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SKEPTICS AND TRUE BELIEVERS—A DEADLY SYMBIOSIS

[Last November, some 900 members of the People's Temple, the creation of Jim Jones, an Indiana-born politico-religious leader, drank poison and died, some willingly, some under pressure, on the order of Jones. This mass suicide of men, women, and children took place in the jungle settlement of Jonestown, Guyana, on the northern coast of South America. They had come there in 1977 from the San Francisco area, where Jones had been active since the middle 60s. While no known survivors witnessed the mass death, a little before the event one of the participants spoke proudly of "revolutionary suicide" to further the struggle against fascism and racism. Jones was found dead from a bullet in the head.]

THERE are two reactions to the People's Temple tragedy that would be deeply mistaken.

One would be to dismiss the event with a bewildered shrug as an unaccountable aberration. It *is* an aberration—in the sense that disease is an aberration of the healthy body. But when disease is chronic or threatens to become epidemic, it cries out for diagnosis and cure. It must have our attention. So too the lethal fanaticism of People's Temple, which once again confronts us with a disease of the mind that has repeated itself too often in the mass movements and sectarian violence of the modern world.

The other, more likely mistake would be to write off all "cults" indiscriminately as social evils, and to call for their investigation and harassment, or at least for their unrelenting denigration in the public eye. This would be to forget how much that is invaluable in our cultural heritage has been incubated in the committed fellowship of cults, sects, and esoteric fraternities often gathered around an inspired leader. Need we recall that once Christianity was a community of twelve comrades drawn together in witness to a messianic founder, and Buddhism a mere handful of monks serving an illuminated master? The cults of the modern world include the Mennonites, the Brethren, the Amish, the Bruderhof—all gentle and retiring pacifists. The Quakers, who have for so long been numbered among the most precocious democratic and humanitarian forces in Western society, began their history as an outlandish sect of enthusiasts guided by an obstreperous prophet whose loyalty to "the inner light" transcended all law and convention.

We really have no choice as to whether we will or won't have cults and charismatic leaders among us. They are among the irrepressible constants of human society. No amount of official persecution or popular disapproval seems able to wipe them out; if necessary, they persevere underground as forces of unrest and rebellion. They may even survive, as they frequently have in our secular era, by casting off their obvious religious characteristics. The turbulent age of democratic revolution through which we are still passing found its seedbed in small, often secret societies of fervently committed comrades. The style of these cadres may be militantly agnostic, but their concern for ideological purity, their zeal for revolutionary justice, their devotion to prophetical leaders—Saint-Just, Mazzini, Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fidel—all this is surely the residue of religious passion.

The media, always in search of convenient stereotypes, would have us think of the New Age cults as a uniform breed of mindless, dope-damaged zombies programmed for unquestioning subservience to Svengali-like masters. Comparisons to Naziism abound in commentaries and features dealing with People's Temple. To a degree, the dropped-out, spaced-out, pathologically dependent adolescents who became the Manson family may have fit that image. People's Temple did not. Its disciples covered a broad social spectrum: black and white, old and young, affluent and penniless, educated and. semi-literate. Nothing strains the understanding

more than the fact that so many working-class, adult blacks—people long schooled in the hard knocks and racist treacheries of life—should have so gullibly delivered their money, their hopes, and at last their lives into the hands of a deranged white messiah. It is not as if they had no place else to turn in the local black community of San Francisco for religious sustenance and social action.

More untypically still as New Age cults go, the Temple was as much a left-wing political crusade as a church. In the course of the seventies, its social program grew steadily more disaffiliated from what Jim Jones came to regard as a "fascist America" and drifted rapidly toward outspoken communist sympathies. Literature I received from the Temple as much as ten years ago often read like the radical press in its treatment of Vietnam, Chile, Iran. Interviewed a few days after the mass suicide in Guyana, one of Jones' surviving disciples in San Francisco, an articulate young white, protested, "People keep saying we're some kind of religious cult. We're *socialists.* We'll always be socialists." And, reportedly, right up to the last, Jones was flirting with the fantasy of moving his following to Cuba or the Soviet Union. We are not familiar with such a bizarre mixture of faith-healing evangelism and Marxist ideology. It should warn us—as do the examples of the Manson family and the S.L.A.—that fanatical violence can be as much the result of paranoid politics as of paranoid religion.

If we avoid these two mistaken responses, what are we left to do? The "we" I speak of here is primarily those who live the life of the mind, for whatever their influence may be: the academics, intellectuals, clergy, publicists . . . those who worry their way into print over such issues. We can ask what it is that drives people to such terrifying extremes of self-enslavement, and what responsibility we may bear for keeping them from that dire choice.

Why do people surrender their freedom to totalitarian masters? The answer is not that they are morally weak. People who sacrifice all they have and are, even for a corrupted cause, cannot be evaluated that cheaply—not if we would reach out to them in charitable support. Rather, they are morally desperate. Even at their ugliest, they act from an overwhelming desire to possess and serve a transcendent ideal. No matter how brutally the Hitlers, Stalins, and Reverend Joneses of the world may finally betray that craving for absolute commitment, they first of all awaken and liberate it. They dignify its existence by letting it be publicly professed and lived. For that, they win the undying devotion of their followers. Then, of course, they go on to feed that moral hunger on hatred and to harness it to their own ruthless uses. If they are Svengalis, the device they use to rivet their victims' attention is our finest human quality: the aspiration for self-transcending purpose.

To so much, regarding the psychology of true believers, many might agree. But from here forward, we face a decisive parting of the ways in the intellectual community. To one side, there are those who see moral aspiration as an inherently tragic element in our nature, believing that there is nothing in all the universe that answers to its need beyond our own tentative and arbitrary inventions, nothing that can assuage its longing except heroic resignation before the alien void. And to the other side, there are those like myself who believe that the pursuit of transcendent meaning manifests an authentic vocation that is as real a part of the world as any physical object, and as capable of being examined, discovered, known. From this viewpoint, the highest mission of intellect is to clarify that vocation in the light of our unfolding historical experience so that we may one day offer it a universal response.

A truth that remains true and is many times repeated runs the risk of being mistaken for a cliche, and then restless minds may be piqued into looking for more refined notions somewhere beyond the simple reality of the matter. One such truth is that the intellectual life of modern society is an ethical vacuum created out of doctrinaire

skepticism and relativistic philosophy. Since the Age of Reason, the most gifted talents of the Western world have been predominantly invested in the proposition that nothing is absolute, nothing is sacred, that knowledge is bounded by numbers and empirical fact. All of us who have passed through the standard curriculum of higher education have learned the lesson, mastered the style. Confronted with moral zeal—our own or that of others—we reach for our guns, fearing the fierce energy that lies hidden in this mightiest of human passions. So it is that those who are most responsible for educating that zeal default; they respond with a studied negativity, or resort to clever ploys and put-downs, never realizing that it may be as dangerous to repress the moral needs of people as we have learned it is to repress their sexual needs.

Only think back over the past few years: how many reports, documentaries, studies have we had that have played village atheist with the preachers and the swamis, the cult leaders and true believers? And notice how often the discussion stops there, content to discredit and debunk, offering nothing to the hunger for moral certainty which reaches out to these figures. For, indeed, few of us know how to nourish that appetite; it is no part of becoming learned in our society to deal with such responsibilities. On the contrary, the very meaning of "enlightenment" in the modern Western world is to insist that reason and intellect are the hammer of all absolutes, instruments of radical doubt and critical subversion.

I would not argue that many other societies in the past have found more graceful ways of handling the ethical and metaphysical needs of their members; some have done far worse. They have purchased dogmatic certainty at the expense of becoming cruel, authoritarian regimes. But it is the distinction of modern intellectual life in the West that so many of us have turned ourselves into religious illiterates as a matter of principle.

Alfred North Whitehead once observed that

> The common sense of the eighteenth century, its grasp of the obvious facts of human suffering, and of the obvious demands of human nature, acted on the world like a bath of moral cleansing. . . . But if men cannot live on bread alone, still less can they do so on disinfectants.

His words remind us of the fissure that runs through our culture. At the bottom, the ordinary millions who cannot diet on the disinfectants of critical intellect continue to nurse transcendent longings, for this is, at last, a deep, natural need of our kind. So they flock in record numbers to born-again preachers; they cast horoscopes and puzzle over the I Ching; they sign up with Scientology, Krishna Consciousness, and the Course on Miracles. For the most part, people grope their way into these commitments, and where they finish is little more than a matter of spiritual roulette. Often the first thing that comes along to offer ungrudging hospitality to their capacity for wonder and their need for metaphysical anchorage captures their complete allegiance. Perhaps it will be something wise and gentle; too frequently it is a commercial gimmick; in a few unhappy cases, it is vicious nonsense. But no amount of mocking and scolding will stop people from taking the gamble.

Meanwhile, on the intellectual heights a Himalayan distance away, we have an exquisite culture of doubt and despair which interprets the peculiar, transitional anxieties of modern society as an essential feature of the human condition. The major themes of that culture—angst, absurdity, alienation—are now so much the commonplace of contemporary art and thought that they can serve as the stock in trade of satirists like Woody Allen and Jules Feiffer. In these lofty regions, a courageous air of cosmic abandonment passes for the leading fashion of the day, and conducting autopsies on dead gods is a freshman philosophy assignment. As long as this remains the prevailing intellectual posture, what else can we expect but that those who lack the necessary Stoic fiber to hold the stance for a lifetime will take their spiritual needs to "anti-intellectual"

sources for gratification? Nor should we be surprised that demagogues and commercial opportunists rush forward to exploit the situation, for those needs are power lying in the streets waiting to be seized. In effect, these two elements breed off one another in a kind of deadly symbiosis. By indiscriminately denying the validity of all the absolutes to which spiritual need would offer its allegiance, secular skepticism leaves the field open to quacks and rascals. The quacks and rascals are then free to announce the futility of intellect and to appeal to blind faith and gut feeling. Which, in turn, confirms the skeptic's position that religious conviction is intellectually squalid and socially dangerous. It is as Yeats warned: where "the best lack all conviction, the worst are full of passionate intensity."

I think few of those who have learned to navigate the skeptical orthodoxy and existential terror that dominates the contemporary cultural mainstream realize what an emotional toll this gruelling style of life and thought takes of the public generally—even among those who have never seen a Bergman or Fassbinder film, never attended a Beckett or Pinter play, never read Sartre, Camus, Heidegger. Nevertheless, word reaches them that the sophisticated tastes of the day run to nightmare art and nihilistic philosophy; it filters down and gets around that the great minds of the time believe we live in the eclipse of God, where the purposeless gyrations of subatomic particles are counted more real, more fascinating than the ideals and teachings toward which the human spirit reaches out. All this is a steady, grinding pressure of tough upon tender minds that finally drives the desperate toward blind, fanatical commitments.

It is really no great feat to recognize Reverend Jones, Charles Manson, the Maharaj Ji for what they are—frauds, fools, or opportunists. Picking apart their doctrines is like shooting fish in a rain barrel. It is an easy exercise in basic cynicism, and it convinces nobody who is vulnerable to their appeal and has nowhere else to turn. The great unaddressed challenge of our time begins beyond that task of logical demolition; it is to reassess the spiritual need to which these charismatic figures attach themselves. What do we make of that need? Do we, with Freud, regard it as an illusion that deserves to have no future? Do we, with Marx, dismiss it as an opiate of the backward masses? With the positivist philosophers, do we discard it as a meaningless confusion of language, or with the existentialists, do we revile it as a cowardly retreat into bad faith? With the behavioral psychologists, do we analyze it as so much noise in the programming of the human biocomputer? And do we, then, continue to scorn and scold all those who weaken to the appeal of absolute values?

Or do we, with some humility, at last begin a respectful dialogue with those who cry out for guidance, recognizing their longing as a reality and a glory of our human condition, as much our own as theirs?

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REVIEW
A MELLOW BOOK BY JOHN HOLT

AFTER reading John Holt's new book, *Never Too Late* (Delacorte, $10.00), we began wondering, not so much what to say about it, but why we enjoyed it. There is a particular reason. When a man writes book after book on one subject, and when he is something of a campaigner—as Holt has been for the needs, rights, and possibilities of children—you tend to think of him as some sort of embodied abstraction, without ever asking what else he may stand for or do with his life. Some distortion inevitably results. Human beings are not animated Causes; they have lives of which work for causes may be an expression; and if the work is good, this is accounted for by an underlying symmetry in life, giving the work for the cause balance and staying power.

Never Too Late is John Holt's autobiography. He calls it his "Musical Life Story," but it may be a better account of his life than one without a particular focus would be. Two things make Holt's life interesting. One is his knowledge of and devotion to teaching children. The other, which we hadn't known about until now, is his devotion to music. We had gathered in a casual way that there was music in his life—in one of his books he tells about the three-year-olds who liked to touch his cello, and even play with it a little—but not that musical sound is at times almost as important to him as breathing.

Holt's joy in melodies, in songs and chamber music, in the experience of making music for oneself, brings recognition that here is a man who has managed, without worrying about it, not to grow old. Of course, to be over fifty is not *old*, but he seems to savor, along with a few adult pleasures, the things that excite the spirits of children. No wonder he gets along so well with them! No wonder they like to have him around. He's a real companion.

This book is not about "education," yet everything Holt writes is about education because of the way he thinks. He hadn't been playing the cello for a year when a bright eight-year-old demanded that *he* give him cello lessons. The boy felt that Holt, whatever else he did, wouldn't destroy the fun in his attempt. Fortunately, Holt's first teacher knew that this was the most important thing there is in teaching anyone how to play a musical instrument. If the pupil doesn't experience the joy of making a sound—a sound that he likes to hear—there will be no real learning. No music results.

One day Holt came to his teacher for his own lesson and heard another student playing. The sound was technically correct, but spiritless. There was "no shape to the phrases, no color, no poetry, no feeling." A machine could do as well.

> As I was getting ready to play I asked, "Who is that?" Hal said it was someone who had just started to study with him. After a moment or two, he asked, "How long do you think he has been studying the cello?" I said I didn't know, probably a little longer than I had. Hal told me he'd been studying seven years. I said, "Seven years! Who's he been studying with?" He named one of the world's great cellists, an internationally known concert player, professor of cello at a hotshot music school, and so on. I said, "What in the world has he had this guy doing?" Hal said, "Playing exercises." Poor devil, he had had his seven years of drudgery, and still hadn't begun to have any fun with his cello. . . .
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> Once again I thought how lucky I was to have the teacher I had. I thought also of what Sam Piel had told me about his teacher in New York, a very old but (among cellists) famous teacher. Sam had asked him one day what exercises he should play. His teacher said, "Exercises! Exercises! Why play exercises? Play *music!* When you find something hard in the music, learn to play it beautifully. Make that your exercise!" Much of the time I follow this advice. On the other hand, there are many exercises I *like* to play.

Holt rambles on, recollecting, free associating, but everything he says relates to teaching and learning. The good teacher, quite evidently, is the one who knows that you have to teach yourself. The most he can do is to help you find out how.

> A few years ago I was asked by the Music Educators National Conference, meeting in Boston, to give a keynote speech. When the time came, I surprised them by saying that I was not going to talk about teaching arithmetic or reading, but about music. I told them, among other things, the story of this boy, my one cello pupil. Then I said to them, "My credentials for talking about music teaching are modest, but real. The only person to whom I ever taught music *still loves* music! How many teachers can make that claim?" They laughed, as I had hoped they would. But I was serious. The question How many of my students still love music? is one that all music teachers might well ask themselves.

It will help, of course, in the enjoyment of this book to know a little about music, but this isn't really necessary. A reader can enjoy a novel involving flying a jet airplane without really understanding the technical routines the pilot goes through. If the writer knows about these things and weaves the material into the story (without letting it get heavy), then, instead of being bored by the technical stuff, one's sense of reality grows. Technique is a basic obstacle in learning to play an instrument well. This is especially true of a stringed instrument, since the technique—apart from muscular development and sensibility of the hands and wrists—is mostly inside the person. How does a violinist or a cellist know where to put his finger to make the right pitch? There are no frets, as in a banjo or guitar. You just have to do it right. This haunted Holt for quite a while. Then, one day, after whistling an air he liked, it dawned on him that he didn't have to know *how* fingering is done! He could settle for that because he already had. He hadn't the faintest notion of how, when skipping around whistling a jumpy tune, he hit right on the pitch. He hadn't sent any instructions to his tongue or other muscles in his mouth. They knew how to focus the breath so that the pitch was true. This was something that came naturally. No lessons or strain, just listening and whistling were involved. So with fingering. He would just do it. He got better at it fast after this discovery.

But playing the cello well cannot be easy and it is not easy for Holt. How do you deal with the torture of being a dub, working with other musicians who often play rings around you? Holt is at his best in telling about this problem and how he handles it. He looks at his imperfect capacities as just so much raw material he will learn how to use as well as he can. This is what he has to work with, and *all* he has to work with, and he will make the best of it. It turns out to be enough. Holt is not greedy. He enjoys what music he can make.

> The great soloists, like Starker and Rostropovich, and the Boston Symphony players, are so far beyond me that I don't even think, much less worry, about being that good. But I sometimes feel discouraged when I think how much I will have to improve just to be as good as the other players in my orchestra. To have to work so hard to get not into the major leagues, but just the lowest of the minors! But then I realize that this business of comparing myself with others, or berating myself because (so far) I can't do what they do so easily, is silly. The baby learning to walk does not reproach himself every time he falls down. If he did, he would never learn to walk. When he falls down he gets right up and starts to walk again. Just the other day I saw a little girl at this stage; she was walking like someone on a ship in a very rough sea. In the hour or so I was near her she must have sat or fallen down thirty or forty times. Up she rose each time and went on her way. Not being able to do what she was trying to do may have been a nuisance, but not failure, nothing of which to feel guilty and ashamed.

Well, this is sort of elementary. Why does John Holt keep the reader's attention? Because he is totally uninterested in being fashionable—because, whatever his shortcomings, he seems never to have been touched by the artificialities of civilization. These things pass him by, and he doesn't mind in the least the surprise some people may show because he ignores so much. He has no interest in pretending. There is a sense in which this makes life pretty simple, although not easy. You have clarity of ends and try to reach them. It may be hard, but what of that? It's hard to learn to play the cello at forty or fifty. Hardly anyone does this, but Holt has found it a lasting delight.

> What I am slowly learning to do in my work with music is revive some of the resilient spirit of the

> exploring and learning baby. I have to accept at each moment, as a fact of life, my present skill or lack of skill, and do the best I can, without blaming myself for not being able to do better. I have to be aware of my mistakes and shortcomings without being ashamed of them. I have to keep in view the distant goal, without worrying about how far away it is or reproaching myself for not being already there. This is very hard for most adults. It is the main reason why we old dogs so often do find it so hard to learn new tricks, whether sports or languages or crafts or music. But if as we work on our skills we work on this weakness in ourselves, we can slowly get better at both.

What has all this to do with Holt's social ideals? Quite a lot. In his introduction he writes about days and places where people made their own music instead of just listening. "J. B. Priestley once wrote that the working class people he grew up with in Yorkshire knew more about music, and made more music, than the much richer working class of today." Something of what he is getting at in his playing is conveyed by Holt's recollection of an article by the German conductor, Eugen Jochum:

> The article said that he had grown up in a town in Germany with a population of about two thousand, and that in that town there had been a symphony orchestra of 75 players and a mixed chorus of 150, who played and sang much of the great music. It may well be that this town was not typical, and that not every little German town had music making on this level. Still, if we had only one tenth this much music making in Boston (or any town or city), we would have an orchestra in every neighborhood, and many quartets and chamber groups in every block. What a city, what a country that would be to live in! I would like to do all I can to bring that city and that country closer.

COMMENTARY
NOBLESSE OBLIGE

WHY, asks Mr. Roszak in this week's lead article, do people surrender their freedom to people like Jim Jones? What needs to be added to the "will-to-believe" and the longing to know? Why are the "followers" of modern cults so vulnerable?

His answer seems to be that the intellectual classes—the men of learning and scholarly attainment—have ignored the yearnings and high aspiration of human beings and have themselves made a cult of low-rating all visionary dreams. The masses join cults, the classes form coteries, and one is as bad as the other. The coteries, perhaps, are worse, for the reason that they thrive on egotism and self-praise.

People with learning have lost the first principle of their calling—the service of others. The brahmin, in Eastern tradition, is a *servant* of the people. He does not seek wealth or worldly distinction, but is a beggar in these matters. The responsibility laid upon the individual of learning is to be a model in all that he does. Krishna told Arjuna that "whatever is practiced by the most excellent men, that is also practiced by others. The world follows whatever example they set."

It is a counsel of perfection and most difficult to fulfill. Tolstoy, who tried very hard, became humble because of his failures. All men who attempt to be real teachers experience this discouragement. It is a wholesome thing, since it does away with pride and conceit.

No human can learn much of anything from "authorities." Being *told* stops the learning process. The good teacher understands this and never violates the rule: People have to learn for themselves. A wise teacher learns how to throw people back on themselves in ways that are not discouraging. The Socratic ignoramus knows how to teach, and is recognized by the Oracle as the wisest of all.

Yet there are secrets and mysteries involved in acquiring intelligent self-reliance. We *can* learn from one another. The great books *are* great. One basic task of the teacher is to explain how a book can be valuable without being an authority. There are great temptations to do something else, as Theodore Roszak shows. The man of learning has one thing above all to learn about himself, summed up by *noblesse oblige.*

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
SCIENCE AND MYSTICISM

WE had some trouble understanding Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, and therefore let it alone. While several readers recommended the book, we let it alone because what we read in it seemed now and then to pull rank on the ordinary reader, and for critical comment you would need to be either an accomplished physicist or an accomplished mystic. We pretend to neither so we let the book alone. Now, in the Winter (1978/79) *American Scholar*, a professor of physics (who also writes for the *New Yorker*), Jeremy Bernstein, tells us that while Mr. Capra's physics seems sound, it is dated, and the critic has other objections to the book, such as vague parallels which, he says, seem based on "accidental similarity of language as if these were somehow evidence of deeply rooted connections."

It seems likely that this critic is right. In any event, his concluding comment applies to various books based on similar parallels:

> The Oriental mystic's view of the universe is a gentle one. There is a feeling of harmony about it. But when a writer—any writer—says that the parallels between any branch of science and some mystic view of the universe are valid "beyond any doubt," my blood begins to freeze. The most valuable commodity that we have in science is doubt. In modern physics we have learned to doubt nearly everything that our predecessors believed only a few decades ago. It is not that they deliberately set out to mislead us, but rather that they simply did not know what we know now. In this respect the one thing that I am sure of, beyond any doubt, is that the science of the present will look as antiquated to our successors as much of nineteenth-century science looks to us now. To hitch a religious philosophy to a contemporary science is a sure route to its obsolescence. To say, as Mr. Capra does in the introduction to his book, that its readers "will find that Eastern mysticism provides a consistent and beautiful philosophical framework which can accommodate our most advanced theories of the physical world" is, as far as I am concerned, either to say that this framework is so vague that it can accommodate anything or to say that the validity of Eastern mystic philosophy will stand or fall with that of modern physics. I do not see how one can have it both ways.

Now comes a comment which seems just right:

> This is not to say that there is no place for a mystic sensibility in scientists. Many of the greatest of them—Einstein above all and Newton before him—have had profound mystic feelings about the universe. These have come about, I think, from the scientists' sense of wonder at the comprehensibility of the universe, of its laws and workings, and that these could be grasped by the human mind. That comprehensibility Einstein saw as the "eternal mystery."

What, then, ought scientists to do with their mystic sensibility? Mr. Bernstein names two, who can be looked up, and Erwin Schrodinger's *What Is Life?* might be added as another illustration. There is also the biologist Lyall Watson's *Gifts of Unknown Things* (Bantam), or certain parts of it. Early in his book this writer tells what a hologram is—a kind of photographic image made with laser beams in which every part is somehow a picture of the whole. "No matter what part of the plate you choose to use, the view is still the same. This is the momentous thing about a hologram—every part contains the whole." The hologram, Mr. Watson suggests, gives us a "connection to the cosmos." Then he says:

> This notion of continuity keeps cropping up.
>
> It can be found in the works of Whitehead and Leibuiz, of Spinoza and Heraclitus. It is embodied in the poetry of Whitman and Blake, of Verlaine and Baudelaire. It is a recurring theme in all Hindu Upanishads and in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. It is the mainstay of every ancient mystical tradition and it is the essence of the modern science of ecology (although few who use the word seem willing or able to take it to its logical limits). But most important of all, a sense of oneness is at the core of every system of belief, every view of the world, held by every child everywhere.

To be a scientist and not to lose the child's acceptance of wonder seems to be what this writer is rooting for:

> Children have a very powerful sense of the propriety of certain things. They believe that rocks and houses are alive, that bears and elephants have feelings, and that it all matters. Every child of five knows everything there is to know; but when children turn six we send them to school and then the rot sets in.
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> I wish there was some way of reconciling formal education and natural knowing. Our inability to do this is a terrible waste of one of our most valuable resources. There is a fund of knowledge, a different kind of information, common to all people everywhere. It is embodied in folklore and superstition, in mythology and old wives' tales. It has been allowed to persist simply because it is seldom taken seriously and has never been seen to be a threat to organized science or religion. It is a threat, because inherent in the natural way of knowing is a sense of rightness that in this time of transition and indecision could serve us very well.

Well, we know what he means. Every child has this sense of reality. For the imaginative child, it leads to wonderful forays of fantasy. For the imaginative scientist, it leads to books like those of Loren Eiseley. Such writers help you to launch yourself on imaginative explorations of your own.

Mr. Watson goes on:

> Both poet and scientist deal in human truths, but we have relinquished control of our destiny to science alone—and that is a mistake, because scientists are missing something. Galileo thought comets were an optical illusion. We know they are not, but our scientists have delusions of their own. There are whole areas of experience left unexplored because they conflict with current orthodoxy. Most of us pass by on the other side with our senses discreetly averted, but fortunately there are some whose curiosity cannot be so simply circumscribed. Poets and children and other wise and primitive people often stop to look and wonder. Some try to tell of it, but the words they use are simple ones, full of mystery and rhyme, and the scientific journal has yet to be founded that would accept a report in blank verse whose sense was in the sound and not in the syntax.
>
> The grammar and the goals of science are incompatible with certain kinds of truth. There are levels of reality far too mysterious for totally objective common sense. There are things that cannot be known by exercise only of the scientific method.

This writer constructs no answers. He raises questions. We haven't finished his book, but its one object seems to be to stir the reader to think unfamiliar or unconventional thoughts, put him on his guard, then set him free.

There is this in the last chapter:

> In the first few years of life, everything has a magical quality. Before minds ossify into the channels prescribed by the current educational formula, all events are shrouded in mystery. They take place in a world where anything is possible. . .
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> Do you know beyond doubt that your thoughts have no influence over your environment? No modern physicist shares your certitude. The most advanced cosmologies all include consciousness as an active participating factor. And the new equations are very much like the old beliefs of children everywhere. Undogmatic young minds are much concerned with magic, and as a result they arrive at descriptions of reality that seem to us faulty, but in the final analysis prove to be far more meaningful than those we contrive by the elaborate exercise of logic and contingent mathematics. It seems that merely by admitting the possibility of unlikely events, you increase the probability of their occurrence. And the cosmos is filled with unlikely happenings.

A lot of odd things are described in this book, but most impressive of all is the common sense of the writer, who never lets you feel dependent on him.

FRONTIERS

Something Hard to Do

IT is commonly supposed that the way to work for community is to find some like-minded associates, agree on objectives, and after acquiring a piece of land somewhere, start a garden and construct some dwellings. Historically, no doubt, many communities have come about in this way. Comparatively few people, however, are now able to cut themselves loose from what they are doing and take off for the country. Land, moreover, is not easy to locate, and when you find it, it may be too expensive. Good agricultural land in California is worth thousands of dollars an acre, and to pay off the mortgage on land like that you have to raise several cash crops a year—become, that is, a money-obsessed businessman, not a farmer. Market considerations design your life.

But getting a piece of land on which to become a farmer is not an essential of community, only one of its various forms. Community is the *meaning* behind a scheme of human relationships—relationships that can exist almost anywhere.

Yet the reason why people who think and write about community usually develop their ideas in a rural setting is obvious enough. Nature is a vast assemblage of living interdependencies and community seems to fare best in such surroundings. Moreover, to be decently poor in the country is at least possible. Being poor in the city means living amid ugliness, and sometimes in filth. There are exceptions, of course—lovely places created by ingenious people who have excellent reasons for staying in the city, and who make community centers out of their homes—but the spontaneous longing for a country environment is not a false leading of the imagination. Cities, for the most part, are places which have been spoiled by commerce and industry, making it harder to get communities going there. Yet considerable ingenuity is also required out on the land, as retrospective articles by present and former communitarians make clear.

What other way is there to look at this question? Well, *why* is it in many ways easier to establish a community in the country? The answer seems simple: In the country, money can be made less important. You can't keep a few chickens in the city. You can't have a goat. The tradition of cooperation originally grew and became established in the country. In the country, when a neighbor has trouble, you help him out. In the city, most of the time you can't help a neighbor directly; all you can do, if, indeed, you happen to know him, is to give or lend him some money, and this may be difficult for him to accept. Life in the city has a cash basis, not a human basis. A particular kind of alienation results—call it the cash nexus, as Marx did, or the market mentality, as Karl Polanyi named it. Richard Goodwin put its effect briefly and well:

> As money took on independent value, personal obligations could be fulfilled through payment—cash instead of services. . . . You no longer owed yourself; you owed money. . . . The earth was transmuted into capital.

Polanyi gave the reasons why this change put an end to community:

> Market-economy . . . created a new type of society. The economic or productive system was here entrusted to a self-acting device. An institutional mechanism controlled human beings in their everyday activities as well as the resources of nature. This instrument of material welfare was under the sole control of the incentives of hunger and gain—or, more precisely, fear of going without the necessities of life, and expectation of profit. So long as no propertyless person could satisfy his craving for food without first selling his labor in the market, and so long as no propertied person was prevented from buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest, the blind mill would turn out ever-increasing amounts of commodities for the benefit of the human race. Fear of starvation with the worker, lure of profit with the employer, would keep the vast establishment running. . . .
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> "Economic motives" reigned supreme in a world of their own, and the individual was made to act on

> them under pain of being trodden under foot by the juggernaut market. Such a forced conversion to a utilitarian outlook fatefully warped man's understanding of himself.

No wonder there is longing for community! In community people are more important than money. This is not to declare money the root of all evil and come out for the barter system, or something like that. Money is a tool and a convenience, not an end in itself. But the market system and the psychology it imposes make money an end. The market psychology makes of economic processes the ruling force in human life. In community, mutually beneficial social and human relations are the guiding light. Without community, social relations are *submerged* by economic rule as something trivial, or even a bit illicit, from a hardheaded business point of view.

Our present institutions are nearly all anti-community. The insurance business, as we practice it, is anti-community. Insurance should never be anything more than a limited substitute for the community spirit. When there is a disaster, everyone in community pitches in and helps. No one says, the insurance will take care of it. No one thinks about how much money one might be able to make out of a fire or an accident. The electronic media are anti-community. They exist to create a demand for goods we don't need, or for adulterated fancy stuff that is seldom as good as the plain stuff we used to buy when we needed it. The advertising business is anti-community. It is death and destruction to the neighborhood shopkeeper and the small producer or craftsman. Mass marketing has the same effect. When every enterprise must get big in order to succeed, smallness becomes a crime against the acquired nature of commercial activity. Mass marketing vulgarizes very nearly all forms of retailing, all forms of entertainment, all forms of recreation.

The real estate business is the enemy of community. The real estate business may perform a few useful services, but basically it depends for its profits on land speculation. A condensation of some observations by a contributor to *Peacemaker* (Dec. 11, 1978) fits in here:

> Land is the most important element in earthly life, because we all depend totally on the produce of the land for our very survival. For this reason land speculation has more importance and impact, more "clout" in the economy, than any other kind of speculative venture. When a person buys land, holds it for a few months or years, and then sells it for two, six, or twenty times what was paid for it, he adds nothing to society's store of value. And when one sells land for an inflated price, the money so gained goes into the market place, either directly or through the bank, increasing the supply of money available to buy goods and services. Price increases naturally result. Since each year there are literally millions of land transactions in the U.S., in which land is sold without improvement for a price far higher than what was paid, land speculation acts as a huge pressure cooker, custom-made to produce inflation.
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> We are taught that "making a killing" in land is smart. And the practice is legitimized by calling it "investment," which is a terrible corruption of that term, for true investment adds value by fuelling the productive process, while land speculation cripples that process. Land speculators hurt their communities grievously, although most of them are unaware that they do so. We all feel the stab of speculators' wounds in our pocketbooks. Their enrichment is our impoverishment, and desperation is driving more and more people to do it, because "everyone does." And not infrequently the poor who own land are forced into speculation.
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> One particularly distressing manifestation of the harm that comes from speculation in land is the fact that a growing majority of Americans—"the richest people on earth"—can no longer afford to buy land for homesites or productive ventures. Land speculators are indeed "making a killing," for what they do tears at the vitals of society and dissolves the glue of human solidarity that allows our social systems to function even as imperfectly as they do. According to recent surveys, most people now see inflation as the darkest cloud on the horizon. There will be no effective cure for this modern plague that does not squarely confront the mistaken practice of land speculation.

That seems a sound analysis, but urging real estate speculators to learn how to lay bricks probably won't work. It took a couple of hundred

years for the market system to destroy community, and it might take at least half that time to restore it. Moreover, not everybody will see the point at the same time. What, then, can we do?

Well, it is possible to practice the community spirit even while doing things we hope will some day become obsolete. It is not necessary to become a fool about money while reducing its importance. For one thing, we all have some choice about where we do business. We can buy in stores which don't have ten brands of some food product when one or two would be sufficient. We can help small dealers to survive by being loyal to them. Gandhi once said that if your local barber doesn't know how to give a good haircut, don't go to the city for yours. Send him to barber school, if that's the only thing that will help. Buy craft products, even if they cost more. Ignore the ugly signs that hide the scenery in the country and jar the sensibility of the eye in the city. Write a letter or two about this. Keep in mind how charming the villages of hundreds of years ago looked, with only a symbol hanging over the door of people who make things for other people. Not even the best architect in the world can make a city street look well so long as merchants compete for your attention with hideous signs in intentionally clashing colors.

Make trust instead of price the foundation of your relationship with the people you buy from. Not always, perhaps, but every time you can. Most human beings, when they feel that they are trusted, become more trustworthy. There are ways to find reliable people in business, even when you don't know very much about what they make or sell. If you are buying some machinery, and are not enough of a mechanic to tell from looking at it whether it will do what you require, then try to find a salesman who used to be a mechanic in the repair department. A mechanic has learned to respect the laws of physics. There is no other way to be a good mechanic. Such a man has been trained to respect the truth. Nobody cons a piece of metal on a work bench. You have to know its properties or you can't shape it into what you want it to be. This is habitual training in telling the truth. It applies to all craftsmen, and what they have learned from the work they know how to do is not something easily brushed aside in order to make a sale. There is an earthy honesty about someone who does good work with his hands, or at least there is likely to be. This quality is fundamental to community and we need to rely on it, encourage it, spread it around.