

UNFRIENDLY STRUCTURES

AS suggested here before, there are two sorts of remedies for our most serious and besetting problems: moral solutions and design solutions. They must be used together, of course, but it is somewhat difficult to talk about them at the same time. E. F. Schumacher succeeded rather well in recommending both at once, as his best known books, *Small Is Beautiful* and *Guide to the Perplexed*, show. Of the two, *Small Is Beautiful* is the better book—that is, more effective in terms of influence. It says that the tools and arrangements we now use, for getting the kind of life we want, won't and can't continue to work. The way we do things shuts out our best intentions. Bigness—bigness in government and industry—has led to practical imperatives which remove the power of decision from individual humans. This, he points out, becomes morally intolerable. A passage from one of his *Resurgence* articles puts the matter briefly and well:

Many books have been written about moral individuals in immoral society. As a society is composed of individuals, how could a society be more immoral than its members? It becomes immoral if its structure is such that moral individuals cannot act in accordance with their moral impulses. And one method of achieving this dreadful result is by letting organizations become too large. (I am not asserting that there are no evil individuals capable of doing evil things no matter what may be the size of organizations or, generally, the structure of society. It is when ordinary, decent, harmless people do evil things that society gets into its deepest troubles.)

How does this happen? *Small Is Beautiful* explains, making the case for smallness and decentralization, all down the line. The argument is sound and appealing because people can themselves find ways of acting on what Schumacher recommends, thus proving the value of his counsel. It works. There are lots of problems and obstacles, but it works, and

provides unexpected bonuses that are described by vague words like "wholeness" and "integrity." There are always problems, and Schumacher's good sense shows how to scale our problems to dimensions that people have some hope of dealing with. He writes with a moral inspiration—appearing on every page—and this informs his practical suggestions and proposals with an ethical glow, and in at least a few relations people can begin doing what he says. They are already doing it; they are making mistakes but they are doing it. This is what is called "a movement."

From his moral motivation, Schumacher, knowing something of human nature, proposed a design solution, and by reason of its inherent common sense it has caught on. Happily, before he died, Schumacher had opportunity to recognize the growing response to his appeal. After years of neglect, he enjoyed a measure of fulfillment. He had offered, it became obvious, an idea whose time had come. But this only led him to work harder in the few months that remained to him. Those who have taken up his cause, some of them, are trying to spread the common sense which he displayed in everything he did, although the panoply of enthusiasm and uninstructed ardor which attends every movement that approaches mass dimensions makes it difficult. This is the normal price of success in times like ours.

What about the moral solution? Where, for one thing, do the "moral impulses" he speaks of in his *Resurgence* article come from? It may be best to say simply that they are a fact of human life. We have them. They usually begin to come into play in adolescence, along with other potentialities. There is hardly anyone who has not encountered a young person, say between fourteen and sixteen, who had candidly, even eagerly, admitted that he would like to spend the rest of his life "helping people." He may become a

doctor or a nurse, a teacher or a social worker, a lawyer or a policeman, or enter the diplomatic service. Going to work in a health food store is another option. The mental health field attracts many. We know what happens. Eventually, for most of these people—all except the very strongest—disillusion sets in. Practically all these activities have been institutionalized, the motive of service reduced to ritual, the practice become largely a compromise between tired professionalism and self-interest. There are today a considerable number of critics who devote themselves to the abuses and flaws of such professions—Ivan Illich's *Medical Nemesis* is an example of this sort of analysis.

There are other sorts of frustration and defeat. An illustration is the project called "The Manhattan Court Employment Project" of the Vera Institute in New York City. The idea was to find a job for first offenders, and by arrangement with the judge have the young would-be criminal paroled to his employer. It was a great idea, and it worked after a fashion. The administrators planned well. They found self-reformed individuals, street people, nearly all of whom had served time, to work with the first-offenders, to explain to them the advantages of accepting a job instead of going to trial. It turned out, however, that there were severe limitations on what the Project could accomplish. For one thing, the administrators couldn't cope with drug addicts. Then, as a report relates: "Most women defendants are arrested on drug or prostitution charges. We are not equipped to deal effectively with drug problems and we doubted we could have an effect on women charged with prostitution who were accustomed to an income many times that of any job we might refer them to." The program could not accept defendants charged with serious crimes for the reason that the courts would not cooperate in such cases. Moreover—

Other charges are excluded because of our assumption that we cannot work successfully with the defendants: we do not accept gamblers, pimps and

others who make good money in the street economy because we cannot compete financially with their accustomed income. We exclude all defendants who are charged with public intoxication on the assumption that most will be alcoholics. Alcoholism, like drug addiction, is beyond our capability to treat.

By reason of these various exclusions, the program accepted only ten candidates out of each thousand considered. The total of 850 participants who were acceptable were half black and a third Puerto Rican. All were from poor families and most were dropouts from school.

Most of them have a key characteristic in common: they don't believe they can succeed at anything straight, and, even if they thought they could, would not know how to go about doing it. Having been counseled and programmed throughout their lives, they have generally lost hope in outside helpers. Most know that their chances of going to jail if prosecution proceeds are relatively low, so they feel little compulsion to cooperate with the project unless it can deliver something for them, and deliver it pretty fast.

You start out with the idea of saving youthful first-offenders from the searing and corrupting experience of imprisonment, but soon find out that there is no use in trying to find jobs for anyone except males who are not drug-users, and who are willing to work for a low rate of pay. And of those who qualify, only a few understand the importance of punctuality and are able to hold their jobs and keep on *trying* in the face of discouragement or injustice. Self-confidence is at a minimum among these people, and how, in such circumstances, can anything be done to help them acquire self-reliance?

Meanwhile, in the inner city environment where these youngsters grew up, the only "successful" people they ever see are pimps and numbers runners. What chance do moral impulses have to emerge in these surroundings? Well, it happens. It happened in the determined "representatives" who worked with the first offenders, who had themselves come up through and out of the street environment. These rare individuals had qualities not often found in

professional social workers, enabling them to establish relationships of trust, respect, and sometimes affection with the participants. Because of this, you could say, the program was worth attempting, however limited its opportunities and small its actual success. The "Reps" made it work.

The main reason is their commitment to each participant independent of stereotype or even, frequently, the participant's past behavior. The Reps have consistently assumed a partisan role in the face of the court, the prosecutors, and MCEP administrators. For example, they . . . will strongly request the right to continue to work with a participant who has been rearrested. Their refusal to be guided by actuarial predictions has sometimes meant their energies are misallocated, but their willingness to stick with participants is infectious and one of their strengths.

With the best will in the world, these determined workers—truly exceptional people—tried to help a downtrodden segment of youth in New York. Why were their victories so few?

The best general answer we know was given in a report published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* for November, 1937. In a study of 1,380 recidivists (repeater criminals), Dr. Charles B. Thompson, senior psychiatrist in the psychiatric clinic of New York's Court of General Sessions, said that the habitual criminal acted in response to an idea of himself—an idea which, once formed, was not changed by either imprisonment or available educational influences. From childhood these habitual offenders had been exposed to an environment which generated in them an obsessively egocentric self-image. The self-centered "I" comes to have "more importance than everything and anyone else in the world." Such attitudes, Dr. Thompson said, are found throughout society, but in the criminal they are reinforced by daily experience and go out of control. "Civilization's outstanding characteristic," Dr. Thompson wrote, "is its systematic training of each individual to get for himself at the expense of others." He maintained that the offender is often one who would pass for

a "good citizen" save that he uses unacceptable methods to get what he wants.

The psychiatrist's general conclusion goes far beyond the problem of crime in the streets:

In our superficial angers and hatreds or in our agreements, in our wars and in our equally superficial and evanescent arrangements called peace, "normal" man, like the criminal, is himself a repeater of pathological reactions. Naturally, then, if we are all involved automatically in repeated reflex actions that have to do with oppositeness, self-acquisitiveness and competition, the nature of the behavior of the recidivist is not far to seek, for the problem of the recidivist is but the problem of man's behavior generally. . . . Society has its mass homicides called wars, its mass-robberies called invasions, its wholesale larcenies called empire-building. As long as the individual's behavior fits in with the mass-reaction it is considered "good" behavior. As long as he does not question by word or deed the validity of the mass behavior he may be called a "good citizen."

According to Dr. Thompson, the common, everyday way of thinking in our society is against a normal expression of moral ideas in action. Conceivably, if he is right, we might make a deliberate attempt to change the way we think.

A book that goes a long way to confirm his judgment is *The Culture of Narcissism* (Norton) by Christopher Lasch, which appeared two years ago. Most reviewers were hard on this book, and one sees why after reading it. Its almost total indictment of Western civilization is depressingly accurate. The portraiture of our culture as soaked in egoistic delusions is unrelieved by notes on promising signs, and the author admits it. Savonarola had nothing on Mr. Lasch. His target is the endless preoccupation with self, with personality, and with making a "good impression." This, he suggests, is the only replacement people have found for the dissolving sense of meaning in human life. Narcissism, one could say, is the sophisticated version of the "obsessively egocentric self-image" that Dr. Thompson finds at the root of criminal behavior in less complex individuals.

Mr. Lasch believes that not enough attention has been given to understanding narcissism in psychological terms. He says:

Men have always been selfish, groups have always been ethnocentric; nothing is gained by giving these qualities a psychiatric label. The emergence of character disorders as the most prominent form of psychiatric pathology, however, together with the change in personality structure this development reflects, derives from quite specific changes in our society and culture—from bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis from changes in family life and from changing patterns of socialization. All this disappears from sight if narcissism becomes simply "the metaphor of the human condition." . . . The refusal of recent critics to discuss the etiology of narcissism or to pay much attention to the growing body of clinical writing on the subject probably represents a deliberate decision, stemming from fear that emphasis on the clinical aspects of the narcissistic syndrome would detract from the concept's usefulness in social analysis. This decision, however, has proved a mistake. In ignoring the psychological dimension, these authors also miss the social. They fail to explore any of the character traits associated with pathological narcissism, which in less extreme form appear in such profusion in the everyday life of our age: dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings. Nor do they discuss what might be called the secondary characteristics of narcissism: pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous self-deprecatory humor. Thus they deprive themselves of any basis on which to make connections between the narcissistic personality type and certain characteristic patterns of contemporary culture, such as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women. For these critics, narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym for selfishness and at its most precise a metaphor, and nothing more, that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self.

We find mainly a descriptive account of how people become narcissistic under the influence of the various aspects of culture and modern life

which Mr. Lasch describes so accurately. His examination is searching—he reviews the modern novel, the effect of advertising on how people think about themselves, the changing attitudes in business and the idea of "success"—and seems to suggest that narcissism is the last resort of people who have no idea what to do with their lives.

Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone. These conditions have also transformed the family, which in turn shapes the underlying structure of personality. A society that fears that it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation, and the ever-present sense of historical discontinuity—the blight of our society—falls with particularly devastating effect on the family. The modern parent's attempt to make children feel loved and wanted does not conceal an underlying coolness—the remoteness of those who have little to pass on to the next generation and who in any case give priority to their own right of self-fulfillment. . . .

The ethic of self-preservation and psychic survival is rooted, then, not merely in objective conditions of economic warfare, rising rates of crime, and social chaos but in the subjective experience of emptiness and isolation. It reflects the conviction—as much a projection of inner anxieties as a perception of the way things are—that envy and exploitation dominate even the most intimate relations.

This is not a book of much value to readers unable to bring to bear on its conclusions some personal awareness of counter-tendencies, not only on the present scene, but from the resources of history. There have been times and groups—to say nothing of individuals—which showed the positive power of lives committed to do some worthwhile work in the world. There have always been men and women who took their conceptions of self and the meaning of life more from personal intuitions than from the environments into which they were thrust by birth.

Concerning the later plays of Eugene O'Neill, Eric Bentley once asked: "How could one be ennobled by identifying oneself with any of his

characters?"—a point that might be applied to nearly all the most evident cultural influences of the present. Insofar as we have control over our lives and thought, this failure to seek the ennobling may be the chief cause of the narcissistic culture portrayed in such detail by Christopher Lasch. One wishes that he had expanded his concluding words into at least a chapter, for readers easily convinced of his diagnosis but who feel left with little more than a sense of the hopelessness of it all. Yet there are clues in what he says:

In order to break the existing pattern of dependence and put an end to the erosion of competence, citizens will have to take the solution of their problems into their own hands. They will have to create their own "communities of competence." . . . In a dying culture, narcissism appears to embody in the guise of personal "growth" and "awareness"—the highest attainment of spiritual enlightenment. The custodians of culture hope, at bottom, merely to survive its collapse. The will to build a better society, however, survives, along with traditions of localism, self-help, and community action that only need the vision of a new society, a decent society, to give them new vigor. The moral discipline formerly associated with the work ethic still retains a value independent of the role it once played in the defense of property rights. That discipline—indispensable to the task of building a new order—endures most of all in those who knew the old order only as a broken promise, yet who took the promise more seriously than those who merely took it for granted.

We began by saying that there are both design solutions and moral solutions for the problems of the time—of any time. The design solutions are definable, as shown by Schumacher and now by many others. The moral solutions are both definable—exhortation is common enough—and essentially obscure, usually found, when recognized, embedded in the design solutions which they animate. Needed is a culture warmly hospitable to the "moral impulses" Schumacher spoke of, and this, as Lasch implies, begins in the family life. If you look at the biographies of distinguished humans, you usually find that there was someone—a parent or close friend—who believed that there was something that needed to

be done in the world, and found self-authenticating reasons as well as rational support for doing it. Because of human intelligence, the moral solution always flowers within a design solution, making the two seem almost indistinguishable, yet both are there.

REVIEW

LISTENING TO ALEXANDER NEVSKY

A FRIEND of mine is one of Hitler's Germans. She was born the year he took power. I have noticed that she is moved to tears by the music of Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* (which was completed, ironically enough, in 1939—the year before the war). I also am moved to tears by it. Yet I suspect that her tears come from deeper wells than mine. I have lived a physically secure life. I have not known what has been familiar to every European (and to every Chinese for that matter) over centuries. It is true that I have lived long in China and Europe, but I have done so safely, before 1939 and after 1957. Prokofiev's music conveys to me ideas that were less emphasized in the Eisenstein film that it was composed to accompany.

Let me describe what I, at least, hear in the music. First I hear the common people of Russia suffering under the Mongol yoke. Soon I hear that marvelous melody which expresses their yearning—their yearning for freedom. Then come the Teutonic Knights, cold and implacable, convinced that they are helping to spread their peculiar brand of Christianity. The mayor of Pskov says in the film: "People of Pskov! The great Master of the Teutonic Order has been appointed by His Holiness the Pope in Rome to rule over the Russian realm. He asks you for the last time—are you ready to submit to Rome?" A Russian answers: "We shall not be ruled by the Pope." The Master of the Teutonic Order then orders the destruction of Pskov with a curt wave of his hand. "Burn it," he says. "Erase it from the face of the earth." Soon a black-robed German monk makes the sign of the cross over the people, saying: "Die in order that ye may be saved." He adds: "Everyone who does not submit to Rome must be destroyed!" His fellow monks drag a Russian to the fires, beating him with their crucifixes. The eye-slits in the Knights' helmets are like the arms of the crucifix with which they are sanctified.

Yet Prokofiev, I believe, goes deeper than this in portraying the Teutonic Knights. One can hear *their* yearning for freedom also and their doubts about their mission. (Such doubts must have occurred to German soldiers in the Ukraine 1942-43.) How on earth, wonder the Knights, has their faith ended up this way? Thus Prokofiev tells us of oppression on *both* sides (which was not portrayed in the film). The Russians are oppressed by the Mongol invaders. The German invaders are oppressed by the perversion of Christ's teaching.

I think it is noteworthy that *Alexander Nevsky* was withdrawn from circulation after the Russo-German nonaggression pact of August 1939—the pact that triggered the Second World War. As soon as the Wehrmacht attacked Russia on June 22, 1941, the film was put back into patriotic circulation. By then it was all right to be anti-Nazi, although for two years it had been forbidden. Even today the entire film has yet to be released. The reason is significant. One night in 1938 when the exhausted Eisenstein was taking a nap, the Kremlin telephoned. Stalin wanted a preview. The Communist official who answered the phone did not wish to awaken Eisenstein; so he gathered up the reels and took them to the Kremlin. Unfortunately he overlooked one reel. Stalin approved of the others. The official did not dare admit his mistake. To this day this reel has remained hidden. We do have the text, however. It contains the line, spoken to some merchants by a follower of Alexander Nevsky: "Come with good grace, or the peasants will twist your arm for you." This might have pleased Stalin because it showed an ideologically correct viewpoint. Or it might have infuriated him as a reference to his causing the death of millions of Ukrainian peasants during enforced collectivization in 1932-33.

To get back to what I hear in the film, Prokofiev's next theme suggests the young energy of Alexander Nevsky and his followers, which overcomes the deadly energy of the Teutonic

Knights. It also suggests the universal human love of one's native soil. Then comes the battle on Lake Peipus in 1242. There is a marvelous scene in the film that few of us who have watched it can forget. In their heavy armor, with their helmets screening their faces (and their humanity), dressed in long white robes, the Teutonic Knights sink slowly down into the water when the ice breaks. The water is as icy as their hearts.

After the battle, as the Russian corpses are gathered, a woman mourns, singing of death, in which we shall all end. At the conclusion Prokofiev returns to the yearning for freedom, but now it has been fulfilled.

As usual, the fulfillment did not last. Today in 1980 the Russians still yearn for freedom, and Germans like my friend cannot forget the Teutonic oppressiveness that Hitler utilized. Yet she also admires the other face of the Teuton. On July 20, 1944, it was aristocratic Prussian generals (some descended from the Teutonic Knights) who tried to kill Hitler and were killed themselves instead—suspended on a hook under the chin until they died. Many of us admire German thoroughness (*Gründlichkeit*). Bach was thorough, and therefore we have the modern system of tuning keyboard instruments. Yet this very thoroughness is one reason why the Italian police long believed that the Red Brigade had German help in killing Moro. Every detail had been worked out with German precision. The Italians' lack of thoroughness and precision is why some Germans still look down on them. It may be charming, feel the Germans, but are charm and impetuosity enough? They have been enough for *some* Germans—Albrecht Durer, Mozart, Goethe, Thomas Mann, and others. Bach ranks first among those who never fell in love with the Italian sun and *joie de vivre*. Bach was a Lutheran. Yet Luther himself may have loved Italian sunlight before he returned to Germany and nailed his theses on the church door in Wittenberg. A biography of Goethe says that he regarded his second visit to Italy in 1786-88 as "a kind of

climax to his life; never before had he attained such complete understanding of his genius and mission in the world."

I have mentioned the Chinese. As we all know, they have the world's oldest continuous civilization. Personally, I regard them as the most civilized (in its root sense) of the world's peoples. Yet they too, like the Russians and the Germans, have produced some of the worst rulers and worst atrocities. For example, during the Han dynasty the widow of its fourth emperor had a minister thrown to be killed by the pigs because he opposed her enthusiasm for Lao-tzu. The Empress's "thoroughness" was, of course, utterly contrary to what Lao-tzu had taught.

It may seem that I have wandered far from my topic. Yet all these ideas come into mind as I listen to Prokofiev's music. I ponder on the fact that the Russians, Germans, and Chinese are similar in an important respect: their theoretical grasp of totalitarianism. The Chinese produced the world's first manual on totalitarian rule by rewards and punishments *The Book of Lord Shang*, which was admirably translated into English four decades ago by Duyvendak. The Germans produced Marx, who depended partly upon Hegel, the great German philosopher. The Russians produced Dostoyevsky, whose *Brothers Karamazov* contains the twenty-three famous pages about the Grand Inquisitor. Jesus is tried by the Grand Inquisitor, who condemns him to be burned at the stake because his ideas would unsettle the faithful. I know of no profounder insight into the totalitarian mind. I wonder what people in the Soviet Union think today when (or if) they can read these pages.

Is it a coincidence that my German friend is also much moved by these pages of Dostoyevsky? With her own eyes she has seen them come to life. It reminds me of the Greek saying quoted by Aeschylus: "One learns through suffering." Because *pathos* is ambiguous, the words equally mean: "One learns through experience." If one has not suffered, one cannot learn. Solzhenitsyn,

for example, has suffered and he has learned. Therefore he can write books that tell us what we have not suffered and can barely imagine.

To me Prokofiev's music suggests another question. In world history the Germans, Russians, and Chinese have created the worst oppression and some of the best books. Why? Does Aeschylus provide the answer?

I do not think it is a coincidence that my German friend is moved as deeply by Dostoyevsky as by Prokofiev. Similarly, it is no coincidence that Solzhenitsyn writes so tellingly. He has learned through suffering, and therefore, he is able to explain to us what we have never experienced in our secure lives. Albert Speer has suffered in a different way, but he too has learned. That is why he can write so well about the Third Reich. First he helped Hitler with the architecture that expressed Nazi ideals. Then he directed the German munitions industry towards the end of the war. Then he spent twenty years in Spandau prison, where he had time to ponder on what it all had meant. He wrote his thoughts on scraps of paper which were smuggled out by a Dutch prison guard. Perhaps no German has a range of experience comparable to Speer's. He has learned from *personal* experience. The suffering he went through was manure for the growth of his understanding. Speer ends his book, *Inside the Third Reich*, with the following lines:

"Many of them [his guards] mourned loved ones who had died in the war—in particular, every one of the Soviet guards had lost some close relatives, brothers or a father. Yet not one of them bore a grudge towards me for my personal share in the tragedy; never once did I hear words of recrimination." (This contrasts with an American friend of mine who teaches English and always refers to Germans as "Krauts." When I asked him why, he said that he had suffered too much during the Second World War. Yet he was never taken prisoner and no one in his family was harmed by the Germans in any way, so far as I know.)

Speer continues: "At the lowest ebb of my existence, in contact with these ordinary people, I encountered uncorrupted feelings of sympathy, helpfulness, human understanding, feelings that bypassed the prison rules. . . . On the day before my appointment as Minister of Armaments and War Production I had encountered peasants in the Ukraine who had saved me from frostbite. At the time I had been merely touched, without understanding. Now after all was over, I once again was treated to examples of human kindness that transcended all enmity. And now at last I wanted to understand. This book, too, is an attempt at understanding."

Experience has to be personal. It may be vicarious and gained from books, but it has to be personal. My German friend illustrates this. In 1944-1954—the decade after the German retreat from Russia and Germany's defeat—she lived through experiences so extraordinary that well-known authors have urged her to write her story. Perhaps she will some day, but remembering it is still painful. Unlike her mother (and so many Germans of her mother's generation), my friend feels deep guilt about Hitler's treatment of the Jews. She also still suffers from a sense of betrayal by Hitler. She had been the head of her school youth-group in 1943. She had believed that the Wehrmacht was trying to make the world a better place to live in. She knew nothing whatever about the extermination of the Jews. Here she was like so many ten-year-olds in Germany then.

Prokofiev had personally experienced how the Kremlin treated Russians, high and low. Yet he stayed in the Soviet Union. He did not defect. This was easier for him because he was a composer of music, not a writer of books. Solzhenitsyn has had to defect. Prokofiev and Shostokovich did not. Stravinsky preferred Paris anyway. Here is yet another respect in which the Germans and the Russians are alike. Both have produced superb music. Bach, like Hitler, was a German. So was Mozart, although, like Hitler, he

was born in Austria. Prokofiev was a Russian—like Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev. The First Emperor of China (its first dictator) was a Chinese; or rather he belonged to a northwestern tribe that lay outside China, but conquered it. It is true that the Chinese have not yet produced a great composer. Give them time. Bach died only a little over two centuries ago. All things considered, it is as if extraordinary national talent has two faces and shows itself in two opposite ways, one good, one evil.

To conclude, I wonder if these ideas, which come to mind when I listen to *Alexander Nevsky*, do not explain why my friend who is one of Hitler's Germans finds herself so deeply moved by Prokofiev's music. I have never discussed this with her. I would not want to intrude. Yet I think that the music of *Alexander Nevsky* can open for us all a new sympathy and understanding. In Mahayana Buddhism these are considered the supreme virtues. Sympathy is the same as compassion (*karuna*). Understanding is the same as wisdom (*prajna*). Mahayana has endured longer than Christianity. Yet the two share these virtues in common. In theology they differ profoundly. In much else they are similar. The differences among world religions are as important as their similarities. Yet the latter are impressive. They give clues to what may be universal.

Boston

HOLMES WELCH

COMMENTARY

BAD AND GOOD CONVENTIONS

How could anyone learn anything from Albert Speer, a man who "helped Hitler" and was high in the councils of the Nazis? (See Review, page 8.) Yet readers of his book, *Inside the Third Reich*, find that they do. Speer, it seems clear, writes as a man stripped of all objective and subjective possessions, with nothing left to consider except the quality of his own life, and that, in view of his past, could not have pleased him very much. Not even vanity was left to him. A turn of history—the total defeat of Germany in World War II—reduced him to this condition. Yet it freed him for a kind of thinking that he had not been able to do before.

It is hard to separate character from circumstance. But when there is collaboration from history, the separation may take place. When Speer no longer had a stake, he began to think as a human being.

It took an agonizing and decimating war to have this effect. Yet other, less harmful provocations may have a similar effect on other humans. Tolstoy's *My Confession* gives an example. Some inner rejection of his stake in conventional goals put Tolstoy through the wringer. He came out a transformed man—so altered that people to whom a similar stake remained important could hardly tolerate the change. But even they are unable to deny Tolstoy's greatness, evident in his work and his life.

Tolstoy broke with many of the conventions of his time, some of them hardly changed today after the passage of a century. War and reliance on violence are the most noticeable. It seems fair to say that only individuals cast in a heroic mold are able to make themselves independent of such conventions, and since the production of heroes is a mystery, what hope is there for establishing a better life for the peoples of the world?

Gandhi, you could say, worked on this problem. Let us have, he said in effect, conventions that reflect the thinking and feeling of heroes. He taught and practiced *Ahimsa*—Non-violence. All conventions—since they represent action without equivalent thought—have their weaknesses, but people seem to need them. This is the case for non-violence as a convention. Seating it in human habit may take time, requiring heroic effort on the part of some, perhaps only a few. But arguments against this goal are difficult to imagine.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
"LEARNING DISABILITIES"

IN *Fourth Dimension* for June—"an occasional publication of independent inquiry into scientific & philosophical subjects," Box 10, Brigham, Quebec, Canada JOE IJO, \$1.50 a copy—Merritt Clifton assembles useful information on "Learning Disabilities." This fashionable topic apparently needs debunking. After quoting various definitions and a list of symptoms of learning disability, Clifton comments:

The authors concede that "If a child exhibits only a few, he is not necessarily learning disabled, since most children do show some of these at different stages in their development." They fail to add, however, that among the 34 supposed symptoms, virtually every child will display at least two dozen at virtually any point in time if either tired or bored by pointless busywork. Most presumably healthy, well-adjusted adults will display at least one dozen from time to time. Moreover, the symptoms are mostly open to widely varying interpretation. It is relatively easy to tell whether a child is a good judge of time, because time can be measured—although Native American children often have trouble here because, reflecting a lifestyle unregulated by clocks, their home languages contain no artificial standard measure of time shorter than one day. Cultural bias becomes marked in defining "poor logic" and "pronunciation problems." A major scandal revealed about ten years ago involved black children from the rural south, whose accent got them labeled severely retarded after transfer to northern urban schools. "Poor logic," meanwhile, is often advanced as rationale for flunking or institutionalizing children holding unconventional values. In British Columbia, Dukhobor children are accused of poor logic if they follow their parents in vegetarianism and opposition to regimentation. That they were learning "poor logic" at home became the government's rationale for institutionalizing about 100 Dukhobor children between 1953 and 1959. In Quebec, similar attacks have been made against Mohawks and Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to Dr. Margie Golick, chief psychologist at the McGill-Montreal Children's Hospital Learning Center, some teachers and

psychologists "have a kind of stereotype in their heads about how a child with a learning disability performs on tests." The child is said to be "poorly coordinated" or "hyperactive." He may be said to have a disability if he is better at arithmetic than reading. Clifton asks:

But what, then, *are* learning disabilities, and how *can* they be recognized accurately?

John Holt, author of the best-sellers *Why Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*, is doubtful that learning disabilities can be defined at all, apart from obvious retardation and physical handicaps. "Schools have always worked according to a rule," he points out, "which is that when learning happens the schools and teachers get the credit, and when it doesn't, the students get the blame. LD is only the latest form of this rule, a way, in short, of blaming the school's shortcomings, failures, and general incompetence on the students themselves. No one has ever been able to define 'learning disabilities' with any precision, or to say where the line might be between a 'learning disability' and a 'learning difficulty,' which is something that every human being experiences whenever he or she tries to learn something." Holt advises parents to be extremely wary of any suggestion that their children might be "learning disabled," based predominantly on school performance. He suggests that such children should be removed from school and instead tutored at home, allowed to choose their own educational directions and paces.

Margie Golick's account of her professional experience throws an interesting light on the general confusion about "learning disabilities."

I began as a psychologist in a child psychiatry clinic. The children who came for evaluation had the whole range of problems that child psychiatrists normally see—developmental delays, bed-wetting, school phobias, aggressive behavior, or excessive shyness. Very often, however, along with the primary complaints were serious school problems. . . . The treatment of choice at that time [with the Spock approach dominant] was psychotherapy. . . . In assessing our results after many months, we found that this psychotherapeutical approach was turning out a lot of well-adjusted non-readers.

Then they tried another approach:

We added trampolines, balance boards, basketball nets, swinging balls, and visual-motor

worksheets to our repertoire. We put all the children with learning problems through rigorous exercises. This was still no panacea. We discovered that with all this systematic perceptual-motor training we were turning out lots of well-coordinated non-readers! The message, which should have been obvious, dawned on us slowly. To help children do better school work, we had to teach them.

So, with care and individual attention, the psychologists switched to an academic program. There were some good results, but one of their successful students attempted suicide in late adolescence and there seemed no explanation for this. Dr. Golick continues:

Since that time my colleagues and I have been careful to pay attention to more than a child's academic abilities. We have realized that along with learning the Three it's, children have to learn to enjoy life. . . . In retrospect it seems self-evident. We had taken a fragmentary approach to the children who came to see us. But we found that it was essential that we concern ourselves with the child as a whole human being, one who has to function in a complicated society and needs a vast number of resources to do so in an integrated way.

Merritt Clifton remarks:

When a child is considered only as a mechanical part in some vast structure called society, or as just an extension of a parental identity, he or she gets stifled in some ways, starved in others. When the child resists, seeking control over his or her own destiny, LD symptoms appear. They are the same symptoms displayed by unhappy slaves and prisoners: shiftless resentment of work assignments, rebellious gestures, and attempts to escape, in mind at least if not in body. As Holt puts it: "Schools are bootcamp for kids." If one inmate in ten suffers from LD, odds are good that ten in ten do—but 90% conceal their suffering, seeking time off and extra rations for good behavior.

They learn, in short, to "play the game," but it isn't much of a game, and has nothing to do with education.

A black professor at Los Angeles State University is quoted by Clifton on the misery of black students whose self-respect and confidence have been ground down. This teacher, Jerry Farber, says:

These are the kids for whom every low grade is torture, who stammer and shake when they speak to a professor, who go through an emotional crisis every time they're called on in class. . . . For students the hardest battle, as for black people, isn't with Mister Charley. It's with what Mister Charley has done to our minds.

FRONTIERS "What Can We Do?"

A HUNDRED years ago, a radical was one who believed that the program of his revolutionary party would go to the root of the social injustice and moral disorder in the world. In order for the revolution to take place, the radical had to be a recruiter for the cadres of the party. This was reasonable enough. Revolutions may be made by minorities, but there need to be enough committed individuals to seize power and change things around.

Today, we are witnessing the emergence of another kind of radical. Parties are no longer the acknowledged instruments of change. Ideologies are increasingly regarded with suspicion because of the blinders they impose on otherwise intelligent people. Today's radicals have their "programs," but they are ad hoc in relation to *conditions*, and seldom ideological. They don't have clear formulas for a changed political economy, but say, "*These things are wrong, and they must be changed, one way or another.*"

A fine example of this sort of radicalism is the work of Frances Moore Lappé, known to the housewives of America as the author of *Diet for a Small Planet*, and to a larger number of admiring readers as co-author, with Joseph Collins, of *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity*, a book that every citizen who cares about the future of this country and the world should know. Now, with William Valentine, Frances Lappé has done a smaller book, *What Can We Do?*, issued by the Institute for Food and Development Policy (2588 Mission Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94110, \$2.45). This book is in a sense a how-to book—how to work toward better conditions in the world, not in terms of an ideological program, but in terms of what some people are already doing. The authors say in a foreword:

Anyone working for social change embodies, by his or her choice of actions, a statement of what he or she believes is wrong and what could be better. For

most of us this analysis is vague. But the more concrete our diagnosis of what is wrong and the clearer our vision of something better, the easier it becomes to make choices of what to do today. A well-thought-out analysis is the only measure by which to judge our choices of action.

An editorial statement says:

The heart of the book is a series of interviews with activists throughout North America. They explain how and why they got involved, how they see their work contributing, and what keeps them going.

Their answers will probably not be your answers. Our hope is that their strengths, determinations, insights, and even their vulnerabilities will inspire you—whether you have taken the leap into action or are looking for a place to begin.

Represented in the "case studies" part of the book are the Agricultural Marketing Project (Nashville, Tenn.), the Federation of Ohio River Co-ops (in Ohio and three other states), the Institute for Community Economics (Cambridge, Mass.), the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (Toledo, Ohio), the U.S. Farmers' Association (Hampton, Iowa), National Land for People (Fresno, Calif.), California Agrarian Action Project (Davis, Calif.), Rural Resources (Loveland, Ohio), Mississippi Hunger Coalition (Jackson, Miss.), American Friends Service Committee (San Francisco, Calif.), Canadian People's Food Commission (Ottawa, Canada), the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (New York, N.Y.), Oxfam-America (Boston, Mass.). Two devoted priests, one Jesuit, the other Episcopal, who work to reduce the hunger in the world, tell what they are doing.

For a sample of the interviews with people active in these groups, we take the statement of Nathan Gray, with the Institute for Community Economics, who begins with an answer to the question: "How did you get started in this work?"

"I had a front row on the '60s. As a high school student in Berkeley, California, I matriculated with the Free Speech Movement and graduated with the People's Park occupation. I was studying international relations and Latin American literature

at San Francisco State during the upheaval there in 1968-69. I was very deeply involved. I helped do television tapings on a lot of the issues and debated to bring them in focus for people.

"But what affected me more than anything was the year I spent living with a Nicaraguan family in the Mission District of San Francisco. Through them it seemed as if I had met most of the other Nicaraguans living in San Francisco at that time. I was struck by the particular history of Nicaragua, its relationship to the United States, and the control of the country by the United Fruit Company. Some years later and after considerable study abroad, I worked for VITA (Volunteers in Technical Assistance). I was assigned to Nicaragua after the earthquake in 1972. I saw first hand all that I had read about despotic Latin American dictators such as Somoza. What struck me was the incredible collusion between our military advisors, corporate executives and the elite of Nicaragua.

In answer to a question about the pitfalls confronting the work he does, Gray said:

"The built-in pitfall is the assumption that money is the answer. . . . we have to place emphasis not on the wealth, but on the democracy or political aspect of the proposition. How do you make a community work? How do you make a co-op work? That's the tough part. If you don't really live in awareness of that, then you're caught in a trap.

"The other problem that we have—particularly our generation—is our lack of realism and discipline. We don't realize how difficult it is to build a more just society and so tend to get frustrated and apathetic. We jump around a lot as we search for new and more rewarding causes. . . . We don't demand enough of ourselves.

What Can We Do? is filled with this sort of sense.