

A PLEA FOR MODESTY

THE drawing is a fascinating and quickly communicating art form. It seems to obtain its clarity and impact by what it leaves out, yet this is only negatively the case, since what is left out gives dramatic scope to what is put in: the endless wonders of what can be said with a line become inescapable. The drawing has its own universals, its own immeasurable continuum of versatility. In view of these resources, it seems profane to think intrusively of color, which would bring another language of abstraction into play. The drawing is not a polyglot communication. Frederick Franck, who has drawn much in his life, and who has a rare self-consciousness in relation to the act of drawing, wrote in his book, *My Eye Is in Love*:

Driving through the redwoods of California I see "timber," until I stop and sit down in front of one tree and start drawing it, with or without pen or paper. It is the mind that draws, and perhaps the finger tips that involuntarily follow the living, straight stem as it emerges from its own roots.

This came as a revelation: while I was drawing one of those utterly simple ordinary things like a clump of trees, it revealed itself to be composed of individuals, each one growing from its own roots. Roots that came from a seed in which some enigmatic wisdom had been stored, directing its growth. A tree logos. A tree potentiality become flesh. . . . I became aware of the tree as a being, not a thing. The being of the tree is a process as I am a process. For a little while its process and my own run parallel, as I identify with it while drawing.

Near Menton there is an old olive grove. It is so old that its trees no longer bear fruit. They have the terrible strength some women have after they have done with the business of charming, marrying, and childbearing; they have the invulnerable beauty that becomes theirs after the mating-mask nature has lent to them has withered away.

From this delightful book one learns that there are deep meanings in the veil of substances, in the substances which are themselves veils, and that the artist can somehow get all this into his

drawings. They are not there unequivocally or unambiguously; but then, the meanings that we try to divine from experience are not in nature unequivocally and unambiguously, either. And the systematic reduction of the phenomena of nature to unambiguous "natural law," while bringing a single order of certainties, does not give us any access to the order of meanings that a drawing may suggest.

Shall we say that an unambiguous truth about nature is a ruthlessly exacted disclosure—a conquest turned into an energy-slave and a bludgeoning fact?

We need not torture this question. It is a sound enough utilitarian project to part nature from her ambiguity in order to make the world more habitable. We are not compelled to brand Archimedes a sorcerer's apprentice, to recoil from Watt as an exploiter of mysteries, or to declare the alienation of the entire company of skillful manipulators. We are not engaged in a decision about final truth, but in one about how much or what sort of truth resides in scientific abstractions.

The drawing has the incomparable virtue of being obviously "only" a drawing. You don't mistake it for life. It does not have the authority of a reliable encyclopedia. No one publishes books with consensually approved and verified drawings in them, which are then offered as the truth-to-date about the universe. A man knows, when he looks at a drawing, that he is contributing something to its wonder. Indeed, he prizes it greatly for this invitation. It is not difficult to catch your imagination flowing into the lines of an artist's work, becoming involved in its processes, reaching after what is both there and not there. A drawing, being born with a component of *logos*, works an entirely legitimate magic through this triggering effect.

Definitively, a drawing is a black-and-white and visual-form outline or abstraction. But this is reductive language. Its precision comes from a *less-than* way of speaking, while the drawing itself stirs a *more-than* human response. With a drawing we rush to a sense of the whole without the distractions of detail, the siren preoccupations of color, or any of the other matters which are "real" but not needed in that lucid interval of realization. *Only* a drawing!

We can say, in any event, that a drawing is an abstraction that cannot be mistaken for anything else.

It is conceivable that the ominous but undefined apprehensions now bringing continuous pain to the cultural life of our civilization are forms of growing suspicion that many modern "certainties" rest almost entirely on an order of abstractions which *can* be mistaken for something else—in our case, for the whole truth. No drawing could ever make you think that.

Now an idea, any idea, is an abstraction. It necessarily comes into being by some kind of isolation, often from denying for reasons of interest what is not a part of its selected meaning. Thought, then, depends upon abstraction. Its partisanship may be known or unknown. And thought, unlike a drawing, which is visibly but lines on a piece of paper, can grow, range into enormous complexity until, by its internally logical structure and similitude of "wholeness," it displaces from memory other and often contradictory thoughts. A thought can obsess because, armed by partisan longing, it can assume the role of an intuition of "all that is." Thought can command allegiance from "practical" results; it can beguile through esthetic appeal, from man's deep hunger for unity and finality, and by bright critical rules such as Occam's Razor.

It seems obvious that modern man has not learned how to recognize the partiality of the abstractions on which thought depends—of which it is made. So there are bitter and inconclusive conflicts over the inadequacy of "rationalism" and

the blind energy of emotionalism. There is as much partisanship, today, in intellectual controversy as there is in politics, and as little hope of beneficent resolution.

The philosophical enterprise is always an effort on the part of human beings to figure out how to get control of their lives. One essential for this is to be able to stand apart from the life being lived and to see what are the authentic choices. For the man who achieves this, or partly achieves it, there are two basic options. Having discovered an identity which is something apart from the pattern of his acts, he can now pursue "objective" study of the world, which is science—or, he can begin to think about what he is, himself. Study of the world is of course easier, since the world has intellectually separable parts and you can use abstractions on them. A pluralistic compilation of facts about the world can be begun with measurable success. And the world is, after all, a very interesting place.

The study of the self, on the other hand, has an elusive and "running together" object—or subject. There is constant temptation to locate the self prominently in the pattern of one's acts, and to settle for this explanation as "natural"—based upon experience and history. When men succumb to this temptation, the true subject is left as a bare abstraction, while philosophy turns into an investigation of how to *use* the world. You make a brief stipulation about the self and go on to the important things that you can do something about.

It is the judgment of the Platonists, who insist that knowledge of the self is more important than mastery of the world, that this brief stipulation is not enough—that men get into deep trouble by taking themselves for granted and devoting their cognitive resources to manipulating the world. This issue is argued in the early books of the *Republic*. A Platonist might also contend that after a long cycle of deep trouble, there comes a time when men are driven by their pain to formulate the question of the self and the world

anew. This seems to have happened in later European history through Descartes.

There is a clear affirmation of subjective identity in Descartes' *Cogito . . . I think, therefore I am*. But this affirmation was, alas, only another brief stipulation. Most of the attention of Descartes' order-making mind was given to considering how the world of nature and the things in it work. First he made the body-mind dichotomy, and then he interested himself in bodies. Now this, as an initial abstraction, is not entirely false. As Whitehead said:

Descartes is obviously right, in some sense or other, when he says that we have bodies and we have minds, and that they can be studied in some disconnection. It is what we do daily in practical life. This philosophy makes a large generalization which obviously has some important validity. But if you turn it into a final cosmology, errors will creep in.

Abstractions, in short, can distort the dynamics of meaning. They can lead man to run amok. We do not know how to limit their use. We have no normative principle for controlling their "utility." This is evident from the fact that they keep taking charge of the meaning of human experience, turning partial explanations into total explanations.

Fortunately, in retrospect at least, certain thinkers have been able to warn against this monopolistic claim of abstract ideas. Ortega, for example, terming this tendency "extremism" in thought, makes the following observation:

All extremism inevitably fails because it consists in excluding, in denying all but a single point of the entire vital reality. But the rest of it, not ceasing to be real merely because we deny it, always comes back and back, and imposes itself on us whether we like it or not. The history of all forms of extremism has about it a monotony which is truly sad; it consists in having to go on making pacts with everything the particular form of extremism under discussion had pretended to eliminate.

What is the form taken by these pacts? To have a complete answer to this question would give us a symmetrically accurate history of

ideas—a frame of critical reference which is obviously far in the future for our civilization. Yet some illustrations are possible. These can often be identified as accommodations to oppressive symptoms of ills and disorders; they involve the redefinition of problems instead of their solution; they include all the self-justifying forms of "rationalization." They gain the prestige that might be allotted to skill at corsetry in an age when the effects of overeating have become so common as to be regarded as natural to human life.

There is always the question: Is a new idea just a "pact," or is it the beginning of real discovery of what has been left out by some well-established extremism?

The book, *The Unconscious Before Freud* (Basic Books, 1960), by L. L. Whyte, is an especially valuable attempt to answer such questions. Mr. Whyte is one of the few philosophers of our time who show clear awareness of the *limitation* of ideas as tools. His study of how various thoughtful and original men have coped with the realities left out of the portrait of man by the Cartesian stipulation is a work that deserves more attention than it seems to have received. The abstractions of thought, in Mr. Whyte's hands, become contrasting sources of illumination. His book enables the reader to lift himself out of the clutch of the reigning abstractions and to see that these ideas—virtually modern "beliefs"—are not the very substance of the truth about man and nature, but rather intellectually impressive shots in the dark—dramatic conceptions which the surrounding shadows made men think were the only possible sources of light. In his opening chapter, Mr. Whyte sets the stage for his investigation:

. . . ideas are nothing more than representations of the separable aspects of what is itself unbounded and multiply interrelated. An idea is a focus of unrestricted relationships, just as a point defines an infinity of lines radiating in all directions. . . . This central principle of the history of ideas—that all ideas are partial—is perhaps the most important single fact that the human intellect has yet discovered. It

requires interpretation with a modicum of elasticity, for it does not deny that some ideas may fully cover a limited realm—though even here the main principle holds good, since no idea can be used to define its own limitations. Thus the principle remains as the foundation of wisdom: the mind must be modest. Even if it does not, and probably cannot, know its own limitations, it can be aware that they exist. No thinker need accept the onus of perfection.

Does this principle seem obvious? Alas, it is not. One of the dangers of our age, more damaging than ever before, is *total obsession with partial ideas*. The world of pure intellect should be more sensible, but is not. No scholar should present his own ideas, or those of anyone else, as final. This matters today more than ever before, because community and family habits, which used to hold human life relatively stable through the centuries, can no longer be relied upon to do so. The present moral vacuum will not long remain empty; no traditional religion can claim universality; classical communism is in decline; some new quasi-religious rationalization of the space-age will take over tomorrow, unless those who believe themselves wiser start now by mocking at any total surrender to partial ideas, whether they be those of Marx, or Freud, or anyone else. Let the study of human history help to keep the way clear for the continuing advance of the intellect, by making it unmistakably obvious that every intellectual instrument must sooner or later prove inadequate.

What this book does is to provide the reader with rich and varied alternatives to the abstractions which became available, and at last acceptable, concerning the deeps of the feeling and emotional nature of human beings. There is no attempt by the author to diminish the importance of Freud's contribution but rather a showing of how the same facts that Freud encountered, as well as some others he neglected, had been considered, described, and related to our sparse understanding of ourselves in what, in some instances, seems a more useful and enlightening fashion.

A rare holistic invitation grows out of Mr. Whyte's research, which begins in the seventeenth century, unearthing from unknown as well as famous thinkers an astonishing collection of independent intuitions and proto-scientific observations concerned with the hidden nature of

man. It is a study which makes the humanistic thinker of the present a bit more confident of the philosophic symmetry in the European tradition, and less confined in his resources to the pessimisms of Sigmund Freud.

REVIEW

THE UNBORN UNIVERSITY

THE DISSENTING ACADEMY, edited by Theodore Roszak (Pantheon, 1967, \$6.95), is an exceptionally useful "what is and what might be" book which exhibits the controlled fervor of disciplined minds. It is a book critical of American education by American teachers. The contributors represent the major humanistic disciplines—literature, history, philosophy, and political and social science.

Mr. Roszak and Staughton Lynd write as historians; Louis Kampf is concerned with literature, and Sumner Rosen with economics (in a brief but clarifying essay in the various aspects of Keynesian thinking). John Wilkinson explores his small hope for a "Civilization of the Dialogue," using acids and ironies with devastating effect, and Kathleen Gough writes about the frustrations of an anthropologist who tries to apply this discipline to humanistic ends. Marshall Windmiller draws a portrait of the New American Mandarin—the man of learning who puts his knowledge and skills at the service of the morally unexamined ends of the state, and Robert Engler and Christian Bay record their views of the perversions of social science. The passivity of Catholic scholars is the depressing subject dealt with by Gordon Zahn, and Noam Chomsky writes generally on the neglected responsibility of intellectuals.

These writers, you could say, are wide-eyed Sampsons who bring down the temple of modern learning—or rather, they bring down its pretensions to housing the pursuit of truth. On the whole, although with glorious exceptions, the academic professions are devoting themselves to means, not ends. They are followers of Bacon, scholars of the maintenance and applications of power, not inquirers into the validity of the ends which power claims to pursue.

The feeling-tone of the essays is a pervasive sadness which seems to say, over and over again, "This is not what we set out to be; it is not what we are willing to become; what our professions are doing represents the negation of the dream which

attracted us, and other ardent young men, to the calling of education." But besides the sadness there is luminous critical intelligence, strong asseveration of ideals and clear expression of their rational ground, with determination fortified by practiced humanistic intelligence. Yet the sadness is something that we should like to consider, here.

What did they expect? They expected, it is plain, that the universities would actually be what many men think they are and were founded to become—sites and foci of *independent* investigation into the nature of human good and the things by which human good is served. For Mr. Roszak, the ideal scholar is typified by the Enlightenment *philosophe*—a man who resolved that his knowledge and insight should make a *difference*. He was a man who, by reason of his training, capacity, and concern, exercised his right to call into question "all authority, privilege, and tradition." In these terms, Mr. Roszak finds, as places where such men create and occupy the very outposts of freedom and intellectual inquiry, the universities are still "unborn."

There seems throughout this book a feeling of surprise and indignation that this should be the case. It might help, for understanding this aspect of *The Dissenting Academy*, to read Allen Hansen's volume, *Liberalism and Education in the Eighteenth Century* (Macmillan, 1926), for here, more explicitly perhaps than in any other source, is embodied the early American Dream of education for the New World. Shortly after the Revolution, the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin and others years before, offered a prize for "the best system of liberal Education and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the Government of the United States; comprehending also a plan for instituting and conducting public schools in this country, on principles of the most extensive utility." What becomes evident from the essays submitted in this competition, and from numerous writings about education before that time, is the enormous enthusiasm which attended the discovery that men could deliberately *design* their institutions. These men wrote out of a deep conviction that all institutions, including the educational, if shaped under the guidance of the best human intelligence,

could be developed into perfected instruments. While there was much sagacity displayed concerning the pitfalls of institutional progress, there was also this faith that had won extraordinary vindication in the historic achievement of the Revolution itself. These writers were men already successful as architects of a new social order. Why not a perfect system of education?

It is practically impossible, or was until recently, to grow up in the United States without being suffused with the implications of this dream, or participating in the general opinion that it is no longer a dream but established fact. The American Revolution was a forward step taken by pioneers in behalf of all mankind. Its educational system, therefore, naturally embodies all the excellences of the march of progress. Americans know how to create governments that work; they know how to invent endless machines that work; so it is to be taken for granted that they know how to make educational systems that work. And in proof there is the heroic romance of the long struggle there are always obstacles—finally successful, to establish universal public education in the United States. The "genius" of the Government of the United States was held to be its immunity to the corruptions of old regimes of social control, and why should not all that Americans set out to do enjoy a similar charmed life?

It would be interesting to try to measure the good actually accomplished by this high faith. It certainly led to courageous and ingenious innovation. But for any serious evaluation we would need normative measures concerning all the fundamental aspects and requirements of institutions. No such basis for evaluation now exists. In fact, we could hardly begin to determine the unique contributions of American educational institutions until their failures—as unmistakably identified in *The Dissenting Academy*—are openly admitted, and a fresh and chastened attitude adopted toward the role and possibilities of public education. For example, can genuine education ever hope to survive in a "national" context? Teachers are not marines, who are reputed to accomplish the impossible.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that we should have known better than to have expected such great

things of academic institutions. This seems briefly acknowledged by Robert Engler:

The university has joined the team. It has become another vested interest in a great protective society, and as such, an integral member of the chorus celebrating the American Way.

This is not to argue that there was once a golden age when higher learning was simply teacher and disciple on a log sharing a common search for knowledge. The university has always been caught up in the going system. Its inhabitants have always had to struggle for intellectual independence against those who viewed the schools as instruments for culture-breaking the young and developing loyalty to the social order.

Mr. Roszak is quick to point out that the French *philosophes* could find no haven in the universities of their time. They were not "academics," but men on whom the big guns of the eighteenth-century academies were trained as "agitators" and a subversive influence. And when it comes to hope of remaking present-day universities, Marshall Windmiller has his "hard questions": "How," he asks, "can expensive social science research be financed if not by the government?" Diderot had no grants-in-aid, but can "modern knowledge" do without them? Even theories of knowledge must be challenged when their survival-needs require subsidy from the Big Battalions.

How do you trust and at the same time distrust an institution? This becomes a question for philosophers, and awaits more knowledge than we now have concerning both the individual and the social community, and the relations between. The value of a book like *The Dissenting Academy* becomes obvious when we see where its disclosures lead, and how fundamental are the dilemmas which it brings into plain view.

COMMENTARY

THE OBJECTIVITY WE NEED

HENRY ANDERSON'S conclusion, in this week's *Frontiers* has a strong Emersonian ring:

The most dangerous thing in America today is not the objective "system," whatever that may mean, but what people *think* about the system: feelings that the system is all-powerful; despair that one's own conduct can make any difference.

Emerson wrote, in his essay called "War":

Thus always we are daunted by appearances; not seeing that their whole value lies at bottom in a state of mind. It is really a thought that built this portentous war establishment, and a thought shall also melt it away. Every nation and every man instantly surround themselves with a material apparatus which exactly corresponds to their moral state, or their state of thought. Observe how every truth and every error, each a *thought* of some man's mind, clothes itself with societies, houses, cities, language, ceremonies, newspapers. Observe the ideas of the present day—orthodoxy, skepticism, missions, popular education, temperance, anti-masonry, anti-slavery; see how each of these abstractions has embodied itself in an imposing apparatus in the community; and how timber, brick, lime and stone have flown into convenient shape, obedient to the master idea reigning in the minds of many persons.

It should be evident that this faculty we call "being objective" operates on a sliding scale. Emerson did not throw out objectivity when he wrote the above; he used it to speak of causal relations. So does Henry Anderson.

It is a matter of some interest that the kind of responsibility a man accepts for the circumstances of his life seems to determine everything else that he thinks—what he declares to be "real," whether or not he seeks scapegoats, and the ease with which he opens or closes his heart to other men. It determines whether anger, or some better emotion, is the parent of his choices.

Such dependencies are not noticed when men busy themselves entirely with making definitions of some passing version of the "real" world out there, or with scornful accounts of the "system"—

whatever, as Mr. Anderson says, that may mean. Hate, despair, nihilism—with what other feelings can those who become convinced of their powerlessness balance their emotional lives?

The "system" toward which we need some true objectivity is the open system of growth through which human beings transcend the conditions they have inherited from old, self-limiting ideas.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL FOR THE SCHOOLS

III

THAT the Socratic injunction to "know thyself" is essentially an educational process cannot be denied. Nor can it be denied that the schools have a responsibility to increase the student's capacity to live inwardly, and thus to come to grips with his own emerging self. The very fact that it provides a social environment in which a series of controlled experiences are involved means that consciously or unconsciously the schools are helping to fashion the student's concept of self. For the student becomes aware of his self-image as he sees himself in relationship to the other students, teacher and the subject-matter, all of which are part of the learning experience. It is a process that goes on continuously, but unfortunately teachers are seldom aware of its effects on the student's sense of self-identity. Using the group to force the nonconforming student into line is a good example of how teachers manipulate the student's self-image, but it represents a form of manipulation that undermines the student's ego strength, and hence his ability to act and think independently. The systematic surveillance and interference in the student's personal as well as academic life, which is often quite arbitrary, is also demeaning to the student. On the other hand, through the communication of the feeling of trust and respect for him as a person, a basis of emotional security can be built up which will enable him to be more original in his responses to the learning environment. Knowing that he is respected frees him from the need of seeking approval through conformity; thus he is freer to discover himself. This he does by allowing his own ideas and feelings to come to the surface when undergoing an experience. Once they are allowed to surface, these personal ideas and feelings can be examined and, if accepted, integrated into the self.

Because the primary limitation on the growth of self-understanding is the range and kind of experiences undergone by the individual, the schools should play an important part in expanding the student's sense of identity by insuring that his educational experience includes the widest possible range of cultural and physical experiences. Reading the classics, studying the social organization of bees, working with the potter's wheel, working out a mathematical formula, studying one's social customs as well as those of other people, and listening to classical music, can expand the student intellectually, as well as emotionally. But most important, involvement in a wide range of concrete experiences gives the student the opportunity to learn more about himself—his emotional responses, attitudes, values, and ideas. This educational objective, however, can be achieved only as school abandons social efficiency as its chief criterion for measuring success. Schedules, repetitious courses and standardized teaching materials will have to give way to greater freedom for the teacher and a much richer collection of educational resource materials. Without these the teacher is forced to continue the factory-like process of stamping the students into the mold of middle class society.

The primary objective of this approach to formal education is to enable the individual to make a genuine response to his environment. This means being able to discriminate between role-playing and the intellectual and emotional response that represents a genuine response of the individual. Role-playing requires a special kind of learning and a psychological state that insures the individual's continued dependency on those around him. In order to appear socially plausible, and even successful, one only has to learn the customs, role-expectations and social skills necessary to carry off the performance. Once the skills necessary for social efficiency are learned the individual can automatically call into play the kind of behavior that is dictated socially by the situation. Neither genuine conviction, honesty,

nor individual thought is required of him. That the experience may lack meaning for the individual undergoing it is of no consequence to society; for all that it evaluates is the outward appearances. Inside, the individual may be as empty as the Willy Lomans of our society. In contrast, the individual who can make a personal response to the environment must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed unconsciously by it. He must also possess a heightened awareness of his own values and feelings. And with these understandings must go traits of mind which are not needed by the socially efficient individual embellished by the social reconstructionist educators.

The most important is an "openness to experience," to use Carl Rogers' phrase, which precludes entering into an experience with a preconceived idea of its value or how one is going to act. When a person becomes secure enough psychologically so that he no longer has to control events for the purpose of preventing the emergence of the new and unexpected elements, he can allow things to happen that required an original response on his part. Thus, in moving beyond the sphere of the socially-conditioned response, the individual moves to a level of existence that, to a larger degree, is characterized by authenticity and creativity. It would be highly unrealistic to expect the school to create a society of people who are always original intellectually and emotionally. And, if by some herculean feat it were able to accomplish this it would undoubtedly result in a rate of change too swift for society to assimilate. On the other hand, the school should make a deliberate effort to give the student the kind of experiences which leave him with the capacity for responding at both the personal and social level, and the knowledge necessary for making a choice as to when it is desirable to operate at either level.

It might be said of the Deweyan, social-reconstructionist approach to education that, in stressing the social usefulness of learning to the

point where its personal value is almost completely ignored, a moral imperative was made of cooperation. The inherent danger in this approach is that the individual in not being educated to organize his own values, will be unable to discriminate between those commitments that imperil self and those which are essential for its preservation. The approach that I have outlined here will undoubtedly be criticized for committing the opposite error; educating individuals who have no commitments beyond self. If this is the end to which my proposals lead then it would be a perfectly just criticism; but it is highly unlikely that the individual who learns to give his own meanings to experience and is aware of his inner self, will be a selfish and socially indifferent person. On the contrary, it is much more likely that the person who can accept himself and live inwardly would also have the ability to form meaningful relationships with others in his society. The individual who must rely on society for his goals and sense of worth, which is generally identified with economic success, tends to be more manipulative and self-seeking in his relationships with others. In order to get ahead he often finds it expedient to treat other people as objects to be used for his own selfish ends. In contrast, the person with control over his own sense of identity has a greater capacity to accept other people for what they are rather than for how they can be used. He also tends to be threatened less by the new and unknown—hence he is more open-minded toward changes in the society. Yet, on the other hand, when he conforms it is more likely that he will do so out of conviction than out of the psychological necessity to belong to the group.

It might be argued that in using the external world as a means of giving the individual a deeper understanding of his own internal world the school is, in effect, fulfilling its responsibility to society. For the school is transmitting the culture—and this is all that can be required of the school—but in a way that attempts to minimize conformity and commitment until the student has

the background and maturity to decide for himself. Self-determination presupposes that the individual understands his culture thoroughly enough to know when and why he is dissenting or conforming. All the school can do is work toward making the student self-reliant in the areas of ideas and values. It can hope that the student, upon leaving the school, will commit himself to values that enhance the well-being of others, and, in the end, himself. But it cannot control the values and ideas that the student adopts—and therefore the direction of social change—without undermining his emerging powers of self-direction.

C. A. BOWERS

Eugene, Oregon

FRONTIERS

The Sickness Unto Death

NOT long ago, a peace group in the San Francisco Bay Area prepared a questionnaire and sent it out to about 650 families. It happens that these were a highly selected 650 families: the mailing list of a Unitarian Church in an upper-middle class suburban area. Only 100 persons returned their questionnaires: an interesting result in itself, and one which adds further statistical biases. Bear in mind, as we go along, that we are talking about an unusually motivated group: in effect, doubly "screened" for sophistication and depth of concern over social problems.

The questionnaire began with an illustrative list of current social issues, mentioned in the following random order: population control; civil rights; environmental pollution; U.S. foreign policy; automation; medical care; disarmament; poverty; agricultural policy (including farm labor); civil liberties; and technical assistance to developing nations. Respondents were asked to "score each one according to how important you, personally, feel it is, from 1 for Unimportant to 5 for Very Important."

The issue most respondents considered important was civil rights, which 82 per cent scored 4 or 5—followed closely by U.S. foreign policy, with 77 per cent. Only 28 per cent considered agriculture and farm labor to be of importance. The other issues were scattered in between.

Intriguing as these findings may be, they take on far greater interest when viewed together with the results of the next question. Respondents were asked to "score each one [of these issues] according to whether or not you feel a person such as yourself can have any significant influence on its outcome." Possible scores, again, were from 1 to 5.

In the case of civil rights, 45 per cent of the respondents felt they could be of some effect; 25

per cent felt they could not; 30 per cent were uncertain. In civil liberties, the percentages were 39, 25, and 36, respectively. These were the only two issues on which a plurality of respondents felt they could be of any significant influence—and, even here, the "optimists" fell short of a majority. From there, they dropped rapidly. Only 27 per cent felt they could influence population control; only 25 per cent felt there was anything they could do about environmental pollution; poverty, 20 per cent; agriculture and farm labor, 18 per cent; technical assistance, 17 per cent; medical care, 17 per cent; automation, 13 per cent; disarmament, 13 per cent; and, at the very bottom of the list, U.S. foreign policy, which 9 out of 100 respondents felt they might be able to influence.

These findings suggest that a heavy majority of Americans of even the most privileged status function under feelings of powerlessness in many dimensions of their lives which they themselves consider of major importance. This is an operational measurement of one kind of alienation. There are other kinds, but this would seem pivotal. When people feel powerless, impotent, strait-jacketed, helpless, they become depressed, and dispirited and demoralized, and the fact that they may do so quietly, unrecognized even by themselves, does not lessen the depths of that demoralization. Increasing numbers of people do not do so quietly. Merely to take one example: a generation ago, suicide was an act of desperation largely reserved to the elderly, the incurably ill, persons who had at best a short and tortured life to look forward to. At the present time, 82 per cent of the persons who commit suicide in California are under the age of 65, and 42 per cent are under the age of 45. Last year, over a hundred teen-agers committed suicide in this Golden State: people who had their whole lives to look forward to, but could not bear the prospect they foresaw.

The survey results mentioned above should not be taken as a reflection on the individuals or the church involved. In fact, these respondents

should be given credit for being more than usually aware of their true feelings, and honest in reporting them. In a larger, broader sample, one might well find many persons claiming that they felt able to influence the course of events, but only because they had swallowed their mythology whole, and knew that was the way they are *supposed* to feel.

The empirical findings cited above are in a large measure (but, as we shall see in a moment, not entirely) a reflection on the kind of society we have; an increasingly centralized society, in which decisions are increasingly made by "experts," increasingly in secret—not because they are wicked tyrants, but because their god is efficiency, and free discussion and debate among the laity might be inefficient.

Feelings of powerlessness are not self-starting—no one is born with such feelings—but, once started, they tend to be self-perpetuating and self-validating, regardless of society's omissions or commissions. If you think there is nothing you can do, the chances are that you will not even try to do anything. If you do not even try to do anything, then, naturally, you will not accomplish anything. And if you do not accomplish anything, then you can say to yourself or whoever will listen, "See? I knew all along there was nothing I could do." And so the spiral of demoralization heads downward, powered by its own closed logic.

The most tragic aspect of the tragedy is that most of this demoralization rests on false assumptions. *Things do not have to be this way.* I am well aware of the power of society and culture, of political, educational, economic, family institutions, and all the rest: power which is the greater because it is usually covert, and begins working on us when we are too young to know what is being done to us. I well know this power to make us play the game, to withhold from us knowledge that there might be alternatives, to discourage us from thinking through alternatives on our own.

But for all their power, social forces are never entirely overwhelming. If they were, *homo sapiens* would not have been innovative enough to survive the first ice age. Difficult as it may be, it is possible to challenge the concatenation of forces, and not only to endure, and to live one's own personal life with individuality and integrity, but to change the lives of others and even to change the social order itself.

All societies, all cultures, all institutions have always been conspiracies against alternatives, against individuality, against change. I want to suggest this heresy to those who feel so helpless and so hopeless about our particular society: compared to perhaps 99.9 per cent of the human beings who have ever lived on this earth, and perhaps 98 per cent of those who are alive today, Americans are blessed, and upper-middle class white Americans are twice and thrice blessed. They enjoy fantastic educational privileges; fantastic opportunities for access to information; opportunities to travel; opportunities to express themselves, and to receive expressions of opinion from others; opportunities for access to power undreamed of by humanity-at-large.

This is not to deny or to excuse the many ways in which these rights and privileges and opportunities fall short of perfection. But Americans in general, and well-paid well-educated Americans in particular, do not know the meaning of real powerlessness. Most of humankind, right down to the present day, have always had to spend virtually every waking hour, every day of the year, scrounging and scrambling just for enough to eat to stay alive. That is a form of *real* powerlessness. Leisure time is a form of power—if we use it as we could.

Most of humankind, for all practical purposes, have been ignorant that there was a world beyond the immediate tribe—a world with richly variegated ways of thinking and doing things. Ignorance of alternatives is a form of *real* powerlessness.

Most of humankind have always lived under one or another form of despotism, in which kings, or priests, or generals were assumed to have all rights, and no one else had any rights they were bound to respect. And most of humankind have accepted that estate as altogether proper and fixed in the eternal scheme of things. That is real powerlessness—and it simply does not describe the situation in the United States.

It is astonishing to observe so many Americans—making more money, wearing more clothes, receiving more medical care, travelling more, reading more, with more free time in a year than most of the people of the world will have in a lifetime—sitting back, feeling helpless, feeling powerless, drowning their sorrows in beer or Batman, sex or psychedelics, denying responsibility, blaming everything on an ineffable known only as "the system."

They should be brought face-to-face with the condition, let us say, of a South Vietnamese peasant whose rice paddy is poisoned and whose village is bombed by the U.S. by day; who is taxed and terrorized by the Viet Cong by night; who has no one to speak for him, no options, nowhere to go, nothing to do but exist uncomprehendingly, and die uncomprehendingly, in a vast, merciless nutcracker of conflicting ideologies he never made. That is real powerlessness.

Perhaps if privileged Americans were to see and comprehend real powerlessness, they would stop waiting for someone to thrust a meaningful life, ready-made, upon them, and would get on gratefully with the business of making such a life for themselves. It may seem difficult—but comparatively speaking (note the qualifying adverb), this is a fluid and open society, and the possibilities are great. At the very least, one can live a personal life which is an alternative to those around him. One does not *have* to live a life which is money-obsessed; which is deadened and pointless, punctuated only by periodic excesses and artificial thrills; which is unoriginal, unproductive, uncreative, unfree.

Furthermore, a relatively few individuals—surprisingly few—by putting their alternatives together, can, in this society more than in most, affect the larger system. Does anyone seriously doubt that Southern Negroes are registering to vote today, served in places of public accommodation, addressed as "Mr." or "Miss" in courtrooms, and so forth, because a few hundred, or at most a few thousand of them, began living alternative lives—began rejecting, in their actions, the premise that they were powerless? What a lesson this should be to the suburban white liberals who feel so hopeless about "the system"! By comparison with Southern Negroes, they have every conceivable advantage and opportunity for social influence.

Many other examples come to mind. Five or six years ago, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company was well on its way to building a nuclear reactor at Bodega Bay, on the Northern California coastline. Permission had been obtained from state and federal agencies. Contracts were let; excavation began. Conservationists threw up their hands and said, "Well, we fought the good fight, but it just goes to show—you can't beat PG & E." One young man in Berkeley did not give up. He, his wife, and a handful of friends threw themselves into research. They stayed up late at night mimeographing literature. They reopened the case before the state Public Utilities Commission and the federal Atomic Energy Commission. And in the end they won.

Ten years ago, there were five hundred thousand *braceros* in the United States, one hundred thousand in California alone. This Mexican contract labor system tended to pull down working conditions in agriculture almost to the level of indentured servitude. It was deeply entrenched: it was backed by a staggering combination of economic and political forces. A relatively few critics, without significant economic or political resources, attacked the *bracero* system on essentially moral grounds. It took them years

of unremitting work, but in 1964 Congress rescinded the program.

Does anyone doubt that Rachel Carson made a difference? Does anyone doubt that Ralph Nader has made a difference? There are differences between all these examples and the problem of U.S. foreign policy, to be sure. But the differences are of degree, not kind. And, indeed, a case can be made that even the fortress of foreign policy has proved vulnerable to an extent. One may question the effectiveness of some of the Viet Nam protest activities. One may question the resuscitation of the "united front" technique of the 1930's. But notwithstanding all their internal disabilities, added to the obstacles imposed from outside it seems a tenable hypothesis that the Viet Nam protesters have made some difference. Who is to say that the Joint Chiefs of Staff backed by a nation composed entirely of sheep would not have invaded North Viet Nam by now, or used atomic bombs?

The most dangerous thing in America today is not the objective "system," whatever that may mean, but what people *think* about the system: feelings that the system is all-powerful; despair that one's own conduct can make any difference.

A prophet for our times, writing 120 years ago, warned of this danger. The sickness unto death, said Kierkegaard, is despair. That is the diagnosis which must be made of many good, decent, privileged, articulate Americans. It may, literally, prove the death of us all. But that sickness is not irreversible. There is a cure: to test those powers we fear will have no effect; to be our good, decent, articulate selves, and not to be dragooned into selling ourselves short; to take the risk of being unafraid. Fear is contagious, but so is courage. Whenever and wherever anyone is truly unafraid, others see that it is not fixed in the stars that they should be afraid.

However we may deny it, we do make a difference and we cannot help doing so. If we behave helplessly, that makes a difference—a negative one. If we do something, that makes a

difference—a positive one. And if that something is in the service of human values, and in concert with others who share those values, we may yet deliver ourselves from the sickness unto death.

HENRY ANDERSON

Berkeley, California