VOLUME XXXII, NO. 36
SEPTEMBER 5, 1979

THE USES OF TRUTH

THE question of how to stem the accumulating tide of destructive action in the world has only one popular answer. It is that people need to know more about its terrible effects. Horror—and doubtless fear—is held to be a powerful motivator, perhaps stronger than any other. At any rate, the techniques of generating horror are both familiar and available. We know how to dramatize man's inhumanity to man. *Holocaust* claimed large audiences. And photographs of the mutilations and slaughter brought by war sear human feelings. How, we are made to ask ourselves, can such things be?

But do vivid images and precise descriptions of these crimes of human behavior exercise the further influence they are expected to produce? In *On Photography,* Susan Sontag muses:

> The effect is to lower "the threshold of what is terrible." We steel ourselves to be strong, to pass the test of today's art—be cool, not queasy, show you can take it. What is the effect of more serious representations of the terrible—of photos—of Dachau, Vietnam, third world starvation?
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> Photographs of atrocities in Vietnam helped greatly in turning people against war (though similar photos of Korea would not have been effective because the context of opposition to war was not present). Yet such photographs as these, such demands for compassion, which have obviously worked, also wear out as we become familiar with them. Terror becomes banal through repetition. As we see more and more images they anesthetize our senses, alienate us from our own best impulses.

Sixteen years ago, in *Redbook* for January, 1963, Jessamyn West wrote of the violence and horror exhibited for quite a different purpose—an "entertainment" for those who enjoy such spectacles—yet with a general psychological effect that doubtless results from any exposure which makes sudden death seem an everyday happening. Today said this Quaker novelist, "there exists a conspiracy of doubletalk—a conspiracy to dehumanize the victims and whitewash the process by which they are erased." Her meaning is clear:

> Death on the screen is so easy a matter. The fast draw, the quick collapse. We are never permitted to see very much of the man who is going to die. We must not learn to care for *him,* to feel that *his* death matters; otherwise our enjoyment of his violent deed will be weakened. We must never see him as a man who planted radishes, made kites for his kids or patted a dog on the head. . . .
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> By dehumanizing the action (real persons don't die, only the "bad men"), by never giving the proper name to what we see, are we blinded to reality? Is a generation of Americans being prepared for the routine and casual killings of concentration camps and gas chambers, of death marches and saturation bombings, of mass evacuations and 100-megaton explosions? Violence is a big word with sonorous syllables. Do we ever see behind it the small boy with his face blown away? . . .
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> There are many intelligent and thoughtful people who believe that there is too much violence on our movie and television screens and that it is particularly bad for children to see it. But what is really wrong is that the children do not see it. They see only the pleasure of landing a blow without ever imagining the pain of receiving it, without even imagining that the one who receives the blow is capable of suffering pain.
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> The TV screen wherein only bad men die, and then neatly and with dispatch, dulls and kills the imagination—and whatever destroys the imagination limits and ultimately destroys man.

What kind of total do these two sorts of "horror" pictures add up to? Could the well-meant films and pictures cancel the distortions of violence as "entertainment"?

There is another result commonly left out of the calculations of those who want to "wake people up" by means of realistic description or picturing of terrible happenings. We have had, for

example, a number of literary and a few pictorial anticipations of the devastation of nuclear war. A Harvard psychiatrist, Lester Greenspoon, became interested in the response obtained in this way, mainly because of the apparent indifference to an article of his on what people will need to do to survive, if they can, a nuclear attack. He wanted to arouse the readers to take this possibility seriously, but found that his warnings had little impact. After thinking this over, he formulated an explanation:

> The truth about the nature and risk of thermonuclear war is available; the reason why it is not embraced is because it is not acceptable. People cannot risk being overwhelmed by the anxiety which might accompany a full cognitive and affective grasp of the present world situation and its implications for the future. It serves a man no useful purpose to accept this truth if to do so leads only to the development of very disquieting feelings, feelings which interfere with his capacity to be productive, to enjoy life, and to maintain his mental equilibrium.

Dr. Greenspoon quotes an observation by Archibald MacLeish which seems to repeat the conclusion suggested by Jessamyn West. "Knowledge without feeling," the poet said "is not knowledge, and can only lead to public irresponsibility and indifference, conceivably to ruin . . when the fact is dissociated from the feel of the fact . . .that people, that civilization, is in danger." The psychiatrist illustrates:

> When a man can acknowledge the fact that a continued arms race could lead to a nuclear war which might in turn very well mean the death of himself, his family, and millions of his countrymen, without experiencing any more affect [feeling] than he would upon contemplating the effects of DDT upon a population of fruit flies, then he is probably making use of the defense of isolation. In this way people can be quite facile in speaking about the fact that they and their loved ones would undoubtedly lose their lives should a nuclear war break out. They are speaking of death, then, as something quite apart (isolated) from the feelings associated with the concept of total annihilation. They are speaking rather of an abstraction, of something which has no real connection with themselves. One might, perhaps somewhat fancifully, speculate that this defense of isolation is becoming institutionalized in our rapidly developing reliance on computers and cybernation.

He turns to the question with which we began:

> It has been argued by some that solutions to the difficult and dangerous problems which beset the world would be more readily found and implemented if whole populations really appreciated the nature of the present risks. They argue further that ways must be found to *make* people aware, such as showing movies of twenty megaton bursts during prime television time. The consequences of such an endeavor might, however, be disastrous. For if the proponents of such a scheme were to achieve their goal, what they will have done is to have overwhelmed these defense mechanisms and left people burdened with feelings they might have no way of coping with constructively. Contrary to expectations those activities they might seize upon could very well result in just the opposite of lessening world tension. . . . he who would have others know "the truth" must take into account what "the truth" would mean to them and how they would respond to it. The truth has a relativity in interpersonal affairs; it has meaning only in relation to people, and this meaning is often difficult to anticipate. The messenger of "truth" bears part of the responsibility for the results of his effort. ("The Unacceptability of Disquieting Facts," a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Science in 1962.)

The stress here is on the responsibility of the communicator. Although he sets out as reformer, staunchly convinced that he knows what other people need to know, he may prove himself quite ignorant of how people learn, and of the effect upon others of what he regards as "truth" that must be spread around. Ultimately, this is the responsibility of all artists and writers. What is the effect of what they do?

We may recall that Simone Weil, in *The Need for Roots,* drew attention to André Gide's *Caves du Vatican,* calling him to account for the behavior of the book's "hero," who pushed someone off a train in Italy, simply to prove his "free will," as he said—that he was "capable of committing any act whatever, however motiveless, unrelated to preceding events." Such books,

Simone Weil declared, "have exercised an influence on the practical conduct of life of hundreds of young people, and he [Gide] has been proud of the fact." She added: "There is, then, no reason for placing such books behind the inviolable barrier of art for art's sake, and sending to prison a young fellow who pushes somebody off a train in motion."

Well, what should we do? Never write, not even read, about the terrible things human beings do to other human beings, or allow to happen? Was *Holocaust* a mistake? Shall we not inquire and tell about the children who waste and die from malnutrition all over the world—nor show the pictures of their wasted limbs and distended stomachs? Or is Jessamyn West right in saying that we need to know about these things but see them in a framework of human understanding, not isolated from the normal symmetries of human life?

But the world itself, it may be claimed, suffers from extreme distortion! The society of today continually commits these isolations, and there is no appropriate framework for exposing such crimes. So we are driven to the admission that there must be a right way of showing and writing about these things. They should not be hidden or suppressed. But how should such material be used? What will give it the needed effect?

The question has no easy answer. The hazard of being an artist, a communicator, a revealer, is always with us. Quite possibly, it is useless to try to meet this question with some abstract formulation. Both reality and art would be lacking. Happily, something of an answer is available in what one writer, a contemporary scholar, found himself compelled to do. This man, Philip Hallie, had become a specialist in the study of inhuman cruelty. At the beginning of his book, he tells how he began to investigate another possibility of human nature:

> One afternoon I was reading some documents relating to Adolf Hitler's twelve-year empire. It was not the politics of these years that was at the center of my concern; it was the cruelty perpetrated in the death camps of Central Europe. For years I had been studying cruelty, the slow crushing and grinding of a human being by other human beings. I had studied the tortures white men inflicted on native Indians and then upon blacks in the Americas, and now I was reading mainly about the torture experiments the Nazis conducted upon the bodies of small children in those death camps.
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> Across all these studies, the pattern of the strong crushing the weak kept repeating itself and repeating itself, so that when I was not bitterly angry, I was bored at the repetition of the patterns of persecution. When I was not desiring to be cruel with the cruel, I was a monster—like, perhaps, many others around me—who could look upon torture and death without a shudder, and who therefore looked upon life without a belief in its preciousness. My study of evil incarnate had become a prison whose bars were my bitterness toward the violent, and whose walls were my horrified indifference to slow murder. Between the bars and the walls I revolved like a madman. Reading about the damned I was damned myself, as damned as the murderers, and as damned as their victims. Somehow over the years I had dug myself into Hell, and I had forgotten redemption, had forgotten the possibility of escape.
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> On this particular day, I was reading in an anthology of documents from the Holocaust, and I came across a short article about a little village in the mountains of southern France . . .

This village, which had a population of about 9,500 in 1942, became a place of pilgrimage for Philip Hallie, and in consequence of what he found out there he wrote *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (Harper & Row, 1979, $12.95), a labor of love and gratitude. The town, Le Chambon, and its people who lived through the war, freed him from the imprisonment of his focus on cruelty.

The *Chambonnais* had been staunchly Huguenot since the early years of the sixteenth century. They knew full well the meaning of persecution, having endured it for three hundred years, and their vigorous pastor, Andre Trocmé, was himself of Protestant descent. He was also an uncompromising pacifist who rejected both violence and deceit. At the suggestion of a Quaker leader working in the region, Trocmé

resolved to harbor all Jews who came to Le Chambon for refuge from the Nazis, and to help them leave the country by an underground route. In 1949, when the Petain-appointed minister for youth came to Le Chambon, a student of a school Trocmé and a pacifist associate had founded handed him a letter:

> Mr. Minister:
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> We have learned of the frightening scenes which took place three weeks ago in Paris, where the French police, on orders of the occupying power, arrested in their homes all the Jewish families in Paris to hold them in the Vel d'Hiv. The fathers were torn from their families and sent to Germany. The children were torn from their mothers, who underwent the same fate as their husbands. Knowing by experience that the decrees of the occupying power are, with brief delay, imposed on Unoccupied France, where they are presented as spontaneous decisions of the head of the French government, we are afraid that the measure of deportation of the Jews will soon be applied in the Southern Zone.
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> We feel obliged to tell you that there are among us a certain number of Jews. But, we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching.
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> If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, received the order to let themselves be deported, or even examined, they would disobey the orders received, and we would try to hide them as best we could.

Hide them they did. A year later Trocmé said in a letter:

> . . . in the course of this summer we have been able to help about sixty Jewish refugees in our own house; we have hidden them, fed them, plucked them out of deportation groups, and often we have taken them to a safe country. You can imagine what struggles—with the authorities—what real dangers this means for us: threats of arrest, submitting to long interrogations. Today, because the Germans are now occupying the Free Zone, we are closer to the French authorities here. . . . these facts about the help being given to refugees in Le Chambon are advertised throughout the south of France: from Nice to Toulouse, from Pau to Macon, from Lyon to Périgueux, passing through Saint Etienne, it is by tens, by *hundreds* that Jews are being sent to Le Chambon.

Then, after the war—he lived until 1971—Trocme estimated that during the occupation of France about twenty-five hundred Jewish refugees of all ages found concealment and help in Le Chambon. How all this worked—in spite of the Gestapo raids, only one of which was successful—in spite of the threat to the lives of the French Protestants and cooperating Catholics, and in spite of the arrest and imprisonment for a time of Trocme and his colleague, Edouard Theis—makes Mr. Hallie's book. Interestingly, the French who took part in this incredible rescue operation all indignantly deny that there was any "heroism" involved "There was nothing else to do," they said. There was of course loss of life and transport to death camps for some of the French who protected the Jews. The Nazis punished them for their humanity.

What shall we say about this book except—read it? Writing it restored the balance of the author, and reading it will help to renew for the reader the feeling that there really is a decent world where people do what they ought to do because it is *natural* for them to do it. That world exists in human hearts. Some may say it was kept alive in Le Chambon by the uncompromising religion of the French Huguenots, who in the past had endured cruelties as abhorrent as almost anything the Nazis were capable of. But Trocmé's wife, Magda, as strong in her way as he was in his, had an undefinable secular faith. She explained:

> I have a kind of principle. I am not a good Christian at all, but I have things I really believe in. First of all, I believe and believed in André Trocmé; I was faithful to his projects and to him personally, and I understood him very well. Second principle: I try not to hunt around to find things to do. I do not hunt around to find people to help. But I never close my door, never refuse to help somebody who comes to me and asks for something. This I think is my kind of religion. You see, it is a way of handling myself. When things happen, not things that I plan, but things sent by God or by chance, when people come to my door, I feel responsible. During André's life during the war many many people came, and my life was therefore complicated.

There is no imposing program of philanthropy or reform in these words, but reading about how Magda Trocmé applied her principles from day to day gives them luminous meaning. There was crisis after crisis, and interminable confrontations with Petain's French officials and the German investigators. Trocme and the people of Le Chambon—with him in all he did, as faithful friends and supporters—formed a wall of moral resistance.

Why were they so determined? Why didn't they weaken under stress? It was not because they had been told of the horrors that awaited the Jews in the death camps. They didn't know about the death camps.

> As a matter of fact, the extermination of the Jews (as well as of the Gypsies) was going on, but all Trocmé and the people of Le Chambon knew was that "it is evil to deliver a brother who has entrusted himself to us. That we would not consent to."
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> Trocmé did not know much beyond this, but he *realized* what was at stake. . . . Trocmé knew enough about Nazism and cared enough about its victims to realize that what the Germans were doing—whatever it was—was not for the good of the Jews. Perhaps he did not *know* more about Nazism than many other Frenchmen—Hitler's anti-Semitism was no secret in Europe but he *cared* enough about its victims to realize what giving the Jews to the Germans meant for the Jews. . . . The Chambonnais were committed to sheltering the Jews. They would abide by that commitment despite all threats from the governing authorities.

Horror stories had little to do with that commitment, which might better be left without pretense of explanation.

REVIEW

THE LIGHT IS NOT THE FLAME

NOW and then a book is written which will not have a large sale but really ought to be published, and a perceptive editor of some university press decides to put it into print. We first came across Wilfred Cantwell Smith thirteen years ago (MANAS, April 6, 1966) and gave attention to his *The Meaning and End of Religion.* Unlike most books on religion, this one was hard to forget. It is a clarifying book on a very fuzzy subject. The author, who teaches Comparative Religion at Harvard, ought to be known to a lot more people than those who are going to be professional instructors in religion. Probably there shouldn't *be* any professional instructors in religion. (On this question, the Jews seem to have the right idea. The rabbi is not a priest; he is a scholar.) Religion is too important a matter for there to be specialists or authorities on it.

Prof. Smith has now written another book—*Faith and Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1979, $18.50)—which gives coherence to the great change the modern world is going through in its feelings and ideas about religion. The gist of his 1963 book setting the stage for the present one, is contained in a few short passages:

> The concept "religion," then, in the West was evolved. Its evolution has included a long-range development that we may term a process of reification: mentally making religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective, systematic entity. In this development one factor has been the rise into Western consciousness in relatively recent times of several so conceived entities, constituting a series: the religions of the world.
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> . . . in the course of this present inquiry the adjective "religious" has been retained in use while the noun is rejected. This has to do with a contention that living religiously is an attribute of persons. The attribute arises not because these persons participate in some entity called religion, but because they participate in what I have called transcendence. . . .
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> All man's history is becoming self-conscious; including his religious history. It is also becoming more unified, for good or ill. How man will work out the unification on the religious plane is as yet far from clear.

This *is* what is happening. And as Prof. Smith says the quality suggested by the adjective "religious" is more important than any of the religions or the differences between them.

Faith and Belief pursues further the quest for understanding the "religious" aspect of human life, developing the contrast between faith and belief. Faith, for the author, is the origin and expression of the "religious" attitude, while belief is what humans say, very inadequately, about their faith. This new book looks penetratingly at four great religions—Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity—endeavoring to distinguish between their faith or religious inspiration and the beliefs to which it leads. It is an effort to help the reader to gain a conscious feeling for an undefinable reality in human life—a reality which, when too easily defined, is made into "belief," a mere deposit that wastes away and is often inverted with time. The book is a study of the quality of faith or devotion which lies behind belief in the various religions. The early Buddhists, following Buddha, were in search of a reality behind the pain of embodied existence and the relativities of belief. As the author says:

> The great religious question has always been . . . is there something more? Is there anything beyond the ocean of phenomena that come and go?
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> The Buddha affirmed with vigour that within the ocean, nothing persists. Hence his alleged atheism. Even the gods rise and fall. The ocean is fluid, through and through.
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> He did, however, affirm that there is a "further shore." This phrase echoes through his teachings. He was adamant in refusing to describe it in words, or to encourage his followers to speculate as to what it might look like when they got there. His teaching was concerned not to elucidate the nature of that "further shore," but to delineate how to attain it, to invite people aboard the raft that he saw, and preached, would carry one to it. His seeing that it would carry one across constituted his Vision, his Enlightenment, his Buddhahood. The name of the Other Shore is Nirvana.

No modern logical positivist or linguistic analyst has outdone the Buddha in insisting that human language is incapable of dealing with metaphysical reality, that our terms and categories and conceptual capacities are just inadequate for handling the Transcendent. Nonetheless, unlike most of them, he was sure that it was there—partly through his mystical experience or personal holistic insight, partly for other reasons. He knew it was there—as other people could find out for themselves, he affirmed, by living morally.

Though Nirvana was a distant reality, indescribable, not profitable of discussion, yet the Buddha saw and preached another absolute reality immediately available to every man. . . . That is Dharma: the truth about right living.

Both the Buddha and his followers were resolute in asserting that Siddartha Gautama did not dream up his views on Dharma. It would puncture the whole Buddhist system of thought like a noisy balloon to suppose that the Dharma is simply his ideas, his teachings, something that he constructed. He did not concoct this; he discovered it. . . .

The Dharma that he taught does not owe its validity or authority to the fact that he was a great and wise man; on the contrary, he became a wise and great man because he awoke to its pre-existent truth.

Later Prof. Smith explains that the root of the name *Buddha* means awareness—hence a buddha is one who is *awake.* He is "the man who has waked up to the realities of the universe while the rest of us were sleeping."

Well, can *nothing* be said about faith? The discussion of the meaning of the Hindu term *sraddha* seems the clearest exposition. *Sraddha* "has been held as prerequisite in every one of the various ways of salvation: the way of knowledge, the way of works, the way of devotion, and the way of Yoga."

What does the term signify? In one sense, the answer is altogether simple. It means, almost without equivocation, to set one's heart on. It is a compound of two words, *srad* (or *srat*), heart, and *dha,* to put. Indeed, in the *Rig Veda* the two parts usually occur separately, but even there they are occasionally combined, and later are regularly so. . . . That on which one puts or might put one's heart, in the gamut of India's complex religious life, has been varied. Yet the religious man has been characterized (might we not say, "of course"?) by the fact that he has put his heart on *something* within it.

Faith is our inwardly sensed link with meaning—the meaning humans cannot do without. It is stronger in some than in others:

We human beings differ in the depth and richness and vitality, as well as in the contours, of faith. By being human, we all share in common both the capacity for it and also a potentiality always for growth in it.

Faith can be understood better, I am suggesting—and more importantly, man can be understood better—if faith be recognized as an essential human quality, a normal if priceless component of what it means to be a human person.

Here, in his last chapter, Prof. Smith seems overtaken by a feeling of great discovery. This quality pervades the book and makes it worth reading. Throughout he is considering the various images and concepts of religion, but always there is the indefinable presence of what lies beyond, of which images and concepts are but temporal reflections or shadows. Critical examination of the images and symbols found in religion helps us to realize that the reality is beyond, and that what we talk about, write about, argue about, can never be more than steppingstones or rafts. What Emerson said of Nature can as fittingly be applied to religion:

Nature offers all her creatures to [the poet] as a picture language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value, as the carpenter's stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze. "Things more excellent than any image," says Jamblichus, "are expressed through images." Things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part. . . . Since everything in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not active.

The truly wise man is adept in the use of symbols, yet never mistakes the symbol for its invisible original. We learn from the symbols the diversely rich potentiality of what lies beyond.

"Faith is a virtue," says Prof. Smith, while "Believing is not." Faith, because it defies definition, cannot become a dead letter. Beliefs, because they can be put on the blackboard, organized into a creed, are mortal and fallible and misused. The more stress on belief, the more obsolete the religion. It then dies away. Yet belief was not always, as it is today, the preliminary of skepticism. For us, to say you believe is like saying you may get over it. That is our present use of the term, and Prof. Smith feels that belief has dispossessed faith of its crucial presence and role. Hence his book.

Prof. Smith's way of thinking and writing has a liberating effect on the mind of the reader. Shakespeare, he points out, "knew" something about persons and relations among them that is worth knowing. We "feel" this about him, from experiencing his dramas. But, says the author: "Almost no significant question can be asked about Shakespeare and his plays in terms of what he believed." Yet our ignorance of his beliefs—if he had them in our sense of the word—interferes not at all with our appreciation of his understanding and insight. We continue to be enriched.

What can be suggested concerning Shakespeare's genius seems implicit in a passage toward the end of *Faith and Beliefs:*

> It would be untrue to the facts of human history and to the testimony of the vast majority of our race to fail to recognize the planetary universality of faith, and its centrality to the human condition. At the same time it would be drastically unjust to the experience of those same men and women and their self-interpretation over the ages to imagine that such faith was something to be taken for granted. . . . Faith is beyond apprehension because it is the human potentiality for being human. It is our strange dynamic toward becoming our true selves, or becoming divine.

COMMENTARY
TEACHING AND BELIEVING

READERS of this week's "Children" may recall the claim that when the curriculum at Harvard was determined largely by the "free electives" chosen by the students, the university began to fall apart. The students elected snap courses and didn't get a "well-rounded" general education. Does this make Goodman wrong? Not at all. It shows rather how far we have come from the common sense of medieval teachers. John of Salisbury (died 1180) said: "Those to whom the system of the Trivium has disclosed the significance of all words, or the rules of the Quadrivium have unveiled the secrets of nature, do not need the help of a teacher in order to understand the meaning of books and to find the solutions of questions." And Plato, as summarized by Robert McClintock, said that teachers "could not fruitfully instruct those who would not teach themselves, who would respond only passively to the most convenient appearance; the most teachers could do was to convert inert souls to active study." How this is done remains a mystery, but ignoring it is at the root of modern educational problems. To pretend that all the young who go to college really want an education is a fraud, as Ortega made plain. The need is for a society which refuses support and guidance to inertia, not a clever plan to simplify and transmit dead ideas.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book, *Faith and Belief* (see Review), has a chapter on the changing meaning of the word "belief" which deserves special attention:

> Literally and originally, "to believe" means "to hold dear": virtually, to love. This fact—and it is a hard, brute, fact—provides the underlying force and substance of our thesis. . . . the Oxford English Dictionary [says]: *"Belief* was the earlier word for what is now commonly called *faith.* The latter originally meant . . . 'loyalty to a person to whom one was bound by promise or duty, or to one's promise or duty itself,' as in 'to keep faith, to break faith'." . . . . In the King James Authorized Version of the Bible of [1611] the word "faith" occurs 256 times, the word "belief," once.
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> That is, for the noun. There is, however, no verb in English connected with "faith," as there is in Greek (and, on a more restricted base, in Biblical Hebrew—and for Islamic scripture, as there is in Arabic). Therefore the English translators kept "believe" as a verb, meaning what it had meant before: to love, to hold dear, to cherish; conceptually to recognize, to entrust oneself to, to give one's heart, to make a commitment.
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> In the three and a half centuries since the King James Authorized Version, the word "faith" has not altogether lost its original spiritual meaning, but the words "belief" and "believe" have. One might therefore urge that "belief/ believe" be dropped as religious terms since they now no longer refer directly to anything of human ultimacy. . . . The modern world has to rediscover what "faith" means, and then to begin to talk about that; it must recover the verb, to rediscover what it means to be loyal, to commit oneself: to rediscover what "believe" *used to mean.*

The merit of this book is evident.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
RECALLING GOODMAN

THE thing that makes Paul Goodman an effective critic of educational institutions is that he doesn't look for remedies in institutional reform. The reforms he has in mind come elsewhere and, being fundamental, are much more difficult than changing institutions around. We have been reading in a Vintage paperback which puts together two of his works, *Compulsory Mis-Education* and *The Community of Scholars,* and have made a few notes. One leads to this passage (in *Community of Scholars*)*:*

> The crucial question is not what ought to be taught, but whether the teaching-and-learning makes any difference. Is it committed or merely "academic"? If scholarship makes a difference in the soul and behavior, studies will tend to integrate and focus by themselves, for man is a unitary being, just as in *making* a book, the research will tend to integrate. The underlying then comes to the fore, and this is the classical. It is not grammar that is classical, but to find that one's speech has structure. The classic is not philosophy, but to find that one's science has a method and limits. The humanities begin by finding that one's subject, whatever it is exists in time and place and is the work of men. On the other hand, any abstract outline or ideal curriculum will in practice tend to divide, subdivide, and go dead, like consulting a library catalogue.

Here Goodman is saying something very simple: that there is no teaching-and-learning unless the teachers really want to teach and the students really want to learn. Everything else is fraud and pretense. It is all the other things which make confusion and failure and endless debate about education. Tolstoy put the matter with magnificent brevity:

> If you wish to educate the student by science, love your science and know it, and the students will love both you and the science, and you will educate; but if you yourself do not love it, the science will have no educational influence, no matter how much you compel them to learn it.

Ortega, who writes about the student, has more to say:

> . . . the man who is needful of a science, he who feels the profound necessity of truth, will approach this bit of ready-made-knowledge with caution, full of suspicion and prejudice, submitting it to criticism, even assuming in advance that what the book says is not true. In short, for the very reason that he needs, with such deep anguish, to know, he will think that this knowledge does not exist, and he will manage to unmake what is presented as already made. It is men like this who are constantly correcting, renewing, recreating science.
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> But that is not, in the normal sense of that term, what the student's studying means. If the science were not already there, the good student would not feel the need of it, which means that he would not be a student. Therefore, the matter is an external need which is imposed upon him. To put a man in the position of a student is to oblige him to undertake something false, to pretend that he feels a need that he does not feel. . . . The fact is that the typical student is one who does not feel the direct need of a science, nor any real concern with it, and who yet sees himself forced to busy himself with it. This indicates the general deception which surrounds studying. But then comes the stiffening of that deception, almost perverse in its effect, for it does not lead the student to study in general, but to study broken into sectors leading to careers, with each career made up of individual disciplines, of this science or that. And who is going to pretend that a lad, at a certain year of his life, is going to feel the effective need of a science which his predecessors were moved to invent out of their own necessities?
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> Thus, out of so genuine and lively a need that men—the creators of science—dedicated their entire lives to it, is made a dead need and a false activity. . . Meanwhile, generation after generation, the frightening mass of human knowledge which the student must assimilate piles up. And in proportion, as knowledge grows, is enriched, and becomes specialized, the student will move farther and farther away from feeling any immediate and genuine need for it. . . . That is to say, there is introduced into the human mind a foreign body, a set of dead ideas that could not be assimilated.

Which seems a way of saying that the situation is hopeless. It may not *be* hopeless, but from these caustic and undoubtedly accurate

observations we are able to understand why modern education is such an incredible mess. The situation is not hopeless because there are always a few of those who regard what is offered in the way of education with deep suspicion, and who insist on teaching themselves. They may find some help, but they educate themselves. There is no other education worth talking about.

This is an underlying theme of everything Goodman says. He will not, for one thing, discuss curriculum. There is no master text, no ideal curriculum. "Confusion and pressure can be reduced by simply dropping the whole rigamarole of credits and compulsory attendance, and by having free electives and guidance by a staff meeting of the student's actual teachers who know him." This common sense, of course, will not be adopted. The parents wouldn't stand for it. The students don't know how to choose. Modern industry would insist on a more orderly program. But the rejection of what is sensible, however "democratic," is no reason for assuming we can do anything important without it. If what is good and right won't work in our society, we need a new society. The most important point may be that even in the most artificial and pretentious framework, some real education does go on, although clandestinely, simply because there are always human beings who are able to outwit the system or have the aplomb to reduce its effect.

So long as we have colleges and universities, Goodman thinks they should be run by the members of the faculty, and that as scholars and professionals the faculty should make itself heard in the community:

> My point is not that the university is to take political positions. On the contrary, it must be apart from politics: politics is too transient, not important enough. But it must affirm intransigently the maxims that are categorical imperatives for the teaching, the ideal, of each department of learning, and the public insult to which, indeed, undermines civilized society. And it must try as much as possible to express these home truths not through the isolated voices of individual professors, but as the consensual voice of all the scholars in the departments, and in the name of the university.

If the university won't allow this, then the teachers ought to secede and teach elsewhere—somewhere near a public library. They should rent an old house and practice their profession. Goodman offers a budget for such operations. And an example or two, despite their rarity:

> Another interesting secession is described by Professor Metzger in *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States.* "In 1833 an antislavery society was formed at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati by students and a number of the faculty. The board of trustees banned the society, stating that 'education must be completed before the young are fitted to engage in the collisions of active life.' . . . But the young in this case happened to be rather old—30 of the seminarians were over the age of twenty-six. 'Free discussion, being a duty,' they announced, 'is consequently a right. It is *our* right. It *was* before we entered Lane; privileges we might and did relinquish; advantages we might and did receive. But this right the institution could neither give nor take away.' After firing this broadside, the students removed in a body to Oberlin, where they won the concession that their faculty (which included a professor who had been dismissed from Lane) would supervise them without interference from the trustees." The case, Professor Metzger points out, was "unfortunately atypical. A mass boycott of this kind, reminiscent of the medieval universities, was never to be repeated."

This book by Goodman is not dated, although both essays were written years ago. Its value is evident in the fact that while he writes critically about institutions, and has various proposals to make—which often seem to be about better or ideal institutions—he is really talking about intelligent and mature people and how they would most naturally go about the work of teaching, if the larger society would let them. He writes about institutions because they show what is wrong, but the remedies lie in the initiative and orderliness of people, not in places, programs, and plans.

FRONTIERS

The Ecology of Bad Decisions

CERTAIN realities of human behavior are becoming so evident that it is fair to call them verities—neglected verities, yet verities nonetheless.

For example, a review in the *Los Angeles Times* (June 3) of Barry Commoner's new book, *The Politics of Energy,* beams:

> As you sit in the long gas lines, as you watch the price of fuel creep up; as you listen to plans by government leaders that contradict what they said last month; you may find yourself asking the question: "Have we learned nothing since 1973?"
>
> When President Carter introduced his national energy plan two years back, he called energy "the most important domestic issue that we will face while I'm in office." If Commoner is correct, Carter—and Congress—have failed utterly in comprehending the significance of the growing energy shortfall, and in developing a plan to insure adequate energy for the future.

What is the relevant "verity"? It has various versions. One that applies here appears in a paragraph by Merle Lefkoff in the first issue of the Georgia-published *SUN-REP News:*

> Change comes about slowly in government, because governments are *never* agents of social change. Only people can act as change agents.
>
> Thus government can not be expected to initiate the needed reforms and should not be trusted to do so. . . . We must not abdicate our role as change agents to governmental agencies incapable of initiating change.

This is a late recension of the verity. Another version was given years ago by Vinoba Bhave when, comparing the behavior of conventional leaders in government with the approach of the Sarvodaya workers in India, he said:

> I am sure were we to occupy the position and shoulder the responsibility which they do, we would act in much the same manner as they. Whoever occupies office and wields governmental authority must needs think in a narrow, cramped and set circle. There can be no freedom of thinking for him. He finds himself, as it were, under an obligation to think and act as the world seems to be doing. (*Harijan,* May 2, 1953)

A more biting account was provided by Edward Goldsmith in an editorial in last Winter's *Ecologist Quarterly:*

> Garrett Hardin has said that if a policy has a chance of solving any one of the basic problems facing our society today then it is certain to be unacceptable. If it is acceptable, then we can be perfectly sure that it will not work. He is of course right. The question is why.

After listing the failures of various remedies now being applied, Mr. Goldsmith points out that only technological fixes promise the quick results which politicians believe they must have in order to survive. And this, he shows, is worse than doing nothing: "Technology can do no more than mask the symptoms of this disruption, thereby rendering our disruptive activities that much more tolerable and enabling us to go on applying them for that much longer." This is one reason why we ignore solutions that might work. Why don't we recognize the value of ecological remedies? This is easily answered: "Ecological solutions are inevitably slow since it takes time to reconstitute the largely defunct natural systems whose reconstitution can alone provide lasting solutions."

Another reason for our large-scale blindness is that "the solutions we apply are the only ones that are compatible with the quasi-religious world-view of industrialism whose central tenet is that by means of science, technology and industry we can create a material paradise on earth from which all the problems that have beset man since the beginning of his tenancy on this planet will have been eliminated."

Finally—

> The third is that our society is specifically organized to apply such solutions. It is an atomized society, in the sense that basic social structures such as the extended family, the lineage group, the clan, the tribe, etc., have almost totally disintegrated. The isolated individuals have been reorganized instead into new structures, economic and bureaucratic rather than social ones—the organization that best suits the

> requirements of the market and the bureaucracy and hence that which most favors the achievement of what has become society's over-all goal, the production of the maximum number of goods and services as measured by GNP.

For his conclusion Mr. Goldsmith makes this comment:

> Unfortunately, the professional status, self-esteem and physical livelihood of practically everyone today are *dependent on the preservation of our industrial society, indeed on its further expansion,* and so long as this remains the case, policies that are likely to work must remain unacceptable.

Further elaborations of the verity are hardly needed. But how can it be turned into an axiom for actual decisionmakers—ourselves?

More quotation from the *SUN-REP News*—SUN-REP means Southern Unity Network/Renewable Energy Projects, 3110 Maple Drive, Atlanta, GA 30305—might help. The following is by Kathryn J. Waller of the National Sharecroppers Fund, devoted to the revival and survival of small-scale farming:

> The odds against us are impressive. American agricultural policy over the last 30 years has moved inexorably towards the "Get big or get out" position. The cost to rural America is statistically shocking. Only one half the farms that were viably operating in 1950 exist today. Three million farms have disappeared and every day more small farmers are forced to leave their land or seek off-farm employment. Many migrate to the cities not because they want to but because they have to. For them the options have run out.
>
> And yet the exodus of small farmers from the land has brought neither prosperity to rural areas, nor better, cheaper food to the urban consumer. Research programs geared to the needs of the small family farmer are almost nonexistent. The contradiction, indeed the head-on confrontation, between a world facing a limited energy supply and an agricultural system based on tremendous use of oil seems to be of little concern to our agricultural policy makers.

This first issue of *SUN-REP News* is filled with the good things happening through the independent initiative of citizens in the South. Happily, there are similar papers starting up. The verity is getting around.