

## THE PERSUASIONS OF NATURE

NOW going on in the United States is a heroic attempt to change the foundation of morality in this country—from an eclectic collection of inherited precepts to a sense of the unity of human beings with the earth, its soil, and all living things. This effort is timely, coming into being with the new-born ecological movement and its strong ethical implications and the hungering looking around of a great many people for a new faith. The focus of this new effort is on the practice of agriculture, declaring that what we do to grow food needs to be largely changed—changed in motive, concept, and result. Such a change is admitted to be difficult. While some eighty per cent of our people were once farmers, and Thomas Jefferson grounded his hope for the future on these people, today farmers—if you can still call them that—are less than three per cent of the population, and there are even those who regard this great change as a mark of progress—who wants any more to do the drudgery which growing crops entails?

Yet there are still some farmers—a handful of them—who do not think of their lives in this way, and there are people around the country, a few, who would be glad to turn to cultivating the soil as a way of supporting themselves and some others. And there are agricultural scientists with vision who are carefully explaining how farming ought to be done and giving persuasive reasons for the changes that they say are needed. If you read what these men say in books and articles you are likely to be persuaded that they are right. One thing they are saying is that the growing of food is too important a matter to be left to experts. Since we all eat, we are all involved. Since the soil is the medium for the growing of food, the care of the soil is a crucial responsibility. If farmers neglect it, the weight of its obligations falls upon us all. Since with hardly an exception the big farmers do neglect it, that responsibility has now become ours.

A book which sums up this situation and appeal is *Soil and Survival*, published recently by Sierra Club Books, at \$19.95. The authors, Joe Paddock, Nancy Paddock, and Carol Bly, are said to be two poets and an essayist, yet they are that and a lot more. Nancy Paddock edits the *Land Stewardship Letter*, her husband, Joe Paddock, is associated with the project, and Carol Bly is a consultant and writer who works with the Land Steward Project.

They all live in Minnesota. In his introduction to their book, Wes Jackson says:

This is more than a book about soil and survival. The authors have been much too modest in their title selection. This is a book about soil and life, soil and our roots, soil and culture, soil and civilization. As far back as 1940 E.B. White could "see no reason for a conservation program if people have lost their knack with the earth." White could see no reason for saving the streams to make the power to run the factories if the resultant industry reduces the status and destroys the heart of the individual." He called this the most "frightful sort of dissipation." White saw the necessary connections, yet in the nearly half century that has passed since he wrote these words, nearly all our efforts at protecting soil and water have ignored this dimension and we have failed miserably.

This, then, is a book for the sick at heart. It makes a focus for the sad wandering that can find no place to settle. It restores to us the parenthood of earth.

How can such a book succeed in gaining attention in a world like ours? We are talking about the great difficulty with which ideas of sacrifice, of self-restraint, of assumption of responsibility are entertained by the people of our time. Yet there is an analogy in nature which may give encouragement. In every living thing there are body cells and germ cells. The body cells can reproduce themselves, but that's all; the germ cells can reproduce whole organisms—their unique capacity. But there is only one germ cell for countless million somatic or body cells. So, among humans, who have the power of

imagination, there are rare individuals with the capacity of germ cells, who not only can set an example of how to create another kind of organism—in harmony with its surroundings—but are able also to tell how and why. That may be all the encouragement we need, since it is all we have, and nature, in the long run, does not fail.

The first chapter in *Soil and Survival* is titled "Something We Can Change." In it the authors say:

The greatest concentration of prime farmland in the United States—and perhaps in the world—exists in the state of Iowa. After one century of agricultural activity the topsoil of Iowa is half gone. A frequently quoted graphic description of soil loss tells us that an Iowa farmer, on the average, loses two bushels of topsoil for every bushel of corn grown. Some say the loss is really much higher. Certainly it is higher in the case of soybeans, Iowa's other major crop. Farmland in the state of Iowa as a whole suffers an average soil loss of just under ten tons per acre per year. In deep loess hill regions losses average just under sixteen tons. In certain local areas losses go much higher. Soil losses in other states of the American breadbasket though not quite so high, are similar to those of Iowa.

What has gone wrong? For one thing, our enormous blessing in land has led to complacency. For another, fluctuating political and economic conditions have made our farmers more attentive to preserving their way of life than to preserving their soil. Then, too, national policy makers have seen agricultural production and export as one of very few ways by which we might resist an unhealthy international balance of trade. Some say we export soil in exchange for oil, swap topsoil for Toyotas. . . .

Erosion is not the only way we lose farmland. Others are desertification, salinization, and diminished fertility. Chemical approaches to farming greatly reduce soil life and humus content, and thus fertility. Such losses in organic content also make soils more easily erodible. Most agricultural experts argue that meeting world food demands would be impossible without the use of agricultural chemicals, yet these diminutions in soil quality are already making themselves felt. Ever more chemical fertilizer is needed to maintain peak yields. Many farmers complain of a chalky deadness in their soils.

In the United States, as much land is lost to development as to erosion. Housing projects, roads and highways (including our vast interstate system),

shopping malls, airports, athletic facilities, power plants, water impoundments strip mines—these take enormous bites from our farmland base. . . . In a 1981 guidebook, the National Agricultural Lands Study describes the magnitude of farmland lost to development: "Visualize a strip of land half a mile wide stretching from New York to California. That is one million acres—the amount of important farmland converted to other uses and irreversibly lost to agriculture every year in the United States."

A later chapter of this book is made of quotations from various thinkers. In it there is a passage from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, a work that has become a guide, counselor, and friend to many people of today, which ends:

A land ethic . . . reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.

As definitions go, this is probably one of the best. But as with all definitions, its meaning has to be realized by being lived and so understood beyond the confines of words. What, for us, is self-renewal? It is waking up in the morning with eagerness for what the day may hold, for what it may bring as well as what our plans for it involve. How do we arrange to feel that way in the morning? By doing well a lot of little things that seem right and good, and usually without understanding exactly why. But today we live in a sick society in which it has become our habit to do a lot of things—by no means all little things—which are wrong, and this means that our recovery, our self-renewal, will result only from deliberation and resolve. Our feelings and hunches are no longer reliable. Our very "guts" lead us astray.

We speak here of majorities, of masses of people who as a rule are doing what other people do and ordinarily feel well satisfied with the result. But now we are overtaken by the ominous suspicion that what all those other people are doing is going in the wrong direction. Nothing seems to work well any more. Even *children* are getting cancer, and that doesn't seem at all right. The schools, ninety-nine per cent of them, are said by thoughtful educators to

be a failure. The environment in which the young must grow up is filled with perverting influences; even a great many homes are filled with such influences. The nation, as run by its present managers, seems to have gone at least half insane. If you read travelers who are essayists, they report very nearly continuous pain all over the world. And now, from books like *Soil and Survival*, we learn that the food supply of all the world is in danger. The authors of this book quote from *State of the World* for the latest word from ecological scientists and workers in related disciplines, and they all say the same thing: We must stop what we're doing and turn around. Otherwise the world will become an unambiguous hell. This is the news—very nearly the only news—for our time.

Another of the "philosophers" quoted in *Soil and Survival*, Paul Williams, says in his book, *Das Energi*:

Homo sap, that creature who believes his purpose is to control and conquer Nature, is just now beginning to remember the obvious—that he is part of Nature himself.

He has fought his way to the top of the planetary spinal cord, inflicting damage every step of the way. Now, bewildered, he looks around: *What am I doing here!*

*Assuming responsibility*, answers a still, small voice all around him.

It would be difficult to improve on this formulation. It describes exactly what is happening to a great many people all over the world, and especially in the United States. The terms of the discovery vary greatly, beginning, in most cases, with pained bewilderment and frustration. A parallel might be found in the case histories of a few distinguished individuals who finally came through a series of mental disorders by the realization that they could not get well except by caring for the other patients in the ward. Their health, they found out, was in helping other people. Learning this, their lives took on meaning, even happiness of a sort.

Two books record this discovery well. One is *A Mind that Found Itself*, by Clifford Beers, first published in 1907. After regaining his balance Beers

founded the National Committee for Mental Hygiene. He died in 1943. The other book, more moving in a way, is *If a Man Be Mad* by Harold Maine (known to his friends as Walker Winslow). Maine was working as an attendant in mental hospitals, learning the lessons he needed to get well. He wrote to a leading psychiatrist, asking him how to improve conditions in mental hospitals. The psychiatrist, a wise man, replied that the conditions of our civilization made it almost impossible to change the conditions in mental hospitals, but Maine might help by writing about his own experiences. So Maine wrote his book about his own madness, saying in one place:

I who had been a constitutional liar in regard to my personal life found that America is a constitutional liar in regard to its national life. Is one to hate one's own kind? Was I in a position to rebuke my country? Like me, it wanted to be comfortable; like me, it wanted only those responsibilities its lies sometimes created. It went about reform as I went about my cures. It would admit and even get desperate about its surface symptoms, but in the depths the disease was always hidden—left for a comfortable day when it could be quietly and surreptitiously cured.

In the same year (1947) that *If a Man Be Mad* was published (by Doubleday), Henry Beston wrote in *Human Events* (Dec. 23):

I think with the Greeks that what is done "outside of life" is punished. There is no exact Greek phrase for my English one but the meaning held in the shell of the words catches an enduring mood of the Greek mind. Things done "outside of life" (like Orestes' killing of his mother) well . . . we have waged a war and it too will be punished. When jellied gasoline and unquenchable gobbets of phosphorus are showered on women and children huddled in the open fields, the stars cannot but work against us in their courses.

It was Tolstoy who understood our ill, as could no one else in his time or ours, and wrote in *Resurrection*:

It became clear to him that all the dreadful evil he had been witnessing in prisons and jails, and the quiet self-assurance of the perpetrators of this evil, resulted from men's attempting what was impossible: to correct evil while themselves evil. Vicious men

were trying to reform other vicious men, and thought they could do it by using mechanical means. . . . The answer he had been unable to find was the same that Christ gave to Peter. It was to forgive always, every one, to forgive an infinite number of times, because there are none who are not themselves guilty and therefore none we can punish or reform.

We cannot use Tolstoy's language—it is too flamboyantly moral—but we can feel our way to knowing what he meant. Yet the truth we need may not be the truth in its final expression. The cry of a child in the South Bronx may mean more to us than a weeping little girl in Nicaragua. Or, for some, it may be the other way around. Some of us may be old enough to remember the streets of New York after 1929—remember the lean, threadbare dignity in the faces of men who sold apples on the street, day after day, week after week, even managing to be cheerful once in a while. Can we have a world in which such faces will be only fading memories? What happens to those who begin to think in this way?

They forget to look for scapegoats. There is no innocence any more, but simply an omnipresence of tired, human pain. Guilt becomes irrelevant, save as a jutting shadow which one must go around, but will wear away in time. Then, on occasion, we may begin to think in terms of the ethical processes of life. In an earlier chapter of *Soil and Survival*, the authors say:

Religion wrote the book on understanding how our actions are returned to us: "Cast your bread upon the waters" and "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." These biblical statements are so familiar that we tend to forget the deep truth they contain. And everywhere around us we see those who seem to have "gotten by," even been rewarded for selfish action. The farmer who invested in chemical fertilizer rather than conservation may seem to have a larger "account with the world" than his less selfish neighbor, but if we take enough rope, we hang ourselves. In the case of our current "ag" crisis, the selfish action of the individual has boomeranged on the collective level.

Oriental religions have focused very specifically on this idea of a return of thoughts and actions. Termed *karma* in Buddhism and Hinduism, this understanding of how the world sooner or later pays us "in kind" for our actions is deep and highly refined. Karma is looked at, not so much as a moral response to our actions, as an operation of natural

law. Selfish, short-term choices, then, are really a product of poor judgment. In time, we surely have to pay for them. If religious insight is valid, it would seem that ethical behavior is very practical indeed.

We must ask, then, what ideas and actions make up the ethical approach to farmland that will produce good feedback, good karma for us in coming generations. In the abstract, the answers seem relatively simple. Our first ethical premise should be that we limit our use of the land to what is essential. This choice is, of course, at odds with American society, which works around the clock to maximize production and consumption of material goods. At almost every turn of the head (or dial) we receive a message, cunningly tied to our most basic desires, to buy and consume.

This continuing barrage will make it very difficult for us to change our habits. Still, if we do not want to pay the penalties of the law of karma, we must stop "gorging ourselves" with what is even more basic than the seed grain—that is, the land itself. If we are to be ethical citizens within the stream of humanity and the overall land organism, we must decide what we need from the land to remain well fed and healthy and try to limit ourselves to this.

Rather than maximum consumption, then, we should choose a level of voluntary simplicity. Such material simplicity is not something to fear; indeed, every wise man who ever lived has been its advocate. Until we disencumber ourselves from excessive desire, excessive accumulation, we cannot begin to live authentically. Once having done so, we are free to leave the kindergarten of human affairs and begin to explore the potential of our lives.

There must be numberless ways to exhaust the requirements of the kindergarten and go on to larger questions. Each one must find his or her own way in this. But for our society in general, agriculture is where the kindergarten lies. But it is, alas, no kindergarten, but the region where we are designing our destiny and physical being. If we don't change our agriculture, we shall all sooner or later starve. And before that we shall weaken ourselves by eating more and more poisoned food, by breathing increasingly polluted air, and drinking water that will make fish roll over and die. Nature has her ways of persuasion, some of them harsh and final.

## *REVIEW*

### AN IMMORTAL TALE

WE first came across Jean Giono's story of the Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness back in 1975. It had, we learned, been published several times, first by *Vogue*. The copy we read was in a pamphlet issued by Friends of Nature in 1967. It is now available in a slim paperback from the Chelsea Green Publishing Co., Chelsea, Vermont 05038, at \$6.95. The Chelsea edition is illustrated by splendid woodcuts by Michael McCurdy and has an afterword by Norma Goodrich, who went to see Giono and talked with him before he died.

But the story is one thing. When we read it there was no way of telling whether it was fact or fiction. Later we wrote to a friend in Paris asking her to find out, but she was unable to. Then we decided that it didn't matter. Giono's tale was true in the sense that it ought to be true and because people throughout the world have believed it was true. Yet Giono did make it up. The man it was about, Elzéard Bouffier, was a French peasant in his fifties whose family had died and who then adopted the plan of planting, first oaks, then beeches and birch, in a desolate region of Provence in southeastern France which received the runoff from the Lower Alps.

This was an area which the French economist, Jerome Blanqui, described in 1843:

Signs of unparalleled destitution are visible in all the mountain zone, and the solitudes of those districts are assuming an indescribable character of sterility and desolation. The gradual destruction of the woods has, in a thousand localities, annihilated at once the springs and the fuel. . . . The abuse of the right of pasturage and the felling of the woods have stripped the soil of all its grass and all its trees, and the scorching sun bakes it to the consistency of porphyry. When moistened by the rain, as it has neither support nor cohesion, it rolls down to the valleys, sometimes in floods resembling black, yellow or reddish lava, sometimes in streams of pebbles, and even huge blocks of stone which pour down with a frightful roar, and in their swift course exhibit the

most convulsive movements. If you overlook from an eminence one of these landscapes furrowed with so many ravines, it presents only images of desolation and death.

In this region Giono placed his story, saying that in 1913 he was wandering on foot in the Durance Valley, needing a drink, when at a distance he saw an erect figure, almost like a monument, which, as he approached, turned out to be a shepherd, who gave him some water. He was Bouffier, the peasant, and although he had sheep he was not a shepherd but a planter of trees. He took Giono home with him, gave him supper, and then Giono watched him select from a store of acorns a hundred perfect ones for the next day's planting. He had, he told Giono, been planting trees for three years—about a hundred thousand in that time, and of these 20,000 had sprouted. Of these rodents might take half so that there "remained 10,000 oak trees to grow where nothing had grown before."

The next morning another day's planting began. With an iron rod Bouffier made a hole, dropped in an acorn, and filled the hole, and went on to the next planting. He didn't know who owned the land and didn't care. It needed trees.

That is the story, but as Giono tells it it becomes a forest epic. The next year Giono went off to war. After the war Giono came back to see his friend and noticed changes. Little brooks were running where there had been only sand. Then, in 1933 he returned again, bringing a friend, a French forestry officer, who instructed his rangers to keep the charcoal burners out of the area. The story concludes:

I saw Elzéard Bouffier for the last time in June of 1945. He was then eighty-seven. I had started back along the route through the wastelands; but now, in spite of the disorder in which the war had left the country, there was a bus running between the Durance Valley and the mountain. I attributed the fact that I no longer recognized the scenes of my earlier journeys to this relatively speedy transportation. It took the name of a village to convince me that I was actually in that region that had been all ruins and desolation.

The bus put me down at Vergons. In 1913 this hamlet of ten or twelve houses had three inhabitants. They had been savage creatures, hating one another, living by trapping game, little removed, both physically and morally, from the conditions of prehistoric man. All about them nettles were feeding upon the remains of abandoned houses. Their condition had been beyond hope. For them, nothing but to await death—a situation which rarely disposes to virtue.

Everything was changed. Even the air. Instead of the harsh dry winds that used to attack me, a gentle breeze was blowing, laden with scents. A sound like water came from the mountains: it was the wind in the forest. Most amazing of all, I heard the actual sound of water falling into a pool. I saw that a fountain had been built, that it flowed freely and—what touched me most—that someone had planted a linden beside it, a linden that must have been four years old, already in full leaf, the incontestable symbol of resurrection. . . . Elzéard Bouffier died peacefully in 1947 at the hospice in Banon.

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*Choose Life: A Dialogue*, is by Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda. It is edited by Richard L. Gage, published by Oxford University Press, London. (348 pp., 1976, £9.50.) When first published in Japan, the Toynbee-Ikeda dialogue, which took place between 1971 and 1974, was called *Man Himself Must Choose*, and one wonders why it was found advisable to alter the title in the British Commonwealth edition. *Choose Life* is a vague platitude almost devoid of ethical implication, whereas the book is concerned throughout with the moral quality of human life derived from man's ability to choose between good and evil. Whether the personal, social, scientific, environmental, political, military, philosophical or religious aspects of life are under discussion, both thinkers emphasize again and again the evolutionary necessity for a vast spiritual conversion to bring human conduct in accord with the ethical exhortations common to all great religions.

The dialogue clearly reveals that Toynbee's religious perspective extends far beyond the limits of orthodox Christianity; his sense of the spiritual,

enhanced by extensive knowledge of Eastern and Western tradition, is altogether impressive, and this work, published shortly after his death, is a fitting tribute to a truly enlightened human being. By the same token, Ikeda's elucidation of Mahayana Buddhism and the Bodhisattva ideal as radiant spiritual lights for our dark and ailing world deserves no less than global consideration. It was of course to be expected that their attempts to find solutions to the awful problems confronting mankind evoke more agreement than disagreement: members of the spiritual elite are essentially kindred souls.

The dialogue comprehends three categories of life: personal and social, and international, and philosophical and religious. It begins in a noteworthy way, with a dual denunciation of sexual permissiveness in a scientifically dominated world that is challenging all traditional values. The ensuing discussion leads both men to the conclusion that in time to come science and religion are destined to approach each other in increasing harmony and mutual respect. What follows, however, is far more religious than scientific. It is an admirably reasoned attempt made with heart as well as mind to place the whole discussion on an ethical foundation. As a result, the conclusion is no less noteworthy than the beginning, being a 39-page treatment of good and evil in relation to the ultimate spiritual reality by which the universe moves. Ikeda sees this reality as the universal Law and Toynbee as love—to which the Buddhist adds in assent that "the movement of the universe, based on Law, is compassion." Their agreement deepens as they move on to discuss compassion as practicable love and as expanding the sphere of love; and with the thought that human dignity, the highest human value, can be achieved only in the field of ethics, the dialogue is brought to a close. The editor is to be commended for his appropriate arrangement of the material.

The work contains, however, some debatable assertions, such as Ikeda's belief that the evolution

of living beings is not teleological and his denial that absolute good can anywhere be found. And in certain aspects their vision of future relations between science and religion seems rather narrow at a time when the spiritualization of science is being considered as an evolutionary inevitability. For example, in approaching such current medical practices as organ transplantation and replacement, Toynbee and Ikeda appear not to have clearly seen the ethical implications of the goals and means of modern biomedicine. For although Toynbee specifically states that science should be inspired and directed by religious goals and Ikeda repeatedly talks about Buddhist compassion, there is nothing in the dialogue about the barbaric treatment to which experimental animals have been subjected by scientists, particularly in organ transplantation research. The suffering that non-human forms of life have undergone in laboratories, not least in Japan, degrades the human race. Surely, the spiritual conversion of which Toynbee and Ikeda speak can never be complete until this practice is abolished. Religious love and compassion include non-human sentient beings as well as *Homo sapiens*, as all Christians—and certainly all Buddhists—should know. This is a serious omission. It is surprising, too, to find support for birth control through any means science can devise but criticism and rejection of religious views on the more natural control of human breeding.

Despite these specific objections, *Choose Life* is an ethical dialogue to be recommended far and wide. Dealing in depth with so many vital issues, it is no emotional and ill-defined turning away from the chilling materialism and rationality of contemporary life any more than it is a loose and hazy yearning for the intuitive, the mystical, and the irrational. On the contrary, Toynbee and Ikeda take great pains to point directly to the right and proper goal for each one of us. Toynbee, in particular, repeatedly articulates in forceful and beautiful prose the solemn ethical-religious fact that each man has somehow to master his own egocentricity, to subdue his natural self-

centeredness—and that this self-mastery is the "essence of religion" and the "only effective response to the challenge of being human." If only for this, we are much in their debt.

CATHERINE ROBERTS

## **COMMENTARY**

### **WHAT IS CHARACTER?**

"CHARACTER," said Emerson, "is higher than intellect." (See the passage by Robert Coles on page 8.) Works of reference say that character represents the sum of the mental and moral qualities of the individual human being, with the emphasis usually on the moral qualities. This is the meaning that Dr. Coles gives it.

Looking around for some way to add meaning to the definition of character, we came across a chapter in A.H. Maslow's *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* that seems to help. The title of the chapter is "Various Meanings of Transcendence." His discussion of "transcendence of time" seems filled with Dr. Coles' conception of Character. He says:

For example, my experience of being bored in an academic procession and feeling slightly ridiculous in cap and gown, and suddenly slipping over into being a symbol under the aspect of eternity rather than just a bored and irritated individual in the moment and in the specific space. My vision or imagining was that the academic procession stretched way, way out into the future, far, far away, further than I could see, and it had Socrates at its head, and the implication was, I suppose, that many of the people far ahead had been there and in previous generations, and that I was a successor and a follower of all the great academics and professors and intellectuals. Then the vision was also of the procession stretching out behind me into a dim, hazy infinity where there were people not yet born who would join the academic procession, the procession of scholars, of intellectuals of scientists and philosophers. And I thrilled at being in such a procession and felt the great dignity of it, of my robes, and even of myself as a person who belonged in this procession. That is, I became a symbol; I stood for something outside my own skin. I was not exactly an individual. I was also a "role" of the eternal teacher. I was the Platonic essence of the teacher.

A little later he goes on:

In a very specific sense, the self-actualizing man, or the transcendent self-actualizing man, is the universal man. He is a member of the human species. He is rooted in a particular culture but he rises above

that culture and can be said to be independent of it in various ways and to look down upon it from a height.

...

Maslow understood character as an illumination of deliberated human purpose.



## CHILDREN ... and Ourselves THE USE OF STORIES

ROBERT COLES, a psychiatrist and author of books on the struggles of children, has an essay in the March-April *Harvard Business Review* that will bear rereading. It is about thinking about one's own life, its moral quality and direction, and about the contribution of story-telling to this sort of self-evaluation. While reading Dr. Coles we recalled a conversation years ago with a highly successful businessman who had become a profound admirer of Abraham Maslow and his liberating psychology. We had been talking about literature and someone mentioned Dostoevski, speaking of the fact that you could not condemn any of his characters. Dostoevski aroused only compassion in you. But the businessman sat back and said, "What do I need Dostoevski for? I've got Abe."

Well, there is certainly an element of Dostoevski in Abe's work, yet there was blindness in the man's remark. Reading Robert Coles helps to remove that blindness.

Coles starts out with the novels of William Carlos Williams, which are based, he says, on the life of his father-in-law. Coles says:

Much of what Paul Herman did along the road to business success is chronicled in the trilogy: once an associate of Samuel Gompers, he crossed picket lines, arranged the financing necessary to compete with his old bosses, and in general proved himself to be a smart, knowing, and enterprising businessman. But these books offer something more than a social history of one family rise. Williams bears down on the private side of things—the manner in which someone gets to think about life and people (including members of his or her own family) as deals are cut, the bargains struck, the decisions made. These three novels in essence, cast a close look at the ethical trials and temptations that a competitive industrial order always puts in the way of those who want to become its forceful protagonists.

If we skip to Coles' ending, we find him telling how he gave a course at the Harvard

Business School. (We reprint this because of its surprising character.)

I was enormously impressed with the diversity of the business school students I taught: with their moral earnestness, with their willingness to work long and hard at the reading assigned, both in and out of class. Their papers were singularly affecting: in a page or two they connected their experiences to those of the character in this or that novel.

After graduating many of these students kept in touch with Coles, writing letters about their experiences. One letter said:

"All my friends are talking about Ivan Boesky. They want to know what made him tick. I want to know, too. But yesterday, as we talked, I realized that I did know—as much, probably, as anyone ever will know. I'd read *The Great Gatsby*, and suddenly, as I sat there in a Wall Street restaurant, Jay Gatsby came to my mind, and our long discussions of what Gatsby is meant to tell us about ourselves. I told my buddies: go get *The Great Gatsby*, read it, think about it, and then we can talk some more about Boesky, and some others we read about in the papers, too."

Coles used Williams' novels and short stories in this course because he found that they stirred what Williams called the "moral imagination."

By moral imagination he meant an emotional as well as intellectual response: "Those stories (about doctors) and the Stecher books (the trilogy) are aimed at the conscience, my own and anyone else's who reads them. The last thing I want for them is someone's clever interpretation of them, someone's egotistical delight in figuring them out, someone's enjoyment of them as 'interesting.' I'm out to unnerve people—get them worried about what they might be doing, or not doing. Oh—not to hector them and point a finger at them no, but if I can get people wondering about how they're doing in life, or how they might be doing in life—whether they're doing good or doing bad, and how much of each!—then I'll have done something myself. And if I've listened to myself, and my words have made a difference in my own way of living—well, that's the test, right? If you don't get nudged into practicing what you preach or what you read—then you're at a moral standstill, I suspect."

William Carlos Williams was one of Coles' teachers in medical school. Coles recalls a question:

I remember, while in medical school, asking him how some of us going into one or another profession might do the kind of reading that would get our moral imagination going—help us break out of whatever particular moral standstill threatened us. He had no easy or pat answers, of course, but he had faith in story-telling: "Hell, from the Bible onward, a parable, a tale, a story well told creeps into your chest, turns your stomach, makes your eyes widen up, your ears, too. It's not only the brain that we're after!" Again, vintage Williams—the doctor's inquiry called into service by a writer who wanted to reach people in such a way that his words made a difference in their lives.

Why is it, one wonders, there are so few people who think in this way? What is it, in some human beings, that makes them want to "make a difference" in people's lives?

Coles says:

His words sure made a difference in my life; they got me thinking, got me ultimately to try medicine, got me also to work with children, as he did, to train in pediatrics and child psychiatry. Eventually, I ended up working with young people themselves caught in various moral struggles (school desegregation, the civil rights movement), and later, I was offered a chance to teach college students and medical students.

This presented problems:

What would I teach? Who would be interested in studying what I'd teach, if I could muster the kind of reading list I was used to handing out to students—lists of paperback novels or collections of short stories? Where would such a class be headed—the drifts of its explanations and the thrusts of its objectives? My wife, a high school English teacher (and the daughter of a Harvard Business School graduate), gave a lot of thought to those questions, and together we came up with a reading list and with a sequence for use of the books.

On the list were Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and his *The Last Tycoon* (on the world of Hollywood), Flannery O'Connor's story, "The Displaced Person," and Saul Bellow's novel, *Seize the Day*. They added Walker's Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, stories by John Cheever, and, of course, stories and novels by Williams. Of his trilogy Williams said:

"You won't find answers in those novels, but you'll find lots of questions asked—by indirection. How do you balance your business life and your home life? How do you resist the temptation to become callous and selfish? How do you hold to moral and religious values in the face of all sorts of challenges at work? What happens to people, emotionally and spiritually, when they compromise with certain important principles—start down the road of rationalizations and self-justifications? The slope is gradual—sometimes imperceptible—but real. I try to survey the slope carefully—to bring the reader up close, so close that his empathy puts him in the shoes of the character. You hope when he closes the book his own character is influenced!"

Coles adds:

That last comment is especially interesting—the impact of character in a story on the character of the reader. It reminds me of the important distinction Emerson made in 1837 in his essay "The American Scholar": "Character is higher than intellect." Novels don't supply the intellect its prized formulations, but rather, suggest various, social, and psychological possibilities—stimulate the mind's capacity to wonder, to dream, to put itself in all sorts of situations and to be shaped by such imaginative experiences. Novels help us shape a general attitude toward living a life—encourage us to think about what we want and at what personal and professional cost.

Students who have an encounter with Robert Coles are enriched thereby.

## FRONTIERS

### Berry Rhetoric

AN article by Wendell Berry on "Defense of the Family Farm," which recently appeared in three parts in the *Land Stewardship Newsletter*, has things in it we want to quote and emphasize. In the Winter 1987 issue of the *Newsletter* (the address of this paper in 512 Elm, Stillwater, Minn. 55082), in the concluding part, Berry says:

Farmers, like the rest of us, have assumed, under the tutelage of people with things to sell, that selfishness and extravagance were merely normal. Like the rest of us, farmers have believed that they might safely live a life prescribed by the advertisers of products, rather than the life required by fundamental human necessities and responsibilities.

How, one wonders, do we—all of us, not just farmers—recover from assumptions like that? We are exposed to such persuasions almost from birth, especially if you live in or near a city, and our natural resistance gets low from these impressions that we receive every day. An example comes to mind, and while it applies to Mexico this in no way reduces its relevance. We take it from a recent issue of the *Washington Spectator*, in which the editor, Tristram Coffin, reports:

Television has come to Mexico with a vengeance. A study of 1,800 primary-school children in Mexico City found: 92% knew of a duckling used to advertise chocolate cakes, saying, "Remember Me," but only 64% identified a national hero, Father Miguel Hidalgo, as author of *Viva la Independencia!*; 95% recognized TV cartoon characters, only 19% the last Aztec emperors; 96% identified a local TV character, but only 74% could name the then-President Lopez Portillo. More children knew the times of television programs than the dates of religious festivals, including Christmas.

This may seem natural enough, when you consider the exposure of children nearly everywhere to television programs, yet how awful is the presence of the word "natural" in a sentence like this one!

We are pulled out of shape by the circumstances of our lives. Some of us resist as much as we are able; others don't and have no idea that they ought to. And those others involuntarily construct the patterns of modern life. Is there any use in trying to talk to them about it—about what they are submitting to, as though it were indeed natural? Probably not. Men like Berry, at any rate, are doing what they can to inform the resisters, many of whom, as a result, will be able to strengthen their position, affect other people, and spread the word. Nobody really knows how this works—figures from sales promoters shouldn't be much good—but intelligence does advance a bit now and then, and it at least seems to be a consequence of the thought and writing of good men and women.

We go back to Berry article:

It could be argued that the great breakthrough of industrial agriculture occurred when most farmers became convinced that it would be better to own a neighbor's farm than to have a neighbor, and when they became willing, necessarily at the same time, to borrow extravagant amounts of money. They thus violated the two fundamental laws of domestic or community economics: you must be thrifty and you must be generous; or to put it in a more practical way: you must be (within reason) independent, and you must be neighborly. With that violation, farmers became vulnerable to everything that intended their ruin.

Is there anything in natural law—a law such as gravity—which compels us to be thrifty, which declares we must be generous, or else . . . ? If there were such a law, there would be no such thing as virtue in human life. Could we tolerate that? We have to *choose* to be thrifty, decide for ourselves when to be generous. There would be no moral issues in human life if we didn't have to debate in our minds about these things. But in his writing Berry calls the need to do this "the two fundamental laws of domestic or community economics," and that at least *sounds* like the law of gravity in the offing. Perhaps we should say that, according to Berry, it isn't and it is like the law of gravity. Unlike gravity, the price of

breaking these two laws is not immediately exacted. It may come only after years—say, for example, when an ungenerous man finds himself exceedingly lonely, or an unthrifty man becomes irredeemably broke. But you don't *know* that this will happen. Berry would say that you take more than a calculated risk when you decide to be unthrifty or ungenerous. He might say that you are spitting into an invisible wind and will eventually feel its strength blowing in the opposite direction. That, he might say, is the moral law. It wouldn't be moral if it weren't invisible or unpredictable. Yet it *works*, he would insist.

What, finally, Berry is proposing is that "farmers find their way out of the gyp-joint known as the industrial economy." He says:

The first item on the agenda, I suggest, is the remaking of the rural neighborhoods and communities. The decay or loss of these has demonstrated their value. We find, as we try to get along without them, that they are worth something to us—spiritually, socially, and economically. And we hear again the voices out of our cultural tradition telling us that to have community, people don't need a "community center" or "recreational facilities" or any of the rest of the paraphernalia of "community improvement" that is always for sale.

This is the real point Berry is always making—you can never buy what you really need. There is no price tag on human excellences. Such things are not, never have been, and never will be, for sale. The con men of the gyp joint keep saying that such things *are* for sale, and they have a show case full of them—but they are all fakes. They don't work. They can't. They are not real. This is where we have gone so wrong—believing the con men. The truth is as Berry says:

Instead, they need to love each other, trust each other, and help each other. That is hard. All of us know that no community is going to do those things easily or perfectly. And yet we know there is more hope in that difficulty and imperfection than in all the neat instructions for getting big and getting rich that have come out of the universities and the agribusiness corporations.

How many ways are there to repeat this truth about human beings? Berry, we suspect, will eventually find them all.