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OUR UNCERTAIN IDENTITY

AT some point in our lives we are likely to begin wondering why people have so much difficulty in understanding one another. Various explanations may be worked out, but the one most commonly reached is that they don't *want* to understand why others disagree with them, suspecting, whether consciously or unconsciously, that understanding will also bring insecurity as to their own opinions and interests. The attitude of conceding that one's own opinions might possibly need to be changed is rare, although the assumption that other people's opinions *ought* to be changed is common enough. How, then, do we form opinions concerning ourselves?

The question is difficult to answer, mainly because it is one to which we seldom give attention. Although "Who or what am I?" is an ancient philosophical question, given currency in Western thought by Socrates, philosophical questioning for people who give a great deal of attention to what they want, and how to get it, the problem of identity hardly exists. The answer to it seems irrelevant to what they are concerned with and hardly worth pursuing. Yet today the question of identity keeps coming up, suggesting that we are beginning to suspect that most of our behavior and our puzzling psychological problems are traceable to how we think of ourselves, whether philosophically or otherwise. Already there are numerous books on the subject, mostly of the "self-help" variety, many of them merely fashionable and second rate. Yet in *The Modern Theme* Ortega introduced this sort of questioning long before it became fashionable, and with manifestly serious intent. (This book was first published in English in both Britain and America, in the early 1930s.) Here he regards the lack of a sense of individual identity as a kind of arrested development:

> The psychology of peoples dominated by ancestral ideas and arrested, through one kind or another of historical malnutrition, in a permanently infantile stage is a curious study. One of the most primitive peoples in existence is the aboriginal Australian. If we investigate the way in which the intellectual activity of this people functions, we find that on being confronted with any sort of problem—for example a phenomenon of nature—the Australian does not look for an explanation which is enough of itself to satisfy intelligence. In his mentality, to account for a fact such, for instance, as the existence of three rocks standing together on a plain, is to recall a mythological story which he has heard ever since he was a child, and according to which in antiquity, or, as the Australians say, in *alcheringa,* three men, who were once kangaroos, were changed into the stones in question. This explanation satisfies his mind precisely because it is not a reason or a thought which can be verified. . . . The strength of reason is born of the conviction that it produces in the individual. Now, the Australian does not experience what we call individuality or, if so, he experiences it in the form and to the extent that a child does when it is left alone, abandoned by the family group. The concept of individuality and everything based upon it only produces terror in him; it is a synonym, for him, of debility and insufficiency. Solidity and security are to be found only in the communal condition, whose existence is anterior to that of any individual: for the latter finds it ready-made for him as soon as he awakes to life.
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> This is the traditionalist state of mind which has been operative in our own Middle Ages, and which directed the course of Greek history up to the seventh and Roman to the third century B.C. The content of these epochs is naturally much richer, more complex and more delicate than that of the mind of a savage; but the type of psychic mechanism and its method of functioning is the same. The individual invariably adapts his reactions to a communal repertory which he has received by transmission from a venerated past.

This taking of one's psychic shape and identity from a venerated past was the basis of Plato's opposition to the Greek poets, whose

martial rhythms took possession of the young Greeks, blinding them to the fact that they were moral individuals needing to make decisions for themselves, and not simply to copy the heroes of the *Iliad.* Of the emergence of a sense of independent individuality, Ortega wrote:

> The subjective personality begins by feeling himself to be an element of a group, and it is only later that he proceeds to separate from it and achieve little by little the consciousness of his singularity. The "we" comes first, and then the "I."

Today we are torn between what seems to us the necessity of the "I" and the desirability of the "We" sort of consciousness. Yet we see that the "we" idea of the self does not distinguish between the solidarity and fellowship of the group and the paralyzing effect of absolute conformity. On the other hand the "rugged individualism" of the separate "I" consciousness leads to exploitation, antagonism, and the immeasurable waste of ruthless competition that characterizes the market economy. While we think of ourselves as a highly civilized people who have transcended the communal psychology of traditional societies, we have lost the virtues of the tight community ruled by collective identity. Is there, then, or is it possible for there to be, a feeling and concept of individuality in which the "we" attitude is deliberately recovered, but without needing the bonds of communal prejudice?

A. H. Maslow believed this entirely possible and developed the idea in a concluding chapter in *Toward a Psychology of Being.* He wrote there of Americans who combine "a rather calm, good-humored rejection of the stupidities and imperfections of the culture with greater or lesser effort at improving it." Going on, he said:

> They also showed a surprising amount of detachment from people in general and a strong liking for privacy, even a need for it. For these and other reasons they may be called autonomous, i.e., ruled by the laws of their own character rather than by the rules of society (insofar as these are different). It is in this sense that they are not only or merely Americans but also members at large of the human species. I then hypothesized that "these people should have less 'national character,' and that they should be more like each other across cultural lines than they are like the less-developed members of their own culture."
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> Examples of this kind of transcendence are Walt Whitman or William James who were profoundly American, most *purely* American, and yet were also very purely supra-cultural, internationalist members of the whole human species. They were universal men not in *spite* of their being Americans, but just *because* they were such good Americans. So too, Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, was *also* more than Jewish. Hokusai, profoundly Japanese, was a universal artist. Probably *any* universal art cannot be rootless. *Merely* regional art is different from the regionally rooted art that becomes broadly general—human.

Then, for contrast with these examples, we might consider the classes in the school of education taught by Alton Harrison, Jr., in Northern Illinois University, to whom he showed a film of the life and teaching at Summerhill in England, where full development of individual freedom had been made possible for the students. Harrison's classes, however, did not like the film. More than 90 per cent of them reacted negatively. He studied these students and found that they were "rather passive, shy, introverted, dependent individuals who wanted or needed much structure, supervision, and direction which was not provided at Summerhill." Actually, Summerhill was a school which provided no alternative to freedom! No doubt the students in Harrison's classes would say, if questioned, that they believed in democracy and freedom, but the fact was they preferred the comfort and security of imposed authority. Erich Fromm, we may remember, wrote an entire book about this aspect of human nature. *Escape from Freedom.*

Another kind of identity grows out the excitement that results from a profund cultural enthusiasm, as in the case of the eighteenth-century regard for Cartesian rationalism. For such people nothing counts but the dictates of Reason. Robespierre was an example of this obsessive conviction. Such a man, Ortega remarks in *The*

Modern Theme, "will consider traditional political institutions stupid and unjust."

> As opposed to them, he believes he has discovered a definitive social order arrived at deductively by means of reason. It is a schematically perfect constitution in which it is assumed that men are rational entities and nothing else. This assumption being granted—"pure reason" has always to start from assumptions, like a chess player—the consequences are inevitable and precise. . . . Now, the Cartesian only admits one virtue; pure intellectual perfection. To all else he is deaf and blind. For him what is anterior and what is present are equally undeserving of the least respect. On the contrary, from the rational point of view, they assume a positively criminal aspect. He urged, therefore, the extermination of the offending growth and the immediate installation of his definitive social order. . . .
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> The Constituent Assembly makes "solemn declaration of the rights of Man and of the Citizen" in order "that, it being possible to compare the acts of the legislative and executive powers, at any given moment, with the final aim of 'every' political institution, they may be the more respected, so that the demands of citizens, being founded henceforth on simple and unquestionable principles," etc., etc. We might be reading a geometrical treatise.

Another preoccupation, now common enough since ours is by all accounts an *economic* society, is that self-interest is the true dynamo of human life. Yet as Frederick Turner remarked recently in *Harper's,* "The entirely self-interested individual is clearly a grotesque pathological aberration produced by extraordinary circumstances, the exception that proves the rule."

> Perhaps those circumstances might be reproduced if the impersonal state or corporation were totally to supplant the community (which is what Pol Pot, a devoted student of Rousseau during his years in Paris, was trying to do in Cambodia), but the last few years have shown how durable, indeed how unexpectedly flourishing, are the ethnic, religious, and microcultural communities in the heart of the modern world.

These are several ways in which human beings have revealed their sense of identity, but we should note that what they show is mainly responses either to desires or to situations that need correction, more than carefully thought-out conclusions from a deliberate seeking of the nature of the self. They give, that is, behavioral evidence, not philosophical definitions or accounts. The reason for this is not far to seek. We are complex beings who combine contradictory elements. As a German now working in the United States said of his countrymen: "It took me long years of historical studies to understand how the nation of Mozart, Beethoven, and Goethe could turn into the Third Reich." Then he added:

> It also took me a long time to understand how the relief and liberation my parents experienced at the beginning of the West German-American alliance could turn into a crude hostage situation. Knowing that all nuclear missiles in West Germany are under direct U.S. control, knowing the talk about "limited nuclear war" with West Germany as the battlefield, knowing that the points of total destruction are already marked on U.S. Army war plans, I can not call what West Germany is living in today anything but a hostage situation.

That is one way of contrasting the potentials concealed in human nature. In his *Principles of Psychology,* William James, using his imagination, showed another:

> Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well-dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a *bon vivant,* and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a "tone-poet" and a saint. The thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the *bon vivant,* and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay.

John Dewey, a disciple of James, repeated this conception in less dramatic terms (in *Human Nature and Conduct*):

> There is no one ready-made self behind activities. There are complex, unstable, opposing attitudes, habits, impulses which gradually come to terms with one another, and assume a certain consistency of configuration, even though only by means of a distribution of inconsistencies which

> keeps them in water-tight compartments, giving them separate turns or tricks in action.

If this is so, or even partly so, is it possible for there to remain some notion of real identity, or has the individual human been dissipated into a mist of changing "configurations" with no foundation for actual self-analysis?

Intellectually this question, too, is difficult to answer, yet the fact is that there have been individuals, quite a few of them, who, unbothered by such dilemmas, have organized their lives with high purpose, altered or improved their characters deliberately, and have left their mark on history as great men and women. We contemplate the record of their achievements with wonder and awe and tell our children about such humans. What was it about those individuals that spurred them to live extraordinary lives? In answer we can say simply that great purpose became the meaning of their existence.

How, then, does it happen that this embodiment of purpose takes place in a few, but not in the great majority? Is there actually something in human beings which is capable of overcoming the limitations of heredity, the confinements of environment, and of throwing off the effects of what we call "conditioning"? A noted historian, confronted by this question in relation to his studies, called this mysterious potentiality the "X factor" and invited his scholarly colleagues to always take it into consideration when trying to understand the rises and the falls of great civilizations.

Can we risk trying to give at least a little content to "X"? Is it reasonable to say that in every human being there is a center, a focus, of what we name consciousness, and then, going a bit further, to name that center with the name Leibniz supplied—the *monad?* Call it the principle of transcendence in each one of us, which has an unknown history, yet a *real* history, since on occasion it becomes such a powerful cause in human behavior. It is certainly no "physical" thing, since it models and alters the physical as an athlete does with his physical body. Will is involved, and in some cases wisdom as the compass arrow which guides the will. Imagination, at least in humans, is also a factor, since the direction of what one sets out to do with his life is given, either clearly or vaguely, by this power. And memory is the servant of the imagination—its raw material, so to speak.

Perhaps we should stop here, since abstractions are hard to follow and seldom impress us with conviction, and go to a characteristic human experience of which both psychologists and novelists have taken note—the "I am me" experience. Years ago Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that "everyone in his childhood has been able to observe the accidental and shattering apparition of the consciousness of self." In the Winter 1964 *Review of Existential Psychology* Herbert Spiegelberg wrote of "a personal experience which I have found strangely neglected by both philosophy and psychology," which is "particularly acute in childhood but by no means restricted to it."

> Its most spontaneous expression is the seemingly trivial sentence "I am me. . . . It differs significantly from the mere everyday awareness of selfhood or individuality as signified by the use of the pronoun "I." For the I-am-me experience involves a peculiar centripetal movement not to be found on the ordinary outward turn of our "I"-consciousness or even in the simple statement "I am."

In Richard Hughes' *A High Wind in Jamaica* the novelist has this overwhelmingly intense sense of self overtake a ten-year-old girl. Why, he asks, "had all this not occurred to her before?"

> She had been alive for over ten years, now, and it had never once entered her head. . . . How could Emily have gone on being Emily for ten years, without once noticing this apparently obvious fact?

Bertrand Russell once confessed himself puzzled by his young son's insistence that *he* must *always* have existed. Where had he been, he asked his father, when the pyramids were being built? As Prof. Spiegel put it:

> The "I-am-me" experience, whether sudden or gradually developed, has to do with a very different aspect of personal identity: the sense of "being it," of being the inescapable very me-myself, right now and here. As such the experience has no primary reference to past and future phases in its development nor to other comparable selves. This is, as it were, an experience of self-identity in depth rather than in temporal length and social breadth.

In this experience the entire tangle of threads of the several beings in us—as spoken of by James and Dewey—are blended, becoming the single unity that we mean by "self," a self which thinks and acts and asks itself questions, sometimes obtaining answers but more often not.

Is the impact of the "I-am-me" experience a kind of evolutionary flowering, one level of maturity gained by the monad as a result of its integration with the several layers of its being? And is it conceivable that there are higher levels of self-realization awaiting us in the course of our human development, when further degrees of self-awareness will be achieved? What, for one thing, is the sense of the self that is functionally realized by the individuals named by Maslow—Walt Whitman, William James, Martin Buber, and Hokusai? We may call it a high level of maturity on the part of the indwelling intelligence or ego. To Maslow's list we might add a Gandhi, a Simone Weil, a Jane Addams, and an Abraham Lincoln. How did they think of themselves? What triumph of human development animated their external forms? The monad, it seems clear, is far more than a secretion of the bodily organism, a chance combination of genes. Where did it come from and how did it begin? Where, indeed, were we all when the pyramids were being built?

REVIEW
THE DISTRACTIONS OF IMAGERY

THERE are several reasons for reading carefully Neil Postman's recent book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Viking, 1985), all of them good. His fundamental point, important enough in itself, is that our minds are being dulled and our culture degraded by television. He has a vast amount of evidence to support this claim and he presents it with considerable eloquence and skill. He may exaggerate here and there, but this, as the reader easily discerns, is a useful and permissible use of rhetoric. As a teacher and educator (he is a professor of communication at New York University) he has every right to be concerned with what is happening to our minds and to become a campaigner in their behalf. Moreover, it is a distinct pleasure to read him, since he handles both ideas and words very well. Finally, he makes continual comparisons between our cultural past and the present, providing insight into the way our civilization has developed, dramatizing its decline in the television age. There have been a number of books about this decline, most of them useful and good. Mr. Postman's book is one of the best, since we learn interesting things about our own past.

There is for example this passage:

> During the nineteenth century, scores of Englishmen came to America to see for themselves what had become of the Colonies. All were impressed with the high level of literacy and in particular its extension to all classes.
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> In addition, they were astounded by the near universality of lecture halls in which stylized oral performance provided a continuous reinforcement of the print tradition. Many of these lecture halls originated as a result of the Lyceum Movement, a form of adult education. Usually associated with the efforts of Josiah Holbrook, a New England farmer, the Lyceum Movement had as its purpose the diffusion of knowledge. The promotion of common schools the creation of libraries and, especially, the establishment of lecture halls. By 1835, there were more than three thousand Lyceums in fifteen states. Most of these were located east of the Allegheniees, but by 1840, they were to be found at the edges of the frontier, as far west as Iowa and Minnesota. Alfred Bunn an Englishman on an extensive tour of America, reported in 1853 that "practically every village had its lecture hall." He added: "It is a matter of wonderment . . . to witness the youthful workmen, the over-tired artisan, the worn-out factory girl . . . rushing . . . after the toil of the day is over, into the hot atmosphere of a crowded lecture room." Bunn's countryman J.F.W. Johnston attended lectures at this time at the Smithsonian Institution and "found the lecture halls jammed with capacity audiences of 1200 and 1500 people." Among the lecturers these audiences could hear were the leading intellectuals, writers and humorists (who were also writers) of their time, including Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Louis Agassiz and Ralph Waldo Emerson (whose fee for a lecture was fifty dollars). In his autobiography, Mark Twain devotes two chapters to his experiences as a lecturer on the Lyceum circuit. "I began as a lecturer in 1866 in California and Nevada," he wrote. "[I] lectured in New York once and in the Mississippi Valley a few times; in 1868 [I] made the whole Western circuit; and in the two or three following seasons added the Eastern circuit to my route." Apparently, Emerson was underpaid since Twain remarks that some lecturers charged as much as $250 when they spoke in towns and $400 when they spoke in cities (which is almost as much, in today's terms, as the going price for a lecture by a retired television newscaster) .

Postman's point is that for most of the nineteenth century the American people were literate and enjoyed a culture based upon print. It was, one could say, a natural heritage, for as Richard Hofstadter remarks: "The Founding Fathers were sages, scientists, men of broad cultivation, many of them apt in classical learning, who used their wide reading in history, politics, and law to solve the exigent problems of their time." Postman comments:

> A society shaped by such men does not easily move in contrary directions. We might even say that America was founded by intellectuals, from which it has taken us two centuries to recover. Hofstadter has written convincingly of our efforts to "recover," that is to say, of the anti-intellectual strain in American public life, but he concedes that his focus distorts the general picture. It is akin to writing a history of American business by concentrating on the history of bankruptcies.

Yet Mr. Postman remains unwaveringly faithful to the rationality of the printed word, finding the structure of logic and argument represented in the structure of grammar which gives complexity to the expression of ideas in print. Works based on reason, on rational inquiry, grew out of the devotion of minds to reading and study, not only in the case of writers like Thomas Paine, but also the theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Finney. "It would be a serious mistake," Postman says, "to think of Billy Graham or any other television revivalist as a latter-day Jonathan Edwards or Charles Finney. Edwards was one of the most brilliant and creative minds ever produced in America."

> Unlike the principal figures in today's "great awakening"—Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, et al.—yesterday's leaders of revival movements in America were men of learning, faith in reason, and generous expository gifts. Their disputes with the religious establishments were as much about theology and the nature of consciousness as they were about religious inspiration. Finney, for example, was no "backcountry rustic," as he was sometimes characterized by his doctrinal opponents. He had been trained as a lawyer, wrote an important book on systematic theology, and ended his career as a professor at and then president of Oberlin College.

The passage from the age of reason to the age of entertaining is traced at various levels of our culture—from "thinking in a word-centered culture" to "thinking in an image-centered culture." Postman says:

> The name I give to that period of time during which the American mind submitted itself to the sovereignty of the printing press is the Age of Exposition. Exposition is a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression. Almost all of the characteristics we associate with mature discourse were amplified by typography, which has the strongest possible bias toward exposition: a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for reasons I am most anxious to explain, the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.

The first agencies of transition were the telegraph and the photograph. With telegraphy, "news" became a commodity, valued for its novelty, not for its relevance, while photography began a flow of "images" which engage our senses but hardly our minds. Television brought to insidious perfection the climactic development of imagery as the replacement of intellectual content.

> To put it plainly, television is the command center of the new epistemology. There is no audience so young that it is barred from television. There is no poverty so abject that it must forego television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest—politics, news, education, religion, science, sports—that does not find its way into television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television.
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> Television is the command center in subtler ways as well. Our use of other media, for example, is largely orchestrated by television. Through it we learn what telephone system to use, what movies to see, what books, records, and magazines to buy, what radio programs to listen to. Television arranges our communications environment for us in ways that no other medium has the power to do. . . .
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> There is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre. For the loss of the sense of the strange is a sign of adjustment, and the extent to which we have adjusted is a measure of the extent to which we have been changed. Our culture's adjustment to the epistemology of television is by now all but complete; we have so thoroughly accepted its definitions of truth knowledge, and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane. And if some of our institutions seem not to fit the template of the times, why it is they, and not the template, that seem to us disordered and strange.

The canon of acceptability for the producers of television programs is the measure of entertainment the program provides. Only by

accepting this rule can they stay in business. Aldous Huxley saw this fifty years ago and wrote *Brave New World* as a prophecy of the future. Not Orwell, but Huxley saw what was happening. This is the message of *Amusing Ourselves to Death.*

There are, we might say, two modes of irrational communication—the intuitive, and sense imagery. In some ways, it seems, the intuitive is being heightened in this cycle of human development or life. But the subrational appeal of sense imagery dominates by far. Between these two forms of irrational perception is the function of the mind, or reason, which is all we have to distinguish our "hunches" from our "insights," the distractions of vulgar feelings from the inward voice. Mr. Postman is a valiant defender of the uses and necessity of the mind. He cannot bear to see it dispensed with and calls us to a realization of what is happening to us in the age of entertainment.

COMMENTARY
THE LESSON OF AN ISSUE

WE take a little pride in this issue, which seems effective in all its parts, and feel gratitude for the sources on which we draw—save for the fact that the contents are critical, even devastating—likely to produce depression in the reader. If the articles are paired—Review with "Children" and Frontiers with the lead—they supplement and confirm each other. Judging from what Postman says along with the critics cited in "Children," the prospects for the coming generation seem small indeed. While "human nature" is illuminated in the lead by the quotations from Ortega and supplemented by the observations of Dr. Greenspoon in Frontiers, there is little to provide encouragement in either discussion. Is there nothing more to be said?

Quite a lot more, actually. Some of it has to do with our democratic state of mind. When it comes to bringing about change, we naturally incline to the taking of inventories of public opinion, finding out how all the people think and have thought about projected change. Intelligently interpreted, polls and opinion surveys generally reveal that changes—except in the case of national catastrophes or revolutionary situations—come about slowly through the gradual spread of ideas, which sometimes grow in appeal through the collaboration of unexpected events, sometimes hardly being noticed until they are accomplished and taken for granted.

So the few that see the urgent need for change usually sit back and wait, counseling others to do the same.

This, however, overlooks the fact that at the beginning of every great change of historical and moral significance, there is always at least one, or maybe two or three, individuals who not only conceive of the change, but also recognize the historical moment when there is the possibility of moving others in the same direction. Martin Luther was a man like that. So was Thomas Paine. And so was Abraham Lincoln. There have been similar men and women in other lands—some only brought to death by their efforts, as in the case of Socrates and Bruno, and others who were in a way successful, like Gandhi, although Gandhi, like Mazzini and some others, at the end realized that the change that had taken place was in certain ways superficial and still awaited the inward transformation on the part of the people to make it a permanent achievement.

Yet there had been gains—gains in the increased awareness of a larger "few" who kept on working under circumstances shaped by the complacency of the great mass. These "few" come to know, by their own experience and the study of history, that fundamental changes have always a profound religious inspiration, which may eventually find political expression, but this is never accomplished at the political level of affairs. Politics uses the techniques of manipulation, whereas actual growth by education—which is always self-education—regards manipulation as the enemy of all that educators attempt to do. The rule of manipulation is the elimination of self-denial and the fostering of conceit. The rule of growth is the practice of self-denial in the interest of clear judgment and fellowship among all humans.

This is the implicit lesson in this issue, again being grasped by only the few, yet what needs to be learned by more and more.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
AN ALMOST FUTILE INQUIRY

IN *Harper's* for last February, nine individuals with wide experience in the processes of American education, persons of acute critical intelligence, discuss together what is wrong with the schools of the country and what not to do for remedy. *Harper's* was represented in this discussion by Walter Karp, one of the editors, who said:

> A citizen is a political being; he has private powers and a public role. As Jefferson wrote, the education of a citizen must "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."
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> In practice, that goal is persistently betrayed. It is essential that citizens be able to judge for themselves and have the courage and confidence to think for themselves. Yet America's high schools characteristically breed conformity and mental passivity. They do this through large, impersonal classes, a focus on order as the first priority, and an emphasis on standardized, short-answer tests, among other things. Our schools do not attempt to make citizens; they attempt to break citizens.

Commenting, Theodore Sizer, for years headmaster of Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., and author of a recent book on the nation's high schools, said:

> And the recent reforms reinforce the tendency toward fact-stuffing, short answers, and mental passivity by emphasizing tighter requirements and standardized testing. One of the reasons the reforms aren't changing this tendency is the surprisingly substantial support for the schools. The idea that most people believe schools are in disastrous shape is, I think, quite mistaken. If anything, people exhibit a rather mindless, ill-informed satisfaction about the schools. This is why our political system avoids challenging the basic assumptions and merely strengthens and extends them: our schools are basically OK; let's just push them a little harder add an eighth period to a seven-period day, add thirty days to a 180-day-a-year schedule, test the kids more.

Speaking of the recent decision to set tougher standards for pupils, Floretta D. McKenzie, superintendent of the Washington, D.C., public school system, said that while it is easy to set tough standards, communities "won't tolerate a lot more failing students." Asked how the local school boards would react to this, she said:

> First off, they'll fire the superintendent. You don't fail large numbers of students and expect everyone to be happy. . . . Excellence is important, sure, but we have to confront the simple fact that a high school dropout is likely to become part of a growing underclass with very little hope of decent employment.

This brought from Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the observation that—

> Politicians look for slogan answers and quick results within election periods of two or four years. For all the tough exams being mandated, nobody is mentioning the obvious fact that these tests measure the end product of a long educational process: they measure what students *didn't* learn in the first, second, and third grades. You don't hear much talk about investing in the earlier grades so that when these students get to high school they will have a better chance of making it. These "reforms" are political measures designed to get test numbers up fast; everybody wants some "improvements" to point to before the next election.

And Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, added:

> This is a school reform movement, in short, driven by political and economic interests, not by educational and human ones. Well over 90 per cent of the so-called advances in the fifty states listed by the Department of Education in a recent report are regulatory—do this, don't do that. . . . You have to accept the fact that the schools are political institutions. If you went to a state legislature and said that the schools should produce inquiring, idealistic, active students, students with self-esteem and self-confidence who have been encouraged from the moment they start school to think for themselves and understand their liberties, those politicians would faint dead away. That is exactly the opposite of what they want to see.

These few selections of what the participants say in a report that is eleven pages long are sufficient to confirm Gandhi's opinion that politicians should not be allowed to have anything to do with

education—that there should be complete separation of education and state. Equally confirmed are the conclusions of Alton Harrison, Jr., in his *Contemporary Education* article which we quoted in "Children" for Feb. 12 of this year. He wrote:

> We delude ourselves into believing that the false commitment we have to ideals is genuine. And it is this self-deception that constitutes the greatest impediment to educational reform. For, you see, despite our protestations to the contrary, the kind of schools we have at any given time are essentially the kind of schools we want. . . . Why, you may ask, would people defeat the very changes or reforms they are trying to implement? If they do not want the change, why not simply say so and support the status quo? The answer is that they do desire the change but they have an even stronger desire for the status quo.

This is shown to be the case in various ways, in the *Harper's* discussion. For example, Albert Shanker says:

> We're forgetting something essential about schools. Although the aims of education certainly include the development of character, civic virtues, and so on, the public also pays its school taxes for quite a different purpose. The need to control children, to harbor them for a certain amount of time away from their working or otherwise engaged parents, tends to become the most important function schools perform. And this custodial function often conflicts with, even dominates, the others . . . .If we were to design a place whose sole purpose was to develop the qualities all of you listed, it might look nothing like an institution that, as its first priority, must ensure that three thousand kids get there at 8:30 in the morning, stay until 3:00 in the afternoon, and are reasonably well-behaved for most of that time.

Dennis Littkey, principal of the Thayer Junior/Senior High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, apparently regarded as something of a model institution, provided an interesting comment on parent attitudes:

> One of my teachers did a fantastic month and a half of classes on questioning—teaching the kids how to analyze a subject and ask the right questions. The sessions were designed to teach critical thinking, and they were highly successful. But we got a huge amount of flak—from parents. They didn't want their kids pestering them with questions. We thought our job was somehow forcing these kids to use their minds; the parents thought we should take care of the kids during the day and eventually reward them with a diploma.

Shanker added:

> Insofar as a student is influenced at home, he is told to go to class, find out what the teachers want, and give it to them. Not because he'll become a good citizen or come to enjoy learning the rest of his life or learn how to think critically, but to get that piece of paper and trade it in for a job.

Graham Down, director of the Council for Basic Education, said:

> American schooling has become a sort of kaleidoscope of activities—announcements blasted over the public address system, constant messages from the administration, and of course the chaotic changes in class every hour—in which the psychology, not to say sanity, of the teacher is challenged at every turn.

Walter Karp mused:

> We also have enormous schools. I went to one, and I'll never forget what it was like to be one of 5,000 students: gongs ringing, announcements blaring, guards at either end of a mobbed hallway. It was a prison. Citizens should not have to spend their youth becoming accustomed to prison life.

That was a main reason why John Holt gave up working in schools and trying to improve them. He found it hopeless. Despite the existence of a very few good schools, that is what these "political institutions" seem to be—hopeless. Writers who openly admit it are likely to have something to say. Knowing that a great many people can't, Holt said: "Do without them. Your children will be a lot better off." What else could an honest man say? Deschool society said Ivan Illich, meaning that we don't have to try to "abolish" the schools, because they're falling apart anyway, but realize that the project of education can be pursued in other ways. If more of the intellectuals who now write about schools would turn their attention to those "other ways" we might begin to get somewhere, socially. Meanwhile, there will be schooling "as usual." The *Harper's* discussion shows that this is not really worth writing about.

FRONTIERS

The Uses of "Truth"

EXCAVATING in our files, in the hope of reducing them, we came across a copy of a chapter in a book, *International Conflict and Behavioral Science* (Basic Books, 1964), titled "The Truth Is Not Enough" by Dr. Lester Grinspoon, a psychiatrist. After reading it we decided that it calls for treatment in Frontiers, for the reason that the author takes note of a reality in our lives that is always potentially present, does not really depend upon events, although it does not come into evidence except under the pressure of threatening events. Dr. Grinspoon begins his discussion:

> It has been said that the truth is a scarce commodity, and yet the supply always exceeds the demand. As nearly as we can determine, the truth about the state of the world is that the very existence of a whole civilization, and perhaps more, is threatened. Yet, it does not appear that most people, including decision-makers and the public, have wholly grasped this fact. If they believed that their lives and those of their loved ones were threatened, we would expect them to be seething with concern and activity.

What, then, will explain why so many people turn away from the massive reality of the threat of nuclear war? The importance of understanding this, the author says, lies in the fact that if those who warn against war wish to be effective, they need to understand why warnings are ignored. The answer, he says, is that the truth about so vast a disaster as a nuclear war is simply unacceptable.

> 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 doing so leads only to very disquieting feelings—feelings which interfere with his capacity to be productive, to enjoy life, and to maintain his mental equilibrium.

This article is mainly an account of the ways people find to set aside what they feel might turn out to be unbearable truth. The ways are various, and one of the most important is simple denial—the threat is not there, it doesn't exist. Another way is to isolate oneself from hearing about it, or not listening when you do. Another is what the psychiatrists call displacement—you think of a threat that is more manageable and campaign against that. This gets complicated since people may use the excitement of opposing nuclear war to displace some even more immediately threatening inner psychological struggle. Then, finally, there is the solution of "rationalization" in which you say, "It's so terrible it'll never be used," or "The president will never let it happen," or, more fatalistically, "Perhaps it's God's will."

What brought home to Dr. Grinspoon the reality of these avoidances of the issue was the response he and a colleague obtained from an article they wrote for the *New Republic* in 1961. The article laid out the possibility of nuclear war in no uncertain terms. The writers received thirty-eight letters in reply. Thirteen replies offered some constructive suggestion, but twenty-one "were anything but constructive." One said, "There is nothing I can do about it." Another asked where to buy a suicide kit. Fifteen writers were planning how to leave the country for what they hoped would be a safer place, and one wondered about where to go. Reflecting on this experience, the psychiatrist came to an interesting conclusion:

> Those 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 is relative 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. Doing good can be initiated unilaterally, but it must be evaluated according to the total consequences. The responsible "do-gooder" will consider this in advance.
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> What happens when people's means of keeping facts at bay have been suddenly destroyed? For a while they may suffer anxious, depressed feelings, feelings which may be incapacitating. For some these feelings may precipitate serious mental illness. However, most will either reconstitute their defense mechanisms, much as a self-sealing tire seals over

after a puncture, or they will embrace some anxiety-relieving activity which they believe is capable of altering the unacceptable facts. Perhaps what most commonly takes place is a mixture of restitution of old defenses and adoption of new ideas and activities. New activities may be primarily intellectual or largely action-oriented. While they may be helpful and adaptive as far as the individual is concerned, they may be adaptive or maladaptive with regard to the development of a peaceful world.

How is it that so many highly intelligent people can take part in plans for making nuclear war without being upset by such an occupation? (See, for example, the article, "The Authorized Version" by Tina Rosenberg in the February *Atlantic,* on how the "Strategic Defense Initiative"—the Star Wars plan—came to be adopted by the present administration in Washington.) Dr. Grinspoon quotes from Archibald MacLeish for a reply to this question:

He says:

". . . knowledge without feeling 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."

MacLeish is speaking of isolation, another mechanism men use to defend themselves against feelings which may be painful. When a man can acknowledge the fact that a continued arms race could lead to a nuclear war—which might mean death for himself, his family, and millions of his countrymen—without experiencing any more effect than he would when contemplating the effects of DDT on a population of fruit flies, then he is probably making use of the defense of isolation. People can speak quite facilely about death resulting from nuclear war because they are speaking of death as something quite apart (isolated) from the feelings associated with the concept of total annihilation. It becomes an abstraction, something which has no real connection with themselves.

What then should the eager persuaders do, who want to organize the sensible portion of the world to take steps that would make nuclear war less possible? Would they, can they, will they consider the prospect of such a war without an appeal to fear? It seems unlikely.