it. When they looked again, they saw a white horror of sea raving over the place of their homes. It drew back roaring, and tearing out the bowels of the land as it went. Twice thrice, five times the sea struck and ebbed, but each time with lesser surges: then it returned to its ancient bed and stayed,—still raging, as after a typhoon.

Then Hamaguchi was heard to say, *quietly*, *"That was why I set fire to the rice."* He, their headman, was now as poor as almost the poorest among them, "but he has saved four hundred lives by the sacrifice." The people had no money and could not restore his wealth, yet they did not forget their debt. When they rebuilt their village, they built a temple to honor him as a living god.

> I know only [Hearn writes] that he continued to live in his old thatched home upon the hill, and with his children and children's children, just as humanly and simply as before, while his soul was being worshiped in the shrine below. A hundred years and more he has been dead; but his temple, they tell me, still stands, and the people still pray to the ghost of the good old farmer to help them in time of fear or trouble.

This story, put into our words by Hearn, seems also a kind of prayer. It is one reason that his book is very nearly our favorite book.

COMMENTARY
ON READING GOOD BOOKS

A GREAT many things have been said about the importance of "reading the classics," but the best thing we have come across recently is an essay by Italo Calvino which appeared in the *New York Review of Books* for last October 9. It was sent in by a reader, and we hasten to report some of the things Calvino said. He starts out:

> Let us begin with a few suggested definitions.
>
> (1) The classics are the books of which we usually hear people say: "I am rereading . . ." and never "I am reading. . . ."
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> This at least happens among those who consider themselves "very well read." It does not hold good for young people at the age when they first encounter the world, and the classics as a part of that world.
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> The reiterative prefix before the verb "read" may be a small hypocrisy on the part of people ashamed to admit they have not read a famous book. To reassure them, we need only observe that, however vast any person's reading may be, there still remain an enormous number of famous works that he has not read. . . .
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> (2) We use the word "classics" for those books that are treasured by those who have read and loved them; but they are treasured no less by those who have the luck to read them for the first time in the best conditions to enjoy them.
>
> In fact, reading in youth can be rather unfruitful, owing to impatience, distraction, inexperience with the product's "instructions for use," and inexperience in life itself. Books read then can be (possibly at one and the same time) formative, in the sense that they give a form to future experiences, providing models, terms of comparison, schemes for classification, scales of value, exemplars of beauty—all things that continue to operate even if the book read in one's youth is almost or totally forgotten. If we reread the book at a mature age we are likely to rediscover these constants, which by this time are part of our inner mechanisms, but whose origins we have long forgotten. A literary work can succeed in making us forget it as such, but it leaves its seed in us. The definition we can give is therefore this.
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> (3) The classics are books that exert a peculiar influence both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.
>
> There should therefore be a time in adult life devoted to revisiting the most important books of our youth. Even if the books have remained the same (though they do change, in the light of an altered historical perspective), we have most certainly changed, and our encounter will be an entirely new thing.

Calvino is very thorough. He seems to box the entire compass of the meaning of what we call "classics" in his essay. His definitions go on and on, to a total of fourteen, all somehow useful and related. We have space to add a few more of his comments:

> The reading of a classic ought to give us a surprise or two vis-à-vis the notion that we had of it. For this reason I can never sufficiently highly recommend the direct reading of the text itself, leaving aside the critical biography, commentaries, and interpretations as much as possible. Schools and universities ought to help us to understand that no book that talks *about* a book says more than the book in question, but instead they do their level best to make us think the opposite. . . . The classics are books that we find all the more new, fresh, and unexpected upon reading, the more we thought we knew them from hearing them talked about. . . .

We use the word "classic" of a book that takes the form of an equivalent to the universe, on a level with ancient talismans . . . Maybe the ideal thing would be to hearken to current events as we do to the din outside the window that informs us about traffic jams and sudden changes in the weather, while we listen to the voice of the classics sounding clear and articulate inside the room.

He ends by commenting on the idea that one reads the classics "for some purpose," quoting Cioran, who wrote somewhere:

> "While they were preparing the hemlock, Socrates was learning a tune on the flute. 'What good will it do you,' they asked. 'to know this tune before you die?' "

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
ARGUMENTS AND QUESTIONS

THERE are two kinds of stories or articles about children published in the better newspapers and magazines: stories about the harm schools and methods are doing to our children, and stories about how children learn. The stories about how children learn are the good ones, the kind we like to use here. The other kind may serve parents in trying to decide what kind of school to send their children to, if, that is, they are in a position to have a choice. This second kind of story is well illustrated by an article by Betty Cuniberti in the *Los Angeles Times* for last November 20, which quotes from educators who deplore schools (or rather pre-schools) which try to start children learning at a very early age, say at three instead of five or six. David Elkind (president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children) and Samuel Sava (executive director of the National Association for Elementary School Principals) are active critics of this practice. Elkind said at a press conference late last year:

> Young children learn differently from older children, even from youngsters just a year or two older. With increasing numbers of young children being exposed to these inappropriate teaching methods, there is a real danger that large numbers of children will experience learning problems when, in the past, most children were not even in school. Such youngsters face possible stress and educational burnout in elementary school.

Some other educators were sympathetic to this view, yet admitted that there was little or no hard evidence "on the negative impact of Superbaby teaching techniques on infants and children." A psychologist pointed out that in Japan, "where children are subjected to early, rigorous and competitive schooling, studies have established no firm link between early pressures on children and a high suicide rate." Yet he also remarked that studies of the effects of accelerated learning "generally show that the gains are real but they fade" over time.

But why all the rush? What makes it important for little children to start doing school work as soon as they can? According to the *Times* story:

> Elkind and Sava noted that with increasing numbers of women joining the work force, there is a mushrooming demand for pre-school programs that accept younger and younger children, and keep them longer and longer hours. According to Sava, in the last 15 years the enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds in formal pre-school programs has approximately doubled from 20% to 40%. Many of these children are offspring of what Elkind labels the "Gold Medal," "Ivy League" and "Gourmet" parents, for whom nothing less than Olympic stardom, Harvard law school and designer clothes will do.
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> Many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds want to push their tots too, Elkind said, while the high achiever parents have a double motive: soothing their guilt over not staying home to care for the child, and trying to pass on their own drives for success.
>
> Ironically, this demand for more and better pre-school care comes at a time when fewer people are becoming teachers and daycare workers, due in large part to women's newfound reluctance to accept and keep low-paying jobs. . . . There is a great deal of competition in society now. Education is perceived as a race. We have to educate parents that education is not a race. . . .
>
> Elkind's greatest concern, he said, is that pre-school programs, pressured by the huge demand, are not taking enough time to develop appropriate methods and are instead using "watered down third- and fourth-grade curriculum."

How can parents of pre-schoolers tell what happens at the school? Elkind says, by a few questions.

> "When your four-year-old goes to school, does she bring home dittoed work sheets or her own artwork?
>
> "Is she being taught lessons or engaged in learning through projects such as making soup or building a puppet theater?
>
> "Is her learning limited to learning the alphabet and reciting numbers or is her thinking challenged by

being read stories, taking field trips, or planting a garden?" . . .

Elkind said he was "troubled" by pre-schools that teach foreign languages, music, art and drama, because the children "end up by being not prodigies but parodies."

"Certainly there are gifted children. But in two recent studies on giftedness it was shown that their parents did not push them, that they were allowed to go plunk down on the piano but were not urged to."

According to Elkind, before they are six and a half children "should not be made to sit in a chair and study words," and certainly "should not take tests and receive grades." Sava said that "One of the things we've noticed is that when children are forced-fed early on, they become turned off to education and it's very difficult to turn those youngsters back on." One may reflect that these things are all found out by home-schooler parents in the first few months of working with their own small children. They know, as Elkind and Sava know, that children need to go at their own pace, and even the older ones, too, learn most of all in the same way, although a little pushing may be needed, now and then.

* * *

In the *Nation* for last October 11 Peter Schrag gives attention to the report of a task force of the Carnegie Corporation, issued in May, 1986, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. Summarizing, he says:

This set of proposals would put teachers, not professors, not school boards, not legislatures, in the center of the curricular process. The task force wants to make teaching a real profession, to redesign the schools around it and to let parents and students choose from among the different schools.

The program is fine, in terms of genuine reform, but the task force did not tell *how* to make it operative. The N.E.A, the teachers' union, doesn't like it because it actually suggests that some teachers are better than others, while union practice is to maintain that all its members are equally good. Schrag comments:

But that's only the beginning of the problems. The Carnegie task force is likely to run afoul not only of the unions but of almost every major vested-interest group in the industry: the schools of education, the state boards, the local boards and, most likely, many of the parents themselves. Could local communities accept the wide-open debate that the report envisions—the dangerous questions about local polluters, for example, much less those dealing with sex, religion and evolution? To what extent are school boards and legislatures willing to let teachers run classes without the guaranteed inventories of academic innocuousness that canned, available-for-inspection syllabi, lesson plans and textbooks provide? To what extent, indeed, should they? How many teachers can be found who have not only the intellectual initiative to shape good programs but also the political fortitude to defend them? Even the pap now being offered is regularly challenged by religious fundamentalists on the one side and by minority groups on the other. . . . to attract people of the caliber the task force imagines for the whole system and not just for select suburban districts, schools would have to offer teachers a great deal more in status, responsibility and pedagogical freedom. Unfortunately, there is little reason to believe that most communities would want such teachers or the schools they'd create, difficult and independent as many of them would no doubt be.

The great dilemma in American public education has always been the tension between high academic standards and universality—between education for an academic elite and education for the majority. What about those who can't keep up, the not-quite-average kids, the slow learners, the nonreaders, the tough kids, the difficult kids? The dilemma can only become more acute in the coming years, as the number of white, middle-class children in the public schools declines, the number of poor and minority children increases, and the percentage of voters who have no children or whose children are already grown gets even larger than it already is? . . . The task force tried to resolve the dilemma of high standards versus universality by declaring it away.

More articles like this on education might stimulate more schooling by parents at home, bring smaller and better schools.

FRONTIERS

A Question About "Progress`'

FOR readers interested in the controversy over the continued development of nuclear power, a recent issue of *The Ecologist* (Vol. 16, No. 4/5, 1986, published at Worthvale Manor Farm, Camelford, Cornwall PL329TT, U.K., subscription for six issues, $20), jointly produced by the *Ecologist* staff and the English branch of the Friends of the Earth, with twenty feature articles on every aspect of the dangers of nuclear generation of power, should be valuable reading. All these articles are documented and critical. One of them is by Tony Benn, MP for Chesterfield, who has written and spoken widely on nuclear matters. At the end of his paper he lists eight things that people should work for in order to bring about the abandonment of all production and use of nuclear power. Speaking to the British people, he said:

> These strategies would all help to keep these issues alive, at a time when some ecologists, members of the CND and other antinuclear movements are unduly discouraged by the arrival of cruise missiles, and the present government's apparent determination to build PWRs, all of which are being used to demoralize us.

He then concludes:

> What I most fear is that we shall win the argument, on both counts, because of some hideous nuclear accident, comparable to, but incomparably more serious than, the Chernobyl accident in the Ukraine.
>
> It must be likely that, with so many nuclear devices, of all kinds, now distributed so widely throughout the world, and not always in the best trained or safest hands, there will be some disaster that will bring us all to our senses, and create an unstoppable public demand for a halt.
>
> Mr. O'Leary, the former Chairman of the Federal Power Commission in the USA, a man who later became deputy Secretary for Energy whom I met, on my last ministerial visit to Washington, said to me: "In a hundred years there will be no nuclear power in the world."
>
> I was very surprised at that comment, coming from someone in that position, but I believe that he will be proved to be right.
>
> Those who work to change opinion and are criticized for their stand, may easily get too absorbed in the daily struggles to see the effect of their own efforts in producing the shift in opinion that is taking place.
>
> Having spent much of my life campaigning for reform I should tell you that all such campaigns tend to follow a standard pattern.
>
> First reformers are ignored, then laughed at, then attacked violently for seeking to undermine all that is good and true in society. But, if the reformers stick at it, there comes a time when there is a pause in the argument, and a period of silence, while the top people quietly change their minds, hoping that no one will notice.
>
> Then, quite suddenly, the policy is changed, and the reforms are made; and, in no time at all, you cannot find anyone who will admit to ever having been against them, while some will actually be claiming the credit for their own insight in having carried the change through!
>
> Ecologists and environmentalists are just such reformers, and this is the time to plan for that complete victory which so many have worked for so long.

The reformers, of course, need to be right, as they surely seem to be in this case. But if they are not right, but persuasive, they may do much more harm than good. The articles such as appear in the *Ecologist* are likely to help them to be right.

* * *

According to the Fall 1986 *Earth Island Journal* (Vol. I, No. 5), a quarterly which David Brower, formerly of the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth, probably founded, he resigned from Friends of the Earth because he disagreed with the board's policy, and he is now chairman of Earth Island Institute in San Francisco. We don't know much about these quarrels and have no comment except to say that *Earth Island Journal*, identified as "an environmental news magazine," is doing a good job. Two brief news reports seem worth repeating. First:

African ecologists have come out against a $120 million plan to eradicate the deadly tsetse fly from Zambia, Malawi, and 14 other African nations. The tsetse infestation has now spread to some of Africa's most fertile territory. Ironically, the tsetse may turn out to be a beneficial intruder in the long run.

For years the fly-borne "sleeping sickness" afflicting African cattle, sheep, and goats, has acted as a natural brake against the expansion of livestock ranching. Now senior ecologists in Zimbabwe are warning that elimination of the tsetse fly could open the door to wholesale deforestation, overgrazing, and soil depletion. Within 10 years, they warn, the southern Zambesi Valley could become another Kalahari desert. According to reports in *South* magazine, there is a growing concern over how this land would be used in "the post-tsetse era."

The other news item has to do with Canadian caribou and Innu Indians.

For the last six years the skies over Goose Bay, Quebec, have been filled with the roar of jet aircraft. The jets are flown by pilots from the British Royal Air Force and the West German Luftwaffe operating from a nearby NATO base.

The Goose Bay Tactical Fighter Weapons Training Center is due to undergo an $800 million expansion, making it the largest such facility on the North American continent. Italian, Dutch, and Belgian jets will then begin similar highspeed, low level training flights.

Unhappily, this territory is not uninhabited. It has been home to Labrador's caribou and a community of 10,000 Innu villagers who subsist on the caribou.

The Innu have protested that the sonic booms have disrupted the caribou migrations and displaced other native wildlife important to their survival. The Innu are among the last surviving hunter-gatherer societies in North America.

What sort of progress is it that always seems to do much harm to others, somewhere or other?