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A PROJECT OF WONDERING

WE live in an age of mindless violence and small concern for the sanctity of life. No need to wonder at the increase of assassinations and the routine resort of minorities to terrorism and kidnapping to obtain attention for their claims—have not all the powerful nations made plain that they regard *fear* as the only effective emotional tool of policy? At the same time, the suicide rate climbs in many countries. Even children speak casually of taking their lives when denied a pleasure they demand, or when there is prospect of failing in school. Among college students the common complaint is "the meaninglessness of it all," often made the reason for self-destruction. Why not? they ask.

Yet, curiously, a sudden and widely pervasive opening of the mind to belief in immortality seems to accompany the everywhere evident cultural decline. Materialism, however, has not been defeated in some great debate. Who can "prove" that there is a soul which survives the body? Feelings have changed on this great question mainly because there is no longer any novelty or daring in skepticism. One could say, recalling an essay by Bertrand Russell, that the unbelief of past generations was maintained by men who earned their convictions by hard thinking, while today it is no more than indifference—an attitude not chosen or developed but inherited. Materialism then, for many people, has no more strength in it than an old intellectual habit. Nor, from a practical point of view, is it working very well. The brave new world is no longer new, and least of all brave! Inevitably, its articles of faith have become uninteresting. Today it is fashionable to believe.

But believe *what?*

The question is formidable because the diversity of beliefs is so great. Instead of attempting to catalogue their variety—Jacob Needleman's *The New Religions* will illustrate the range—it may be well to look far into the past, to a time when beliefs were also many. In *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Columbia University Press, 1948) H. Frankfort says:

> The ancients did not attempt to solve ultimate problems confronting man by a single and coherent theory; that has been the method of approach since the time of the Greeks. Ancient thought—mythopoeic, "myth-making" thought—admitted side by side certain *limited* insights which were held to be simultaneously valid, each in its own proper context, each corresponding to a definite avenue of approach. I have called this "multiplicity of approaches," and we shall find many examples of it as we proceed.

A longer passage toward the end of the book gives some insight into the spirit of ancient Egyptian religion:

> The anxiety of the Egyptian in the face of death gives a rather striking foil to the serenity of his positive beliefs in a future life. The conflict between these two moods is expressed in a dialogue between Atum, the creator, and Osiris. I can only quote the beginning because the text is, as usual, full of theological allusions which would require long comments to be understandable. Osiris clearly represents the ordinary man, contemplating with fear the prospects of his future life; Atum explains the cosmic order of his own creation in which death has its appointed place:
>
> Osiris said: O Atum, what does this mean that I must go into the desert? It has no water, it has no air, it is very deep, very dark, boundless.
>
> (Atum:) You will live there without care.
>
> (Osiris:) But one cannot find there the satisfaction of love.
>
> Atum said: I have put there transfiguration in the place of water, air and satisfaction, and carefreeness in the place of bread and beer.

The old Egyptians, it seems, like ourselves, wondered about the practical things of life and

what would happen to them. As Prof. Frankfort says:

> The identification with Osiris had, then, gone so far that he is made to voice man's fears. Atum propounds the view that immortality is transfiguration to a participation in the life of his cosmos which even dispenses with the requirements of sustenance. Our text is exceptional in this as in other respects. And it is understandable that the ordinary man, absorbed by the struggle for existence in his lifetime did not think much beyond the measures of precaution which usage indicated as desirable in case of his death. It is this limited, worried point of view which prevails in so many texts; and it is this point of view which appears as a mechanical projection of ordinary life into the beyond.

After illustrating some of these projections he continues:

> It is no wonder that those who approach Egyptian religion from such adaptations, and take their stand on texts written for the least thoughtful section of the population, reach the conclusion that the Egyptian beliefs concerning afterlife do not make sense. But they act like a man who would gauge our present knowledge of the stars by studying horoscopes in the newspapers. The view which we have described in this chapter stands at the opposite end of the scale; in fact, the belief that immortality is found in sharing the perennial movements of nature may seem to us too vague and too unrelated to the actual problems of human life to qualify as a basic faith. But we must remember two circumstances in this connection.
>
> The Egyptians lived in very close contact with nature and found in the recurring events of the farmer's year experiences pregnant with meaning beyond the sphere of usefulness. We must allow for their deep emotional involvement in such natural phenomena as the sun's course or the rise and fall of the Nile. In the second place, the one-sidedness of any belief could find a corrective in other views held simultaneously.

Then the writer adds material by his wife on the underlying meaning of Egyptian funerary art:

> These scenes contain an implicit but emphatic denial that death should be a tragic and violent negation of life; on the contrary, they attempt a harmonious approximation, a mutual interpenetration of life and death on a scale never equalled by any other people. It is true that death, the unknown, claimed ever present awareness and unceasing service on the part of the living; but this was not merely the price at which doubt and terror could be kept at bay, but a tribute paid to the phenomena of life which, pictured in a funerary setting became unassailable even by death.

This brief account of Egyptian religion may help us to think about our own wonderings and beliefs. Will there be food and drink on the "other side"? Does Heaven have furniture and modern conveniences? How much of the popular belief in immortality is involved in such "mechanical projections" of our present existence?

One philosophical commentator on Buddhism has suggested that the Buddha gave his doctrine of *Anatta*—there is no individual self or permanent ego—to make projections of the familiar impossible, since this would award survival or immortality to qualities and attitudes which are entirely earthly, and thus degrade and trivialize the transcendent reality of non-physical being.

What then is "transcendent reality"? We have practically no words for it. Just a few colorless abstractions. Our experience, and therefore our language, is almost entirely made up of the stuff and processes of earth-life, which are dependent upon continual generation followed by decay and death—a constant dying, one could say. (David Hume reached a similar conclusion.) Edward Conze (in *Buddhism*) demonstrates the difficulty:

> Now suppose that Mr. John Smith is fed up with this state of affairs in which everything is just produced for a short time in order to be destroyed again. Suppose he wishes to become immortal. . . . Just try to think of what is left of Mr. Smith after he has become immortal. His body would obviously be gone. With the body his instincts would have disappeared—since they are bound up with his glands, with the needs of his tissues, in short with the body. His mind, also, as he knows it, would have to be sacrificed. Because this mind of ours is bound up with bodily processes, its operations are based on the data provided by the bodily organs of sense, and it reveals its impermanence by incessantly and restlessly jumping from one thing to another. With the mind

> would go his sense of logical consistency. As matter of fact, Mr. John Smith, turned immortal, would not recognize himself at all. He would have lost everything that made him recognizable to himself and to others.

It follows that immortality consists in having no ordinary self at all—no self, that is, of the sort we refer to when speaking of our everyday lives. This may be the reason why reliable and helpful writing about immortality tends to take the form of allegory. Being unbelievable literally, allegories have disembodied meanings or feelings that we think or know are true. The allegory prevents us from dragging these meanings down to the level of mortality.

Can allegories be the bearers of unearthly meanings? Do they really tell us anything? Well, Mr. Conze uses them to advantage in explaining the Buddhist doctrine:

> It all depends on one's view on the nature of man. Those who regard man as a creature of earth only, will be inclined to compare this Buddhist yearning for immortality with the snail which leaves its house in order to go on a flying expedition. Those who regard man as an essentially spiritual being will prefer the Buddhist simile of the mountain swans who, when they have left their mountain lake go from puddle to puddle, without making their home anywhere, until they are back to their true home in the clear waters of the mountain lake.

We have such discouragements in attempts to think about immortality, but the longing to know at least something about it is irrepressible, and keeps on breaking into the ordinariness of our lives. The idea that we have lived before—have come from somewhere—and will live again seems impossible to abolish. This conviction comes out of the grain of our consciousness, however mixed up we may get in trying to support it on a rational basis. The interesting thing about this longing is that it is now reviving, stronger than ever, despite several hundred years of determined denial of both soul and survival by the very makers of our civilization—the scientists, and the movers and shakers who made it plain by their lives that getting and spending on earth was the only fulfillment they would take seriously.

Is there, then, no rational way to think about immortality, or must we say, simply, that it has proved impossible to deny and stop there?

The facts of immortality may be beyond the reach of ordinary inference, but there are at least some parallels to the kind of thinking we would like to do. Consider mathematics and the applications oℰ geometry to the things of our world. Geometry is a system of ideal conceptions which are all "in the mind." This is the engineer's world of "ideal forms" which he uses in countless practical ways, adjusting them to the imperfections of material existence. We make things work here—we make sense out of our experience here—by bringing down to earth these ideal conceptions. It is the same with metaphysical conceptions. We use them, either consciously or unconsciously, to order our lives. The order of reality we live by has no real existence on earth. Justice, love, peace, serenity, nobility, courage, faithfulness, reliability—and their opposites—have no part in our sense experience, yet we live by them. To vitalize these ideas we clothe them in myth, endow them with substance in the lives of heroes, and elaborate the meanings we seek in the stories we tell to each other. Literature is no more than the record of such activities. A tragedy is the crucial conjunction between the ideal and the actual, or the dream with its earthly limit. A tragedy shows a kind of failure—a death or defeat—yet *something* goes on. Something survives the tragedy; we feel it but have only the pallid term catharsis to tell what it means.

This something that goes on—what is it? Is it a sublime or eternal core in "Mr. Smith" which spurs him to long for immortality; and is it the impossibility of making the crumbling mortal things last forever that renders tragedy inevitable? Is what survives of Mr. Smith some unknown inspiration to go on longing for eternal life—a part of him which, simply and starkly, *knows* that

it cannot die; yet a part that defies definition and which he continually misconceives when he attempts an ordinary explanation?

During the two hundred years of American history when people were spreading out and settling in, learning the rules of survival, finding out how to make things grow, how to cross the plains, how to become fabricators and exploiters, how to accumulate wealth, how to produce merchandise and how to market it all over the world—during that time hardly anyone asked about immortality or pursued anxious inquiries into the inaccessible meaning of life. Men were too busy doing things they became proud of—things that are still, unhappily, the envy of the world.

But not for long. Continent-building has been overdone. Our habits of achieving seem to be life-destroying. Already a substantial part of what economists call the Gross National Product results from picking up the pieces, repairing damage, treating (not curing) our ills, and guarding against fearful dangers—activities which are all anxiously remedial and managerial, not productive at all. They make little real sense, and reduce the sense of everything else.

In his latest book, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl sums up the modern spirit:

> Albert Camus once contended "There is but one truly serious problem, and that is . . . judging whether life is or is not worth living." I was reminded of this recently when I was given a report in which I see a confirmation of what I said before, namely, that the existential question of a meaning to life and the existential quest for a meaning to life are haunting people today more than their sexual problems. A high-school teacher invited his students to present him with any questions they might wish, and they were allowed to do so anonymously. The questions ranged from drug addiction and sex down to life on other planets, but the most frequent subject—one wouldn't believe it!—was suicide.
>
> . . .
>
> Consider today's society: it gratifies and satisfies virtually every need—except for one, the need for meaning! One may say that some needs are even created by today's society, yet the need for meaning remains unfulfilled—in the midst of and in spite of all our affluence.

In his conclusion to this section, Dr. Frankl writes:

> Sigmund Freud, it is true, once wrote in a letter to Princess Bonaparte: "The moment one inquires about the sense or value of life, one is sick." But I think that, rather than exhibiting mental illness, someone worrying about the meaning of life is proving his humanness. One need not be a neurotic to be concerned with the quest for a meaning to life, but one does need to be a truly human being. After all, as I have pointed out, the search for meaning is a distinctive characteristic of being human. No other animal has ever cared whether or not there is a meaning to life, not even Konrad Lorenz' grey geese. But man does.

Our troubles are now well known, but the moves we are making to remedy them remain uncertain. The return to a natural life, for some by leaps, for others with only an inch-by-inch change, is perhaps the most familiar example of the quest for meaning. But the leap of the mind to the affirmation of immortality, or to serious wondering, gradually becoming more intense, about a future life—these are also characteristic of the search. Late last year the California Museum of Science and Industry put on an exhibit called CONTINUUM—the Immortality Principle, which illustrated the great change in feeling and attitude of mind about the nature of man. The exhibit was explained as "presenting human speculations on the possibility of continuing consciousness," or "a report on man's concepts of his own immortality." Something of a keynote is taken from Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Socrates says:

> If the soul is really immortal, what care should be taken of her, not only in respect of the portion of time which is called life, but of eternity!

Perhaps the most interesting part of this exhibition was the section devoted to "reincarnation research." This involves investigating immortality as a process well within

die are reborn. This, at least, we can understand. longing for eternity is a part of our experience, finite segments of experience during which the This is something we are able to think about tendency which takes over when we try to think of are able to understand a succession of

As a principle of continuity for souls, differences among even the members of the same connection with the Buddhist idea of Karma, the sense of justice obtains at least a hypothetical sown in a prior existence.

the individual into an intermediate condition, would be the effect on a human community, if all another life, and then another, and another after Death would no longer be an evil, but a passing more than temporary borrowings from the good perhaps to improve in some way or other. That, children would be recognized as visitors from a perhaps in some other relation than as a parent.

reason for "believing" anything, they may be a immortality is the best to wonder about. For

REVIEW
SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

SOMETHING of the reason why we asked for a review copy of *In Pursuit of Coleridge*, by Kathleen Coburn (published in London by the Bodley Head, 1977, and distributed here by Clarke, Irwin & Co., Toronto, $12.50), is given at the beginning of the last chapter:

> Towards the end of that summer of 1959, work on Volume 2 [of Coleridge's Notebooks] being virtually completed, I meditated a little on the whole experience of editing Coleridge.
>
> Could I have endured him in the flesh? As a person he could be childish, irritating, even infuriating, he could also be wise, extraordinarily sensitive, gently sympathetic, and charming. As well as being full of zest, generosity, and intelligent awareness of those around him, he could be jealous, self-pitying and sometimes disgustingly obsequious. In short this great man, who endeared himself to so many and had a broad and profound influence on his time, was full of personal miseries and unheroic weaknesses. But in the end there was always a certain magnitude of mind, if not always of emotion, though often that too. He picked other people's ideas off the trees everywhere—to look at them in the light of his own acute observations, to judge them with originality, and to combine ideas by his own logic so as to confront us with the great issues, of life and thought and creativity. Perhaps as a contemporary I might have shared the Wordsworths' increasing despair and their limited view, now I see it as their loss, their lack. And even at that, Wordsworth said that Coleridge was "the only wonderful man" he had ever known. Certainly in our own time, now that the fragile creaturely veil is torn away, we can see, unimpeded, his greatness—a courageous, inquiring, inspiring spirit. No other writer so perpetually and so deeply astonishes me.

We wanted to know more about Coleridge's thought, what he believed, and why, so we asked for this book. Years ago we came into possession of his *Biographia Literaria*, constituted of sketches of his "literary life and opinions," published in 1853 by Harper and Brothers. It is a mine of philosophic insights, speculative flights, and earnestly serious inquiry into the nature of poetry. Coleridge and Wordsworth wanted to understand what they were doing, or trying to do, and their efforts resulted in some profundities that have hardly been equalled since. What is gained by reading Coleridge on how the mind of a poet works, or ought to work? One may gain the realization that such direct inquiry into one's own mental processes may bear rich fruit. This sort of thinking is evidently worth doing.

Coleridge (1772-1834) was above all a man of imagination. Being acutely self-aware, he studied how imagination works and set down his findings in *Biographia Literaria:*

> The Imagination then I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate: or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.
>
> FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

Here is a poet's recognition of the processes the psychoanalysts talk about, although they say much more about free association (the wanderings of fancy) than about imagination as a primary power. Why is it that the psychologists of the past hundred years or so have devoted so much study to the mere reflex actions and involuntary behavior of human beings, giving practically no attention to the *potencies* of the mind? Why are its *capacities* ignored?

Coleridge was a man who tried to understand the energies and tools of his art. The impact of the art comes first for most people. No one could finish high school, a generation or so ago, without having felt it. Who can forget certain lines from Xanadu? Coleridge is a magician. What mysterious currents brought him those wonderful words in such perfect order? What inner sense of drama formed the framework of The Ancient Mariner? Is this extraordinary world of mind and feeling to which the poet invites a world more real than the dirt or pavement we walk on?

Is it important for great poets to know what they are doing? Coleridge would have said so. He knew, for one thing, "that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre," and that not all parts of a poem can be poetry. He wrote:

> My own conclusions on the nature of poetry, in the strictest use of the word, have been in part anticipated in some of the remarks on Fancy and Imagination in the first part of this work. What is poetry?—is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.
>
> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. . . .
>
> Finally, Good Sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

Why has the desire and ability to write in this way so diminished in our time?

Miss Coburn does not tell us in her book, although anyone fascinated by Coleridge will enjoy reading her from beginning to end. In *Pursuit of Coleridge* is a kind of detective story, in which the poet is the heart of the matter but also quite incidental. What the book reveals is the mind of a healthy-minded and friendly scholar—what it is like to be a scholar in the twentieth century—and what are the adventures of one who sets out to put before the world of learning the rich store of materials on which a great poet and thinker drew. In this book Coleridge has a part which reminds you of the Holy Grail. He pervades its pages, but you never meet him. There is, however, a little of the atmosphere he created and gave to posterity. Like Keats, Coleridge thought philosophy of great importance, and being far more learned than Keats he read all he could find on the subject, making copious marginal notes in his books and filling notebook after notebook with ideas for future work.

Kathleen Coburn, a teacher of English in a Canadian college, went back and forth between Canada and England, using her summers to search for the Notebooks in the closets of Coleridge's descendants, most of whom became fond of her and gave what help they could. She went everywhere Coleridge had gone, climbed the mountains he climbed, and visited Malta where he had taken refuge from opium and a forbidden love, becoming the busy private secretary of the British High Commissioner of the island.

What one gets from her book is a growing appreciation of the greatness of a quite fallible and imperfect human being. How, indeed, can anyone reach so far beyond himself? Coleridge's influence on the American Transcendentalists is well known, but Miss Coburn's account of a professional indexer with whom she worked seems more revealing of the gift of the poet—of, that is, his art:

> At first her stern Puritan upbringing, or perhaps just a personal reserve, made her critical of one she regularly referred to as "Mr. Coleridge." Why did "Mr. Coleridge" want to write down on paper, even for himself, all the things he did write? However, after a few months I heard that she was offering to others my arguments for the defence and that her friends were setting conversational traps simply to

> provoke her into doing so. One day when I was driving her home in a thick blizzard through slow traffic that gave opportunity for ample talk, she made a characteristically honest confession of the softening influence of STC on her. In reporting someone's misfortunes or mistakes or unhappiness of some kind, she said, "Well, it's really all her own fault . . . " and then stopped herself short. "Oh no," she said, "that's not true." With a sheepish smile she turned to look me in the eye. "Thanks to Mr. Coleridge I don't think that way anymore."

Miss Coburn unearthed in England the *Philosophical Lectures* that Coleridge had given in 1818-19, edited them from an imperfect report, and saw them through the press, and is now presiding over publication of the twenty volumes of an edition of his complete works, six of which had appeared by 1977. Meanwhile, the *Notebooks*—of which there are fifty-six—are appearing in separate publication, in five double volumes. The present book, on doing all this work, reports engagingly on the romance of the author's monumental undertakings.

COMMENTARY
WHAT IS MAN?

THE account of Coleridge given by Kathleen Coburn (at the beginning of this week's Review) recalls the contrasting descriptions of the human being found in Shakespeare. He has Hamlet say:

> What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!

Yet in *Measure for Measure,* Isabella's portrait is equally apt:

> But man, proud man,
> Dressed in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
> His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
> Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,
> As makes the angels weep.

And melancholy Jaques is justifiably sardonic in *As You Like It:*

> At first the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
>
> And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like a snail unwillingly to school.
>
> And then the lover, sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad made to his mistress' eyebrow.
>
> Then the soldier, full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth.
>
> And then the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lined, with eyes severe and beard of formal cut, full of wise saws and modern instances; and so he plays his part.
>
> The sixth stage shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, With spectacles on nose and pouch on side, his youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide for his shrunk shank and his big manly voice, turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound.
>
> Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

The polarities are very nearly too far apart for reconciliation, making us, even in serious thinking, creatures of mood. Yet, noticing this, we are able to understand both sides of the dialogue between Atum and Osiris (see page one), and grasp the point of Edward Conze's explanation of "Mr. Smith's" difficulty in gaining a philosophic conception of eternal life. Well may the Duke in *The Comedy of Errors* ask, reaching beyond appearances:

> Which is the natural man, and which the spirit? Who deciphers them?

Truly, wondering about immortality must eventually return us to a Shakespearian way of thinking, letting go for a time our preoccupation with psychic experiment and such things as brain-waves, and even exciting matters like reports from those who have almost died. The human being seems a mixture, an unstable combination of earthly and unearthly elements or parts. Thought about an immortal life puts us in the position of the human Osiris who wants to know what will happen when the earthly elements are left behind. How can we get along without them? And how much of *us* will be left after "transfiguration"? These are morally muscular questions which no experiment—save for self-experiment—can help to answer.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
CONSCIENTIZATION

A LOT of good things come out of Minnesota, we're not sure why. Perhaps some reader who lives there will offer an explanation. Meanwhile we have a very rich book from Minneapolis, *Teaching Human Dignity* ($7.95), put together by Miriam Wolf-Wasserman and Linda Hutchinson, of which Jonathan Kozol says: "At last we have, assembled in one book, exactly the kind of collection—realistic—grass roots—that the nation's teachers need. It's a fresh, strong, non-dogmatic anthology of some of the best work done by teachers from coast to coast."

Miriam Wolf says in her introduction:

> . . . no one person can create a serious philosophy of education or of social change except by receiving and transmitting signals from the powerful energies that are around. So the fact that this is a book by many teachers offered to Every teacher says what is says. And the fact that when the original textbook publisher dropped the ball, a collective of dedicated people decided to publish the book who had never before in their lives published a book but knew they had to publish this one—that fact also says what it says.

The publisher is the Education Exploration Center, P.O. 7339 Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, Minn. 55407, which calls itself "a resource center for the exchange of knowledge among educators and other social-change agents."

There are many ugly things going on in our society. There is oppression and injustice. Instead of ignoring these realities, how can teachers use them as part of the learning experience? This is the question Miriam Wolf sets out to answer, with a fairly tough-minded approach. In one introductory section she says:

> In the present, we are trapped in a dialogue dominated by power. I, and other writers, have described the dynamics of the school as an instrument of power elsewhere. Here I only remind you that power generates antagonism and interferes with learning and teaching, and that therefore one of the social-change teacher's first tasks is to find ways to dilute the power in the classroom with which she or he is invested by the state. (This does not mean abandoning responsibility as an adult and teacher.)

Most people, she says, come out of and live under conditions of oppression, and a portion of the book is devoted to making the experience of powerlessness "a subject matter for study in school." How?

> The rationale for this proposition is (1) that the life and learning energies which are paralyzed by oppression can be released through exploration of the sources of the oppression; and (2) that some spirited peoples' struggles to overcome powerlessness can be an inspiration to others. This is especially so where there is a strong and natural identification of the learners with the models. So the great autodidact Frederick Douglass will be a more inspiring model for Black children struggling with the printed word than Abraham Lincoln or the principal of the school or Sidney Poitier.

An account by Mona Mellis on teaching black children to read brings in the background of the black struggle for education:

> In the United States, Black people have struggled for two hundred years to educate themselves. During the 1820s and '30s, after the great wave of slave rebellions laws were passed denying learning to slaves. In secret, Black people read and wrote and taught one another, sometimes helped by whites, all risking death or mutilation.
>
> To read and write was to be able to escape with after-dark "passes," to move between towns, to read signs, to write one's name, all skills legally allowed only to "Freedmen." The strategic importance of knowing the progress of the Civil War, events on other plantations, rebellions, was well understood by slave-owners who outlawed the talking drums as well as reading and writing.
>
> And now, today, one hundred years after Reconstruction and twenty years after the Supreme Court decision to integrate the schools, the learning of reading is considered a technological feat beyond the grasp of many if not most Black children. This lesson plan aims to view reading from an historical and political perspective.

One teacher used "theater games" in connection with historical material. If the class is "alive and spontaneous," she says, then the happening or other material is turned into plays, scenes, and paintings. An example is the story of a slave woman who ran a midnight school:

> In Natchez, Louisiana, there were two schools taught by colored teachers. One of these was a slave woman who had taught a midnight school for a year. It was opened at eleven or twelve o'clock at night, and closed at two o'clock a.m. . . . Milla Granson, the teacher, learned to read and write from the children of her indulgent master in her old Kentucky home. Her number of scholars was twelve at a time and when she had taught these to read and write, she dismissed them, and again took up her apostolic number and brought them along to the extent of her ability, until she had graduated hundreds. A number of them wrote their own passes and started for Canada.

This story is first told to the children:

> It is important to tell the story in your own words, having eye-contact with students and the flexibility to stop and explore questions and inspirations. In the discussion, deal with the reasons why the school was held at midnight, what it would be like to be a student in it, why reading and writing were important in order to escape from slavery.
>
> My method at this point is to play a mime game, "Build the Where," in which each player in turn enters the classroom and finds or brings one (imagined) thing into it and by pantomime shows the others what it is. Opening the window that is found, or placing a book, reading it for a moment, etc. After the players have "created" the Midnight Schoolroom in this way, a diagram can be drawn on the board so that everyone agrees on the layout. Then the class can improvise the scene of the secret school; ways in which the pupils come in and go out; the lesson that is conducted in whispers, the long tense moments of listening to identify a noise outside.
>
> The students may then wish to write the scene down, record it on tape, or paint it. It may be the basis for writing or telling other stories and scenes from poetry.
>
> At the end of the session each student should receive a copy of the original reading.

In a letter to Miriam Wolf, a man who had had experience in Stelton and Mohegan—anarchist-founded schools begun early in the century—deplores the ignorance of the present generation of radicals about such devoted efforts. He tells this story:

> I was sitting in a friend's house and about 8 or 9 young people came in to discuss setting up a commune and a Summerhill-type school to go along with it. . . . I listened for about an hour, [then] I said, "Look, what you propose to do is not precisely new. Behind you there is a copious history of experience, especially in the U.S.A. where communal living goes back long before Brook Farm, and what is more many of these had a school for children which was the center of all activities of the community. . .
>
> I said, candidly, "If you think by your efforts you will change the world, and that is why you are starting all this, it would be best to lower your sights, be more humble, or you are doomed to failure. If you think that you yourselves will benefit by the experience, most of you will, some will not. If you are thinking of the children, I've known some kids for whom this was the wrong experience, but for the great majority of kids, they will have a good time, be able to look back to a happy childhood, and this itself makes the effort worth all the trouble it will take. And it is my own hard-earned principled belief that if you are going to use the children as a whip with which to beat the capitalist dog, this is not right. That is indoctrination and I am simply against indoctrination of little kids who cannot know how to defend themselves in these matters. . . .
>
> I found to my surprise that no one even asked me a question. They just went on yakking, their hopes and dreams and anti-establishment stuff. . . . Thinking about it afterwards I had that distinct feeling that generations simply don't learn from each other, and so condemn themselves to repeating the same errors. . . .

Well, this may be mostly true, but some members of some generations learn from the past; they are the older ones who keep on doing what they can.

FRONTIERS

Two Reality Testers

THE way people define problems and objectives has changed enormously during the past thirty or forty years. Two articles in *Resurgence* for last September-October will illustrate. One is by a school teacher who is discouraged by the open unwillingness of his high-school students to learn. He thinks back eight years to the time when he decided to give up on higher education for himself. His work toward a Ph.D. had become meaningless

> I am on my way to becoming a member of the scientific elite: soon I will be an expert in a highly obscure branch of carbohydrate chemistry. But my heart is not in the work. I have had enough. . . . I walk into my tutor's office one morning, and announce I am leaving.
>
> "But I thought you were getting on well with your work," he answers.
>
> "It's all so useless. I don't feel I can do it any more."
>
> He came out with the standard inept reply, "How do you know? It may be, one day."
>
> I proceeded to tell him that although it was interesting to know how to prepare terminally tosylated derivatives of pentitols, although I could calculate the angular velocity of the moon about the earth, work out the probability of finding an electron in a region of negative energy, etc., I'd had difficulty lately in trying to grow radishes, supposedly the easiest of vegetables to grow. Neither could I neatly darn my socks, I had no idea how bread was made, I couldn't begin to say how a house was built, nor how you would keep a cow, nor how you would knit a pair of gloves, nor what you did if a woman on the Tube went into labour. And I was rather worried about the future of the human race. . . .

There is more, describing things he learned and did after quitting, but there were further discouragements. He had a job on a farm where he found out how to make good soil, how to build a greenhouse, and how to grow fine vegetables and beautiful flowers, but,

> The farm has been sold, small herds do not pay any more. I have returned to the academic world to take a one-year teaching certificate at Reading University. Maybe I can bring some light into kids' eyes.

Then there was more discouragement.

The other article is "What Is Self-Sufficiency?" by Ruth Wheeler. After contrasting the foolish romantic notions and the sardonic caricatures of this idea, she says:

> The reality of self-reliance is something altogether different. Before trying our hands at this way of life my husband and I used to speculate and visualize ourselves in the new role. However, when we had these daydreams about producing our own food and living from the land, we were unable to allow for the reality of aching backs, sore, chapped hands, and that total, overwhelming exhaustion when one has become acquainted for the first time with one's own limitations. It's a bit like meeting yourself for the first time.
>
> But digging, ploughing, milking, sowing, scything, harvesting, that's only scratching the surface. Unless one is ill, and then one wouldn't presumably be attempting self-reliance anyway, physical strength can be developed and it's not too difficult. The main stumbling block is the mind. Mental strength is equally, and in some ways more important than physical strength.

The psychological changes a pioneer may go through are vividly described. The worst comes when one is tired through and through and the novelty of the Great Experiment has worn off. If one's store of money runs out at the same time, almost certain failure is at hand. One can of course obtain a stipend (for a while) from the State, but that is no real solution. Now comes some common sense:

> Although the purists in the self-sufficiency movement tend to frown on those who hold down a full- or part-time job along with living as natural a life as possible, this is surely more akin to self-reliance than the shams who put up a convincing front while sneaking off to the nearest DHSS [Dept. of Health and Social Security] after milking the goat! Like the eccentrics, these people do the movement a lot of harm and the honest workers must suffer the derision which they invite.

Ruth Wheeler and her husband were able to go through this ordeal and come out at the other end:

> It's always very difficult for the survivors of crisis and extreme stress to explain to those who haven't experienced it just how cathartic it can be. It's like being let out of prison. Personally, I can explain it thus. Before coming to a remote island to live what is by most standards a fairly primitive life, without even the most basic amenities, I was a very inhibited person. In other words, I had, for most of my life, stayed within the confines laid down by others—parents, educators, employers, etc. I had been conditioned to measure my achievements by the standards of others and thus expected reward and retribution accordingly. Here, on my little croft, there is no one to direct me, no one to assess my efforts and tell me whether my work is good or not. If we have enough to get through the winter then we assume that our work hasn't been in vain. If we starve then the standard of achievement is self-evident. If one has the strength to break this conditioning then this is the first step toward self-reliance. To some, the need for praise and reward is so deeply ingrained that it cannot be forgotten.

But there is a sometimes friendly critic:

> We do indeed have a boss—Nature. . . . There are no set hours and the pay is dreadful, in the material sense. Nature is hard and demanding. You can give the job all you have; you can weed that garden and look after your plants like premature babies in an intensive care unit and she'll still come along and lay your crops low with a freak storm or wind. You can be a caring and expert stockman and still your animals may drop dead without warning. Overall she's not too bad, for once in a while you'll be rewarded with the best vegetables you've ever seen and the world's most perfect calf or kid. First, though, you'll be tested to the limits, and beyond, of your capabilities and endurance.

Further common sense has to do with which tools and labor-saving devices to keep, or get and use, and which to let go. Our ancestors, Ruth Wheeler points out, weren't satisfied with primitive methods:

> Most of them were striving for what we in the modern world have—that's surely why we've got it.
>
> So, it's important to sort out the myth from the truth and decide what is a reasonable existence. . . . Some of our technical inventions are good, labor-saving and pretty essential. Hence one needs the ability to discriminate. . . another giant step toward self-reliance and self-confidence.