VOLUME XL, NO. 25-34
JUNE 24, 1987

AN IDEAL LIFE

IN reading Robert Richardson's *Thoreau—A Life of the Mind*, a new book about Thoreau, published in 1986, and which seems among the best on the subject, one is likely to be driven to think about this man as a model or ideal human, with which to compare oneself. He is valuable to read about for this reason, and if he is used in this way a transfer from him to some other ideal is not easy to accomplish. (The publisher of this book is the University of California Press and the price is $25.00.)

Take him at thirty, in 1847, during his last year at Walden Pond, when it had become clear to him that he was to be a writer, and when he was working hard at this undertaking. An interest in science was growing in him and he had agreed to gather specimens of fish for Louis Agassiz, who had recently joined the faculty at Harvard. The college was then taking an interest in mathematics, chemistry, and other branches of science, and was, in Thoreau's opinion, Richardson relates, "really beginning to wake up and redeem its character and overtake the age."

> The same was true of Thoreau himself. He would never be a scientist in the specialized way in which an Agassiz was a recognized authority on fish classification or on glaciation but Thoreau would always be open to science, hospitable to its basic way of understanding things. "This world," he noted now in his journal, "is not a place for him who does not discover its laws." Nor was Thoreau's rising interest in classification, statistics, and telescope power at odds with his transcendental or idealist side. His concern for material things was still healthily balanced by his concern with mind, his eagerness for facts was offset by his interest in meaning and myth. "All matter indeed, is capable of entertaining thought," he noted down. He liked astronomy because it "is that department of physics which answers to Prophecy, the Seer's or Poet's calling . . . to see more with the physical eye than man has yet seen." As astronomy was linked to poetry, so history was now linked to myth. "Mythology is ancient history or biography. The oldest history still memorable becomes a mythus. It is the fruit which history at last bears—the fable so far from being false contains only the essential parts of the history."

Science, for Thoreau, was evidently not a way of settling things about the world, of establishing final truth, but a way of opening things up, of enriching the areas to explore. This, we are now able to say, was for him a quality of his maturity. What gave him this sort of balance? This is mainly the reason for reading him—to discover this secret. He had his problems. While he was very busy writing, he found no publisher easily. His prose, as we now know, was great, but publishers in those days were reluctant to print what they felt would not sell. Horace Greeley, the eminent New York publisher, who admired his work, tried to help, but was driven to write Thoreau, saying, "don't you see that the elimination of very flagrant heresies (like your defiant Pantheism) becomes a necessity?" Thoreau replied by saying that he could hardly avoid this problem "since I was born to be a pantheist—if that be the name of me, and I do the deeds of one." Richardson's comment is of interest:

> He might bridle at the label "pantheist," but Greeley had not meant it maliciously, nor was it essentially inaccurate. Thoreau was certainly no Christian in any commonly accepted sense. He allowed that he would rather walk to Rutland than to Jerusalem, said pointedly that his system had no place for man-worship, by which religious liberals of the time usually meant worship of Christ, and considered that "God exhibits himself to the walker in a frosted bush today (he was writing in early January, after an ice storm) as much as in a burning one to Moses of old." Much of his love of nature is expressed in language devoid of conventional religious terminology, but no less religious in feeling for that. "I love Nature partly because she is not man. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. . . . He (man) is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this."

At this time he wrote to his friend, Harrison Blake:

> As the stars looked to me when I was a shepherd in Assyria, they look to me now a New Englander. The higher the mountain on which you stand, the less change in the prospect from year to year, from age to age. Above a certain height, there is no change. . . . I have had but one *spiritual* birth (excuse the word,) and now whether it rains or snows, whether I laugh or cry, fall farther below or approach nearer to my standard, whether Pierce or Scott is elected, not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising and everlastingly new light dawns to me.

He wrote this when he was thirty-five. Earlier, at thirty, his publication problem was serious.

> Greeley had managed to place Thoreau's Carlyle essay but he had a very difficult time getting it paid for. Emerson could move no one to publish A *Week* [*on the Concord and Merrimack*]. It had been turned down four times when Thoreau left the pond in the fall of 1847. This shook Thoreau's self-confidence. He had turned thirty this summer, and he had now been out of college for ten years.

Yet another sort of confidence had been growing:

> Living alone, as a bachelor, he was becoming set in his ways now and he was increasingly capable of a kind of defensive superiority which, when not laced with wit, could irritate—and continues to irritate—his detractors. His reply to his Harvard class questionnaire prickles and bristles beneath labored cleverness. "I beg that the class will not consider me an object of charity," he added in a postscript, "and if any of them are in want of pecuniary assistance, and will make known their case to me, I will engage to give them some advice of more worth than money."

In what may be the best brief attempt to identify Thoreau's attitude toward life, Richardson suggests that he was an independent sort of stoic. Stoicism, he says, "has aspects of a religion and is, in fact, a way of life." After the collapse of the Greek city-state, "Zeno, the first of the Stoics, turned to Nature as the one remaining source of trustworthy moral principles."

> Not, what can I know? but how should I live? was the great and overriding question. . . . Zeno held, as William James would hold later, that theoretical inquiry was without value unless it had significance for the moral life. This is the stubbornly practical side of Stoicism; everything is to be judged by whether or not it has concrete implications for our actual and daily lives. . . . "Reserve your right to any deed or utterance that accords with nature," says Marcus Aurelius. . . . "keep a straight course and follow your own nature and the World Nature (and the way of these two is one)" . . . And in another place Marcus Aurelius says, in what is one of his most extreme and provocative observations, "nothing can happen to any man that nature has not fitted him to endure." . . .

While Thoreau does not mention Marcus Aurelius, an early journal entry begins: "Zeno the stoic stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now."

> Ellery Channing came near the mark when he said Thoreau's was a natural Stoicism, "not taught from Epictetus" or anyone else. But wherever it came from (and why should we utterly rule out the classic?) the habitual center of Thoreau's personal energy certainly included some major Stoic perceptions. His thought has a strong ethical center—he aimed, early and late, to find a firm support for the moral life in the ordinary nature of man himself. His was always the practical question, how best can I live my daily life? Then too, Thoreau is probably the greatest spokesman of the last two hundred years for the view that we must turn not to the state, not to a God, and not to society, but to nature for our morality. He also stands as the most attractive American *example*—as Emerson was the great proponent—of the ageless Stoic principles of self-trust, self-reverence, or self-reliance, as it is variously called. Thoreau's life can be thought of as one long, uninterrupted attempt to work out the practical concrete meaning of the Stoic idea that the laws ruling nature rule men as well.

Thoreau's feelings about government are fairly well known. What is notable is that he showed little or no reluctance in making them known. Richardson says:

> The angry young man of "Resistance to Civil Government" makes it pointedly clear by careful repetition that it is American *government* he wishes to oppose. "Visit the Navy Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make." More specifically, he disapproves of the position taken on the slavery issue by the American government. "How does it become a man to behave

> toward this American government today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also." But rejection of the American government did not mean rejection of everything American. It was not the government, Thoreau thought, that had kept the country free, settled the West, or educated people. On the contrary, he was convinced that "the character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished." Thus, in the same essay, Thoreau could be strongly critical of American policy, foreign and domestic, and at the same time warmly enthusiastic about the American people, and about the idea of America. . . . Thoreau did not reject all civic ties, all citizenship, all patriotic attachment to his native land, but he was always asking, of what exactly was it that he was a citizen? His sense of his own identity did not insist much or often on his Americanness. As Henry James was said to have been a citizen not so much of England or America as of the James family, so Thoreau was a citizen of his family, of the town of Concord, of New England, and of nature, and while all of these taken together might make him an American, any one of them by itself took precedence over the grand abstraction of America.

Why, one must ask, don't we have a government that will refuse to do things which so many citizens find outrageous and indeed immoral? The answer is not hard to find. Such laws as we have are made by committees, by a few people, that is, who have been elected to or gained office and are charged with responsibility to further what we call "the national interest." These men have what they believe to be goals which will be of benefit to the country, but goals which may be of no or little interest to the people at large. These committeemen are not especially well educated nor need they be what we regard as truly civilized. They have one major skill—they know how to get elected. This seems to qualify them as wise enough to make our laws. They enjoy the prestige of office and they are accorded the respect that lawmakers are widely believed to deserve. The fact remains, however, that they are only ordinary men with the same faults and vulnerabilities of other men, and these weaknesses give what they do far-reaching effects. Sometimes very good men attain to office and make their voices heard, but these are usually few in number and thus limited in their ability to shape national policy. So, from time to time, the actions of government produce moral shock among a large number of citizens. In Thoreau's time, the war with Mexico was one such action, and also the federal government's ruling that citizens in non-slave states were obligated to capture and return runaway slaves to their southern owners. Thoreau found these actions of the national government morally intolerable and he rejected them. He refused to pay the poll tax as an act of civil disobedience and spent a night in jail as a result. Some unknown person paid his tax, by no means pleasing him, and he was released the next day.

This small event had wide consequences. It led to the publication of Thoreau's essay on Civil Disobedience, first called "Resistance to Civil Government." Richardson says:

> He speaks of *receding* from government, *resigning* from office, *refusing* to pay taxes to support war and slavery.. . . Thoreau also no longer sees American government as self-government or representative democracy, but as machinery that "a single man can bend to his will." . . . Thoreau leaves no possible doubt about his meaning. "If I have unjustly wrestled a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. . . . This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, even though it cost them their existence as a people." This is Thoreau the genuine radical, castigating as "the most serious obstacle to reform" those liberals who personally disapprove of slavery or the war yet still support the government. Observing that "action from principle . . . is essentially revolutionary," he seeks, like Garrison, to block compromise and force the issue. "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we transgress them at once?" . . . "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."
>
> Though it was not printed till 1849, and though it has important roots in the late thirties and early forties, the essay springs immediately from events of 1845 and 1846, from the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, the heating up of abolitionism and the night in jail of July 1846. On these issues, Thoreau was very acutely tuned to his times. Bernard De Voto, in *The Year of Decision*, observes that "somewhere between August and December 1846 the Civil War had begun."

One need only ask, here, if the people of this country had the moral awareness of Thoreau, how many national disasters would have been avoided by the nation in the years since that time?

We go now to 1853 for some of his reflections during that year.

> At the end of May he noted how "some incidents in my life seem far more allegorical than actual," and he was satisfied that such things were "quite in harmony with my subjective philosophy." He even ventured a new, subjective definition of wealth this month, reaching past Adam Smith, and anticipating Henry James's "I call that man rich who can satisfy the requirements of his imagination." Thoreau was more specific, equating riches with the artist's or writer's expressive capacities. "He is richest who has most use for nature as raw material for tropes and symbols with which to describe his life." What he saw in nature simply gave him language to describe what was already going on in him.

He seemed to apply this to his reading, also. He saw in books things after he had already begun to work with them. A few years later Thoreau reflected that—

> a man receives only what he is ready to receive, whether physically or intellectually or morally. . . . We hear and apprehend only what we already half know. If there is something which does not concern me, which is out of my line, which by experience or genius my attention is not drawn to, however novel and remarkable it may be, if it is spoken, we hear it not, if it is written we read it not, or if we read it, it does not detain us. Every man thus *tracks himself* through life, in all his hearing and reading and observation and travelling.

Early in 1862 it became evident that Thoreau was dying of tuberculosis. He knew it and was not disturbed.

> To his Aunt Louisa, who asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know that we had ever quarrelled, Aunt." . . . No more satisfying deathbed utterance can be imagined than his reply to a question put gently to him by Parker Pillsbury a few days before his death. Pillsbury was an old abolitionist warhorse, a former minister who had left his church over the slavery issue, a man of principle and proven courage, an old family friend who, like Blake and Aunt Louisa, could not resist the impulse to peer into the future. "You seem so near the brink of the dark river," Pillsbury said, "that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you." Thoreau's answer summed up his life. "One world at a time," he said. Henry Thoreau died at nine in the morning on May 6, 1862.

Can we say, finally, that Thoreau lived an ideal life? We can surely say that he lived *his* ideal life. What, Richardson asks toward the end, "does a life close to nature teach?" He makes this reply:

> It taught Thoreau the imperative of courage, the absolute value of freedom, a conception of nature as law, and, finally, the necessity of individual wholeness or integrity if one was to avoid a life of despair. "I learned this, at least, by my experiment, that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours." Courage, then, is the first, most important thing learned by living close to nature. Without courage, the other lessons are useless, they can be learned but not lived. Without courage, freedom is only a word. With courage, freedom becomes the opposite of slavery and the absolute ground of human life. "If slavery is not wrong," said Lincoln, "nothing is wrong."
>
> Thoreau also learned the role of law and the necessity of limits. Law pervades nature, and certain limits and boundaries exist which must be respected. Thoreau's sense of this was not negative, belittling, or admonishing. Law was, in his view, something that connected seemingly isolated phenomena. In accepting the laws of nature he accepted not only himself but things beyond himself.

In the life of Thoreau that we are able to see, with the skillful help of such writers as Robert Richardson, we see a life that was lived in behalf of the life we cannot see, which was reality for Henry David Thoreau. Was he right in what he did? This is a hard question, but one which a study of his visible and audible life compels us to ask. No question seems more important.

REVIEW
THE GANDHIAN RULE

THERE is a great paradox in the career of M.K. Gandhi, a man who took part in politics in both South Africa and India, yet who personally rejected the fruits of political action. He used politics, one could say, to gain his objectives, or the conditions which his objectives required, yet regarded the rewards of common political struggle as irrelevant and unworthy of human effort. Why, then, did he enter politics at all? He made a reply to this question in *Young India* for May 12, 1920, saying:

> If I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.

What this meant in practical terms is the subject-matter of an article in *Gandhi Marg* for September, 1986, by Jai Narain, which seems an excellent topic for review. The title is "Power Politics: A Gandhian Alternative."

The writer begins by establishing that politics is the struggle for power. But Gandhi did not seek power. He fought against the misuses of power, you could say, but sought only release from power, not the opportunities it provided. As Narain puts it:

> Gandhi was not a career politician. He did not enter politics to gain political power. He was prepared to opt in and out of the political arena. Such an unconventional political ambition and lack of commitment to constant political involvement implied a challenge to the basic assumptions of power politics.
>
> The political experience in satyagraha that Gandhi conducted in South Africa and later on in India constituted a total challenge to conventional power politics.

Gandhi's methods are illustrated in his effort to obtain justice for Indians from General Smuts:

> When Gandhi found that General Smuts did not implement the agreement in 1913, he planned a protest march of the satyagrahis from Durban on 1 January 1914. The plan was in preparation, and all efforts were being made to make it a success. In the meantime, Gandhi went to Pretoria with C.F. Andrews. But the Union Railways [strike] made the position of the government extremely delicate. Gandhi was faced with a potential dilemma. It was open for him to bargain with his opponent, when he was in difficulty by exploiting his weakness as was usually done in conventional power politics. Here was an excellent opportunity waiting for him. In fact, Gandhi admitted in his *Satyagraha in South Afrira* that some of his colleagues urged him to take advantage of the situation. But he was guided by the ethics of his nonviolent technique alone which required that he should not press his demands at a time when the government was confronting a genuine difficulty.

Accordingly, Gandhi postponed the march, which was greatly appreciated by the British. One of Smuts' secretaries said:

> "I do not like your people, and do not care to assist them at all. But what am I to do? You help us in our day of need. How can we lay hands on you? I often wish you took to violence like the English strikers, then we would know how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy. You desire victory by self-suffering alone and never transgress your self-imposed limits of courtesy and chivalry. And that is what reduces us to helplessness." . . .
>
> During the Ahmedabad Mill strike in 1917, when certain workers suggested to increase demands beyond 35 per cent in wages, he refused to do so, saying "I say you can demand even a 100 per cent increase. But it would be unjust to do so. Be content in the present circumstances, with what you have demanded, if you ask for more it will pain me. We cannot demand anything unreasonable from anybody." . . . The conclusion of the struggle embodied the true spirit of Satyagraha where no advantage was taken from the difficulties of the opponent.

While Gandhi led the Indian National Congress, his methods were adopted. Their success resulted from this. Romain Rolland wrote in his biography of Gandhi:

> "In 1921 Gandhi's power was at its apogee. His authority as a moral leader was vast, and without having sought it, almost unlimited political authority had been placed in his hands." . . . The withdrawal of a political movement when it was deviating from the main principle was basic to Gandhi's notion of politics without power. And this notion brought for him more and more power. Time and again he went on rejecting the conventional notion of power politics and political power went on concentrating around him.

How much of the interest in Gandhi, today, one wonders, is due to the hope that it might be possible to "win" with Gandhian techniques? And to what extent is it realized that for Gandhi, integrity of

motive and method was far more important than winning—that a Victory without integrity was regarded by him as defeat, or worse than defeat, because of the self-deception involved? To be a Gandhian is to start work at the bottom in one's thinking, and to follow its direction in all relationships. His striving for freedom was based on this habit of thought, which is explained in various ways. On one occasion he said:

> I suggest we are thieves in a way. If I take anything that I do not need for my immediate use, and keep it, I thieve it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of Nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this world, there would be no man dying of starvation in this world. But so long as we have got this inequality, so long we are thieving. I am no socialist and I do not want to dispossess those who have got possessions: but I do say that, personally, those of us who want to see light out of darkness have to follow this rule. I do not want to dispossess anybody. I should then be departing from the rule of *ahimsa*. If somebody else possesses more than I do, let him. But so far as my own life has to be regulated, I do say that I dare not possess anything which I do not want. In India we have got three millions of people having to be satisfied with one meal a day, and that meal consisting of a *chapati* containing no fat in it, and a pinch of salt. You and I have no right to anything that we really have until these three million are clothed and fed better. You and I, who ought to know better, must adjust our wants, and even undergo voluntary starvation in order that they may be nursed, fed and clothed. . . .
>
> Indeed, the test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns, but the absence of starvation among its masses. The only statement that has to be examined is, whether it can be laid down as a law of universal application that material advancement means moral progress.
>
> Now let us take a few illustrations. Rome suffered a moral fall when it attained high material affluence. So did Egypt and so perhaps most countries of which we have any historical record. The descendants and kinsmen of the royal and divine Krishna too fell when they were rolling in riches. We do not deny to the Rockefellers and the Carnegies possession of an ordinary measure of morality but we gladly judge them indulgently. I mean that we do not even expect them to satisfy the highest standard of morality. With them material gain has not necessarily meant moral gain. In South Africa, where I had the privilege of associating with thousands of our countrymen on most intimate terms, I observed almost invariably that the greater the possession of riches, the greater was their turpitude. Our rich men, to say the least, did not advance the moral struggle of passive resistance as did the poor. The rich men's sense of self-respect was not so much injured as that of the poorest. If I were not afraid of treading on dangerous ground, I would even come nearer home and show how that possession of riches has been a hindrance to real growth. I venture to think that the scriptures of the world are far safer and sounder treatises on laws of economics than many of the modern text-books.

Quite evidently, the commonplace motives of most people in everyday life were for Gandhi tendencies to be overcome by his conception of ideal human behavior. For him, the ideal was the *norm*, not the common practice. It is this that the serious student of Gandhi soon discovers in reading his works. Narain says:

> In the Preface to his autobiography, he wrote that his devotion to truth had drawn him into politics, that his power in the political field was derived from his spiritual experiment with himself, and those who say religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means. He repeatedly insisted that politics could not be isolated from the deepest things in life. He said that when he found himself drawn into the political coil, he asked himself what was necessary to remain untouched by the immorality, untruth and political gains, and decided that a servant of the people must discard all wealth and private possessions.
>
> By this attempt at purification of politics, Gandhi tried to wash out the idea of using politics for personal gains and to insist that politics should not be used for sharing and exercising power. But political work must ever be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress. . . . In his last Testament on 29 January 1948, Gandhi warned the Congress about the dangers of power politics and solemnly recommended its dissolution as a political party.

It now seems likely that even centuries must pass before we are able to recognize what is to be learned from the life and work of Gandhi.

COMMENTARY
THE CONTENT OF THIS ISSUE

MATERIAL on humans such as Thoreau and Gandhi, as provided in this week's MANAS, has unique value in that it offers insight into human greatness. The biological account of human beings has nothing of importance to say on this subject, and there is no other generally acceptable account available. Yet biography and history have an ample supply of material testifying to the reality of high human distinction. How can this reality be explained?

The puzzle of this question is a principal reason for the publication of MANAS. The educators of our time have little to say about it. Needless to say, the dynamics of human development toward greatness, such as both Thoreau and Gandhi must have possessed and in some measure understood, are a mystery to modern man and are largely neglected. How is this neglect justified?

The history of the past two hundred years throws some light on the situation. Those who believed in freedom of mind during this period decided that, because of the false claims of theology and organized religion, getting rid of all transcendental theories and beliefs was the only way to free the modern mind of the constraints of dogma, so they successfully sponsored the claims of materialism, looking to the rising authority of science, which shared this view, for support. Materialism, then, had a moral origin, polemical in inspiration.

But today, after at least a century of campaigning by aroused and devoted materialists, we are confronted by a world in a moral shambles, with no conception of the inner, higher resources in human beings.

Yet Thoreau and Gandhi—and among women we should name Simone Weil as of this character—bring us evidence of extraordinary moral strength and individuality which needs no dogma for its support.

What gave them their inner strength? How did Thoreau acquire his independence of the prevailing beliefs of his time? What gave Gandhi his ability to select from his ancestral religion ideas which became the foundation of his career as a lover of his people and world?

These are large questions, asked mostly by implication by those who write about Thoreau and Gandhi. To raise them directly is a function that MANAS has assumed for itself, through the years. Pursuing these questions has been an activity which led naturally to a consideration of reincarnation as one of the means by which the character evident in men like Thoreau and Gandhi was developed. Reincarnation is no final answer, but it at least provides the time required for the formation of strong moral character. And incidentally, both Thoreau and Gandhi subscribed to this idea.

Another value of thinking about reincarnation is that it raises what may be called "scientific" questions about the process of rebirth. After a life on earth, what part of us is reborn? All, or only a distillation of our present existence? Is there a cosmic method of bookkeeping which takes all that we have a part in accomplishing, or failing to accomplish, into account? In other words, does the law of Karma, a necessary companion doctrine, apply to us all, life after life?

If we want help in thinking about such things, the books of wisdom of the East, such as the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*, might prove useful. So also the Western classics, the Dialogues of Plato, the writings of Plotinus, and more recent works which reflect the same insight and understanding. These are writings which may help us to bring into being the foundations of a new culture that is in balance with our inward longings and intellectual and moral hungers.

MANAS is not published during July and August. The next issue will be dated September 2, 1987.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
MORE FROM GWS

IT'S not easy to get going on a column based upon material in *Growing Without Schooling,* mainly for the reason that the letters from parents on their experiences with their children are so interesting and so different. What works well for one parent turns out to be an ineffectual flop for another. This only proves what we should have known from the beginning—that children are *different!* These letters so hold your attention that you go on reading them, putting off getting down to work.

Then, there are other things you discover—that administrators who oppose home schooling and give parents serious problems are known to change their minds. No one expects them to, but then you read in *GWS* a letter like the following from a homeschooler in Utah:

> About nine years ago our school district hired a new superintendent. One of the first things this man decided to do was to stomp on me. He was convinced that home school would harm my children and that it was his responsibility to get in control of us. In the two or three years he was there, he and I, and an assortment of other people "went the rounds" a number of times, with a great deal of anger and noise. Then the superintendent moved on to Nevada, and then later to California.
>
> This summer I was given a flyer announcing a home school convention in Los Angeles, and guess who was listed among the speakers? That's right: this same superintendent! His own grandchildren are now being taught at home, two of his sons and their wives are leaders in the movement and he has become a supporter.
>
> Of course I couldn't resist working out a trip to California. I did go without any malice toward the man; he hadn't really done me any great harm (actually I could hardly stop laughing) and he was very gracious toward me, even told the audience he had first learned about homeschooling from me.
>
> So when things seem difficult, persevere and endure. Time is really on our side!

A mother in Washington told a similar tale:

> At a recent support group meeting there were a large number of new people in attendance and among them was a gentleman who spoke up and said he wanted to share something.
>
> "Until recently I was a prosecuting attorney in Idaho," he said. Suddenly there was total silence in the room. Some people looked a little apprehensive. "In fact, not long ago I had to prosecute the case of a homeschooling family," he added.
>
> There was a collective gasp. Suddenly a young mother sitting behind him let go with a book over his head, saying "Shame on you!" This broke the tension somewhat and the man went on with his story. Idaho, you may recall, has had a number of homeschool trials in the last couple of years, including some families who went to jail over the issue.
>
> He said the homeschooling mother who was being prosecuted had no supporters. Not even any relatives would come to her defense. She was alone with only her strong conviction to sustain her in the belief that homeschooling was simply the best thing for her child. He related that after the court hearing, the case stuck in his mind. He kept thinking, "How can it be wrong for a mother to educate her child?"
>
> The thought weighed heavily upon him. He could think of nothing else and finally went to see the judge. They discussed the case for some time, and in the end they both came to the conclusion that the case should be dismissed. "Now my wife and I are homeschooling our children," he concluded.
>
> What cheering news that was! One can only wonder if the homeschooling family in Idaho ever heard the rest of the story!

In the issue of *Growing Without Schooling* from which we have been quoting, No. 55, are several letters from the parents of late readers. Curiously, some children seem to learn to read without anyone noticing how. They pick it up with no trouble at all. Then there are others who have a hard time—hard on the parents, that is. But some of these parents knew better than to worry much, remembering what John Holt said to parents whose children were not yet reading: "The chances of your child growing up illiterate are about the same as the chances of her or him

turning into a crocodile." One letter on this subject begins:

> David is just 10 and just beginning to really read—as opposed to asking me nine out of ten words—and to enjoy it. His older brother taught himself to read, somehow; when he was 5½, we discovered that he could read a second grade reader (though he only read one story in it, preferring more interesting stuff). If we hadn't had Daniel's teaching himself as proof that kids can do it, and if we hadn't had all those reassuring accounts in *GWS* to read and reread, I'm sure we would have done what many parents do: panic. We might have put David in school and demanded special help for him. At the very least, we would have hired a reading teacher for him. And how long would it have been till he'd have been labeled LD, especially since he reverses letters when he writes?
>
> David had insisted for a long time that he wanted to read and wanted us to help him learn, but whenever we tried it was useless. Patience is not my strong suit, and I would sometimes yell, scream, hit, give up in disgust—not actions destined to build up someone's self-confidence.
>
> But two weeks ago, I told him I knew he was ready and I wanted him to start reading. He worked on it alone off and on, but said it was too hard. Then Sunday, on a hunch, I told him that it didn't matter how well his brother Dan read and how poorly he did, or that Dan read at 5 and he at 10, that they weren't competing for anything, that when he grew up and needed to read things, how well Dan read would have nothing to do with how well he read, that when and how he learned to read, how well he read, and how much he enjoyed it were all up to him.
>
> He read seven books that day! And read them all, needing to be told only a few words in each. Six were "easy readers," maybe first grade level. The other was *A House* Is *a House for Me.* Since then he's read several more, including two chapters of *Whitey Takes a Trip.* He spends an hour or so a day on it, and I don't encourage him to do more, partly because it's his business, partly because I want him to stay enthused, and partly because I want to avoid any vision problems. When he's read too long, I suddenly notice that he's asking me to tell him almost all the words, including ones he's been reading easily only a page before. But he is absolutely delighted, so proud of himself, and can't wait to read all the books he's wanted to for years.

An oddity in a letter from North Carolina:

> Five years ago, we enrolled Jessie in our church school for the first grade. . . . At the end of the school year, a note came home asking me to work with Jessie on her "reading expression" during the summer. This one, I couldn't believe. This was the child who read to 3-year-old Joshua every day, and no child his age will sit through a boring reader! Confused, I asked her to read as she read in school. She proceeded to read in the choppiest fashion and in a monotone voice. When I asked her why she read that way, she said it was so the other kids wouldn't get mad at her. I spoke with her teacher about this. She admitted that at the beginning of the year, Jessie had known all the words, and she had encouraged Jessie to pretend the reading was harder for her, so as not to hurt the other children's feelings.
>
> By August, I knew Jessie would not be returning to school.

We close with an extract from Marie Winn's book on television, *The Plug-In Drug:*

> Universally, concern about television and its dangers centers on the programs people watch: too violent, too shallow, too sexist, too foolish. I believe, however, that by focusing our attention so completely on the contents of television programs, we have long ignored the more profound influence of television—of the mere act of watching, and the availability of this experience as a timer-filler—on child development, on the ways parents bring up their children, and on family life. A look at television from this unusual angle may help us to recognize that the way to deal with the problems it presents is not to work for better programs—for that is not unlike dealing with alcoholism by striving to replace cheap whiskey with Chevas Regal—but to work at better control.

FRONTIERS

What Happened at Chernobyl

IT is at least possible that the major accident at Chernobyl in the Ukraine area of Russia may in the long run have a beneficent effect. This disaster is given close research attention by Christopher Flavin in Worldwatch Paper 75, published in March by the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C. It may prove to be the trigger of anti-nuclear opinion throughout the world, leading to complete abandonment of this source of energy. Flavin writes:

> Majority opinion had already turned against nuclear power in many countries, but polls taken after Chernobyl showed support for nuclear expansion at the lowest levels ever. The psychological reaction was heightened because some leaders had misled the public into thinking that a serious nuclear accident was all but impossible. In Europe, government credibility eroded further because many people believe that officials failed to warn them of the health threat from Chernobyl. In the United States, public support of further nuclear development fell from 64 per cent in 1975 to 19 per cent in 1986. . . .
>
> Nuclear power's fading fortunes stem from the fact that it is an energy source whose implications many citizens find troubling. Some argue that we need a new generation of nuclear technology and a new commitment to safety. However, a growing number of people, including qualified scientists, believe that nuclear power as it has so far been developed is unacceptable. They claim that nuclear power's long-term costs—in waste disposal, threats of terrorism, and accidents—exceed any conceivable economic benefits. . . . As we approach the end of the twentieth century, Albert Einstein's observation that the "unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking" seems ever more profound.

Apparently enough facts have been established and made public to enable Mr. Flavin to tell the story of the accident. On April 26 of 1986, the operators of the fourth and newest nuclear reactor at Chernobyl began a special test which led them to disconnect safety systems. The "emergency core cooling systems had been shut down" and "other safety mechanisms had been disconnected, and all of the control rods that moderate fusion in the reactor's core had been at least partially pulled out in order to keep the reactor going." This made the reactor unstable, but when the operators pushed the emergency button that would send the control rods back into the core to stop the fission reaction, the rods failed to fall fully into the already deformed core. A few seconds later two large explosions occurred.

> Soviet officials report that in 4.5 seconds the power level of the reactor rose more than 2,000-fold to 120 times its rated capacity, a surge that can best be described as a "slow nuclear explosion" that ripped open the 2,000 fuel rod and control channels in the reactor's core. (Nuclear bombs release their energy in billionths of a second and are far more powerful.) The rupture of the fuel rods caused the cooling water to flash into steam, resulting in a huge explosion that was directed upward by the surrounding graphite mass. The 1,000-ton concrete slab above the reactor was blasted aside and nearby observers saw a spectacular fireworks display as hot nuclear fuel and graphite were hurled into the night sky (described by the Soviets as a "rapid fuel relocation").

While at Three Mile Island in 1979, a partially melted core contaminated the plant, all but a tiny portion of the dangerous radioactive material remained in the reactor vessel and was not spread across the Pennsylvania countryside.

> The Ukranians were not so fortunate. For the first time ever, the lethal radioactive contents of a large power reactor were exposed to the atmosphere. . . . Local officials were at first unaware of the dimensions of the unfolding tragedy. . . . By the end of the day, the Soviet Union's top nuclear officials were directing what was soon to be one of the largest peacetime emergency operations ever. . . . To fight the fires and slow the release of radioactive materials, helicopters dropped 40 tons of boron carbide, 800 tons of limestone, 2,400 tons of lead, and thousands of tons of sand and clay on the reactor.
>
> These efforts were only partly successful. Although the main fire was extinguished within several hours, saving the adjacent reactor, the graphite-encased core continued to smolder for several days. Radiation levels, after falling initially, gradually built up over the following days. . . .

Most of the twenty-nine people who died from radiation exposure in the first few months were workers directly exposed. Hospitalized were 237 who received large doses of radiation and may die of cancer. The area around Chernobyl was helped by the fact that fire carried the fallout high in the air where winds brought it to distant areas in Europe. Most of the fallout came down outside the Soviet Union. The pollution reached as far as northern Poland and across the Baltic sea to Scandinavia. It also reached southern Poland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, southern Germany, Switzerland, northern Italy, and eastern France. A change of wind then brought it into central Germany, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. Flavin says:

> The Chernobyl cloud left an extraordinarily complex pattern of fallout that may never be fully understood. Potentially health-threatening levels of radioactive materials were deposited more than 2,000 kilometers from the plant and in at least 20 countries. Some parts of Europe directly under the plume received little fallout, while others got larger amounts. The plume was composed of many different elements with varying weights and half-lives. Their deposition was heavily influenced by rainfall that washed radioactive particles out of the air. Local topography caused the radioactive runoff to concentrate along valleys and in reservoirs, forming "hot spots." West German researchers found that over a distance of 200 kilometers, radiation levels varied by a factor of 15. Similarly, levels 100 kilometers northwest of Stockholm reached 10 times those in the capital.

Some concluding remarks by Christopher Flavin are worth remembering:

> Nuclear power is not the mature industry that proponents claim, but rather a sick one sustained by government subsidiaries. Moreover, it is quickly losing the political life-support systems that kept it going for the past two decades. The noble vision of the fifties did not include shoddy construction practices, billion-dollar cost overruns, disinformation campaigns by government officials, thousands of tons of accumulating nuclear waste, or exploding reactors that contaminate foodstuffs a thousand kilometers away. If Chernobyl is compared with a heart attack, it is clear that the ailment struck a patient already afflicted with cancer.