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NOT ON THE COUCH

CAN'T you find something wrong with me?" the aging retiree asked his psychiatrist friend. "This is such a pleasant room—a lovely view, comfortable furniture, and a lived-in feeling that isn't clinical at all. I'd like to come here now and then, just to enjoy the place and have some talk with you."

"I might be able to figure something out," the doctor said. "You're getting along in years, aren't you?"

The conversation went on along these lines. They talked about getting old—how it feels, and how some parts of us age while other parts remain unaffected. There was some persiflage about the senior citizens who can't wait to tell you how old they are, as if it were some real achievement like being male or female, or under thirty.

There must, the visitor said, be a good way to grow old, a good way of thinking about age which goes behind the platitudes and gets at its true advantages. The pleasures of age, for one thing, are different from the pleasures of youth. The young have a natural egoism which seeks achievement. When you are old, no longer on some firing line, it becomes natural to watch with pleasure the development of others, and to give some direction or help, if you can. The Promethean restlessness of the vigorous life diminishes—it is always there, of course, so long as we are able to think about being human, but the deep anxiety which wonders, "What ought I to be doing now?" becomes less urgent with age. Choices still have to be made, but at another level. Patience also comes with age, although in some cases this capacity to intuit the endlessness of an ongoing process lapses into an indifference encouraged by narrowing horizons.

When you talk about age, you eventually get to death, which is some sort of absolute, or seems to be. Everybody dies. Being a "good man" puts no restraint on death, although it may lead to a death that is less painful to all concerned. "The art of the philosopher," said Plato, "is in learning how to die easily." This may seem a very negative statement, but Plato, of all people, was no negative man. What he meant may have been understood by Plotinus, now more and more recognized as one of the most thoughtful of Plato's interpreters. He wrote:

> The Soul is bound to the body by a conversion to the corporeal passions; and is again liberated by becoming impassive to the body.
>
> That which Nature binds, Nature also dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the Soul; but the Soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the Soul; but the Soul liberates herself from the body.
>
> Hence there is a twofold death; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the Soul; but the other peculiar to philosophers, in which the Soul is liberated from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow from the other.

It is curious that we may read this over, accept the sense of it, and make some application of what Plotinus says, without having any clear notion of what is meant by "soul"! We use a lot of words this way, perhaps because we must. The words represent unsolved mysteries, but they also contain felt meanings. Without having any precise or even vague definition of the reality involved, we understand quite well the logic of John Haynes Holmes when he asks:

> What are we to think, for example, when a great and potent personality is suddenly cut off by an automobile accident, a disease germ, or a bit of poisoned food? Must it not be what George Herbert Palmer thought as he looked upon the dead body of his wife, one of the outstanding women of her time—"Though no regrets are proper for the manner of her death, who can contemplate the fact of it, and not call the world irrational if out of deference to a few

> particles of disordered matter, it excludes so fair a spirit?"

If we can accept this conclusion, then Plotinus gives us something to think about. In our own terms, what he says translates, on the one hand, into "Now I'm really falling apart," and on the other, into "My body seems ready to let go, and I think it may be time for me to let go of it; we shall see."

Is there any "research" into such matters? Well, those who might be supposed to know something about death from both sides seem to compose mostly myths—ways of saying: You have to work it out yourself—although Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who has collected the experiences of a number of persons who almost but not quite died, reports that not one of these people any longer fears death. "Nature just takes you back, and you're still you, going on to other things," might be a summary of how they felt. That's second-hand testimony, of course, but what other communicable evidence is there? The matter is exactly as Kierkegaard put it more than a century ago, saying that "the entire content of subjective thought is essentially secret, because it cannot be directly communicated." A revelation, as someone sagely remarked, always happens to somebody else.

The great novelists know this—which, the psychiatrist remarked, is why good doctors of the mind read them so carefully. The novelists know how to examine the dualities—the multiplicities—of the soul. Tolstoy is an example. In the last September *Harper's* Amoz Oz, an Israeli novelist of some distinction, shows what can be done with Tolstoy's story, "The Death of Ivan Illitch." He begins:

> When Ivan Illitch Golovin was wrestling with the knowledge of his approaching death, in a sudden moment of panic he happened to recall a syllogism that he had learned at school:
>
> *Every man is mortal;*
> *Caius* is *a man;*
> *Therefore Caius is mortal.*
>
> "But the subject is Caius!" exclaimed Ivan Illitch. "Caius, not me! Did Caius play with a teddy bear when he was a child, and fall asleep hugging it? Did Caius know how to melt his nanny's heart by his endearing ways? Was he as good at cards as I am? Could he conduct such a skillful cross-examination that you could hear a pin drop in the courtroom? So let Caius die!"

Tolstoy, Amoz Oz says, being a man of Christian compassion, has Illitch see the light, become reconciled, and die peacefully. But Oz, speaking for the tough-minded of our time, objects. He wants to reopen the case. Before the reconciliation,

> Ivan Illitch seems to rebel against his death on the basis of a simple, stubborn argument, a kind of inner syllogism, which, if it were expressed in words, would take some such form as this:
>
> *Everyman is indeed mortal;*
> *But I am not everyman—I am me!*
>
> Or perhaps:
>
> Everyone who has died since the creation
> of the world has been someone else;
> I am not someone else—I am me:
> *Therefore I do not consent to die.*
>
> . . . The issue is still open . . .

What we have here is, as Oz says, a stubborn state of mind, but something more than a self-centered rejection of ancestral wisdom. Apparently, the will to live is for most humans stronger than the will to live wisely. This stubbornness is something in us which functions in lieu of wisdom, and until we are wise it may be a necessity for living at all. Plato, moreover, never said it was easy to learn how to die easily. Oz is telling us that in Tolstoy's story it became *too* easy. Yet Tolstoy nonetheless started us off on a long voyage of wondering, if not of discovery.

When Arjuna, the Indian prince, is downcast in the hour before his great battle, Krishna, his teacher, reviews for him the common knowledge about death. He hopes to get across to him some uncommon knowledge, but he begins with what they both know, or what Arjuna ought to know. Speaking of the dweller in the body—the intelligence that considers and weighs these matters—Krishna says:

> But whether thou believest it to be of eternal birth and duration, or that it dieth with the body, still thou hast no cause to lament it. Death is certain to all things which are born, and rebirth to all mortals; wherefore it cloth not behoove thee to grieve about the inevitable. The antenatal state of beings is unknown; the middle state is evident; and their state after death is not to be discovered. What in this is there to lament? Some regard the indwelling spirit as a wonder, whilst some speak and others hear of it with astonishment; but no one realizes it, although he may have heard it described. This spirit can never be destroyed in the mortal frame which it inhabiteth, hence it is unworthy for thee to be troubled for all these mortals.

Krishna, we should note, seems to expect Arjuna to agree equally to *all* that he says—in theory, at any rate—yet he makes it plain that humanity at large has varying views about the "indwelling spirit." He knows, as any observant person would know, that the Arjunas of this world will see only what they are able to see, hear what they are able to hear, and then go their own way. The force—the full force—of Krishna's logic will affect only those who in some sense share his assumptions, who *feel*, that is, even if inconstantly, something of an immortal presence in themselves.

Amoz Oz, in the second part of his brief challenge to Tolstoy's solution for Ivan Illitch's pain, stretches into a full column a stream-of-consciousness passage showing how most people occupy their time and their minds (here much abbreviated):

> . . . I must not miss the afternoon news because at the bus stop people were saying something about concentrations of troops, and I must see the dentist about a filling, mend the strap of my sandal, smoke a little less, get a little more done, time is flying. . . . In a moment we shall hear the six o'clock news. Perhaps the Syrian artillery has begun a massive bombardment, and the air force has wiped it off the face of the earth. Or else this time our army has acted on early intelligence warnings and destroyed the enemy forces at a single sudden blow and is now penetrating the outskirts of Damascus. Quiet, please. Let me hear. I don't want to miss any more. The situation is getting worse, and something has got to happen.

So it ends, this approbation of Illitch's complaint. One can see why the artist has drawn this comparison. Our resources for questioning death are skimpy indeed.

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, containing the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, can be read in various ways. It is of course a scripture affording teaching from an avatar. But it is also representation of the inner dialogue one may hold with oneself. Krishna articulates what human beings sometimes feel, gives voice and rationale to their longings; what he says is what we might tell ourselves, although by no means as clearly. Yet this view of the dialogue is in harmony with the idea that we learn only from ourselves, and must translate and make our own whatever we hear from others that seems good and true. So it is no good *telling* people what to think. If they suppose that they *can* be told, they are in the deepest trouble.

Yet the Krishnas come again and again and say what they have to say. They seem to use the forms of acceptable human thinking, but often press these forms beyond their limit, using the lever of paradox.

It is of interest to inquire into the beginning of the "I am me" awareness, which toward his end became Illitch's outraged objection to death. There is hardly a better account of the apparent genesis of this feeling than an extraordinary passage in *A High Wind in Jamaica*, a story by Richard Hughes. He writes of a ten-year-old girl:

> She suddenly realized who she was. . . . She stopped dead, and began looking over all of her person which came within the range of her eyes. She began examining the skin of her hands with the utmost care, for it was *hers*. . . .
>
> Once fully convinced of this astonishing fact, that she was now Emily gas-Thornton (why she inserted the "now" she did not know, for she certainly imagined no transmigrational nonsense of having

> been anyone else before), she began seriously to reckon its implications.
>
> First, what agency had so ordered it that out of all the people in the world who she might have been, she was this particular one, this Emily; born in such-and-such a year out of all the years in Time, and encased in this particular rather pleasing little casket of flesh? Had she chosen herself, or had God done it?
>
> Secondly, why 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?

This is what we start with—the conscious self who then makes decisions, asks questions, wonders about meanings, and tries to stay alive. If there is an "indwelling spirit," to use Krishna's phrase, it doesn't get all the way in, and is unable, therefore, to make sense of a great many things that philosophers and teachers like Krishna declare to be true, or offer as options.

And then come, all too soon, those fluttering preoccupations Amoz Oz writes about. *What next! what next!* displaces the wondering about who we are, where we came from, what we are trying to do. We speak, of course, of typical thinking, not those wonderful interludes of inspiration which abandon custom and declare new rules. Who thinks about the meaning of death, today, and asks how it is connected with the meaning of life?

Well, some do, but not in any great number, nor with any noticeable impact on the rest. If you look up the popular books or best-sellers to see what there is on death, you may find that Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved* Ones and Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* are the books that catch the readers—which fits well enough with Amoz Oz's stream-of-consciousness portrait of modern man. These readers never get beyond the funeral parlor.

Correction: We almost forgot Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, which also caught a great many readers. Miss Dillard sets Ivan Illitch's protest at another level. In a chapter which alternately describes the omnipresent fecundity and slaughter throughout the natural world, she arrives at a climax when death is brought home to us:

> Evolution loves death more than it loves you and me. This is easy to write, easy to read, and hard to believe. The words are simple, the concept clear—but you don't believe it, do you? Nor do I. How could I, when we're both so lovable? Are my values then so diametrically opposed to those that nature preserves? This is the key point.
>
> Must I then part with the only world I know? I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as though the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down. Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin's—or even the barnacles'. We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit. It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized. Is human culture with its values my only real home after all? . . . This direction of thought brings me abruptly to a fork in the road where I stand paralyzed, unwilling to go on, for both ways lead to madness.
>
> Either this world, my mother, is a monster, or I myself am a freak. . . .
>
> Precisely: we are moral creatures, then, in an amoral world. The universe that suckled us is a monster that does not care if we live or die—does not care if it itself grinds to a halt. It is fixed and blind, a robot programmed to kill. . . .
>
> All right then. It is our emotions which are amiss. We are freaks, the world is fine, and let us all go have lobotomies to restore us to a natural state. We can leave the library then, go back to the creek lobotomized, and live on its banks as untroubled as any muskrat or reed. You first.

"What would you make of that?" the visitor asked the psychiatrist.

"Not much," the doctor replied. You see, he said, that's really a cosmic question—a matter of Ultimate Theory and underlying meaning. But we doctors are confronted by immediate problems. Our patients hurt. We don't see them before the battle, but in the middle of it. We get those questions only in derived form—obliquely, you could say. But Annie Dillard gives us a lead. In that same chapter she says: "We have not yet encountered any god who is as merciful as a man who flicks a beetle over on his feet." Some people do have a sense of their own possibilities, and we have to work with that. It sometimes seems that anyone who is really sick has been abusing something or someone, and that the resulting disorders are the only ones we may be able to do something about. Health for the patient then means asking the question: "Who or what have I been stomping on lately?"

Doctors aren't supposed to moralize. This is the language of the inner dialogue, not ours. Morality deals with obligations, and what is the use of talking about obligations to someone blind to possibilities? So, maybe you talk about possibilities, letting the feeling of obligation come by itself. It may, of course. In humans, possibility and obligation are closely or inseparably linked.

Another poet makes this evident. Oscar Wilde began his poem, "Helas," with the lines,

> To drift with every passion till my soul
> Is a stringed lute on which all the winds can play:
> Is it for this I have given away
> Mine ancient wisdom and austere control?

Wilde didn't need a therapist. He understood human possibility. Rotting in Reading Gaol or wasting his last months in a Paris slum, he knew what he could have—might have—done. A sad, sad life, perhaps, but he made a fragment of immortal song out of his regrets. The healing power was in him, although it seemed unsuccessful at the time. Even in the depths he spoke with angelic voice. All a doctor can do is try to help people to tune their instruments and improve their ear. We can't ever tell them what to play, sing, or hear. That's not our job.

REVIEW
WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE STORIES?

TED SOLOTAROFF—to whose judgment as an editor (of the no longer published *American Review*) MANAS owes its opportunity to quote the insights of John Schaar—discusses storytelling in a two-part *Nation* (June 3 and 10) article that was to be his introduction to *The Best Ameri*can *Short Stories 1978.*

What makes the holding power of stories and why does the art of telling them seem in decline? Mr. Solotaroff chooses Walter Benjamin as his mentor in answering these questions. For Benjamin the story is a "tale" with roots in oral tradition. It grows out of everyday things, presenting a meaning the reader can mull over as he would a proverb or a maxim.

> In other words, the tale was spun into a useful fabric, one that provided counsel for its audience, "counsel" being understood, as Benjamin puts it, less as "an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation (and significance) of a story which is just unfolding." And because such stories were typically drawn from the ways of the world, from shared or readily communicable experience, their counsel becomes "the epic side of truth," namely wisdom, which, like storytelling itself, Benjamin believes is dying out.

A story—a story in this sense of a "tale"—can have impact only if the reader is somewhat inclined to reflect on the project of living a life; or, to put it another way, only if the reader believes that wisdom is both possible and of some importance. What distinguishing definition can be applied to wisdom? Definition by restriction may be the best approach. Wisdom doesn't have much to do with events. The wise man is not so much concerned with events as with seeing through them. He is not deceived or overwhelmed by them. In a given situation, the wise man does not act with the crowd, although now and then he may seem to.

What else can we say about wisdom? That it gives its possessor balance under stress. Discrimination among facts is a practical matter, but discriminating between the feelings generated by facts rests on wisdom. Wisdom doesn't alter the facts, or make anything out of *them,* but it charts a course in terms of the metaphysical meanings and values behind the decisions they bring to us. So, Hannah Arendt called wisdom—or Socratic thinking—"resultless," adding, however, that this sort of thinking is what enables us to tell right from wrong, beauty from ugliness, and that it sometimes averts catastrophes.

Wisdom, in short, is possible only for those intent upon living their own lives, and its first principle is that human beings are able to live their own lives. The story—which includes epic, legend, myth, and allegory—has little or no appeal to those convinced that their lives are ruled by events. There is no human freedom in events, but only in decisions about them. When, then, events become overwhelming—when people stop deciding how to feel about them and simply describe and then submit to what seems their dictation—wisdom is at a discount and shrivels away. Literature, one of the embodiments of wisdom, shrivels, too. Drawing on Benjamin, Mr. Solotaroff says:

> . . . he would attribute the decline of counsel and wisdom to the fallen value of experience itself, whether of the person or community or the race, its supercession by the bewilderment of man in the face of his incessantly changing society, of a world that has gotten out of hand and has passed beyond the human scale of understanding and judgment. Hence the story is dying because of the incommunicability and incommensurability of being-in-the-world. He points out that the men returning from World War I were silent rather than full of stories and the novels that were later produced were "anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth." What they communicated instead was mostly the enormity of modern warfare, the overwhelmment of the person.

Who takes the place of the storyteller? The journalist, of course. He may still tell "stories," but in the place of wisdom for living a life he introduces the impact of events. People are less and less people. Years ago, a critic writing in *Twice a Year* (1948) gave examples:

> John Dos Passos' trilogy is a novel about people, dispossessed of themselves. . . . The same might be said of the characters of other American novelists: those for example in John O'Hara's admirable *Appointmeni in Samara.* These writers communicate a very special malaise; the same malaise that we find in some of the magazine stories, that are so useful a study for anyone interested in the sociology and psychopathology of the United States. . . . The profound truth to which this whole world of American fiction bears witness is that nothing in man belongs to him; considered in himself, he does not exist; he is reduced to a bundle of physiological and social determinisms. Whether Dos Passos' heroes succeed or fail, are happy or unhappy, satisfied or dissatisfied, the cause is never in themselves; it is due neither to their force of character, their ability nor their wisdom. Even determinants which are usually considered intrinsic, located in the depths of being, are represented by Dos Passos as fortuitous, adventitious, exterior.

The trilogy referred to—U.S.A.—was practically all a kind of angry reporting which revealed a world of victims and puppets, a world new enough, but not brave, and which had *no* people in it. Benjamin attributed this decline in literature to the failure of the modern storyteller to come to terms with death, and ironically, with the socio-moral devastations of war. Solotaroff muses:

> What are we to say forty-odd years later into the maelstrom that hardly requires war to reduce persons to social atoms? The mass society does that very readily, while its culture further undermines the communicability of experience by its various modes of pseudo-communication, the more pseudo the better, as the TV ratings testify. . . . The product of the up-and-doing middle class with its preference for the actual and the explicable, the daily flood of information works directly against the function and value of the traditional story. Though drawing upon the ways of the world, Benjamin's (failing) storyteller is indifferent to the verifiability of his account and offers no explanations of life. . . . Like man himself, the imaginative interest on which his story does depend has diminished to the meagerness of the "news story."

Mr. Solotaroff believes that the story is now fighting for its life—he gives examples of some successful ones (to be published in his collection)—and he states the ground of his faith: "I believe that the usefulness of the contemporary American story lies precisely in fighting for the human scale of experience and its communication against the forces that seek to diminish and trivialize it."

By coincidence or something more, the article which came just before Mr. Solotaroff's in the June 10 *Nation* is a spirited defense of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a Washington bureau created by the legislators five years ago. After a beginning attended by "a wave of overwhelming legislative support and impeccable purpose, it has drifted and plunged to overwhelming unpopularity ever since." Naturally enough in these days of "anti-bureaucratic *macho,"* there are many who would like to see the commission abolished. The *Nation* analysts (Mark Green and David Moulton) object:

> For what is at stake here is not merely reshuffling some Organizational boxes in Washington but the lives of tens of thousands of Americans, many children, who are being killed or permanently injured by shoddy products.
>
> The commission still has the potential to reduce this suffering significantly, and indeed has done so in several instances to date. For example, child-resistant caps on packages containing poisonous or toxic substances, required by CPS regulation under the Poison Prevention Packaging Act, are estimated to have prevented 40,000 poisonings since 1973. An estimated 4,000 injuries and 175 deaths have been avoided since 1974 as a result of CPSC regulations requiring that cribs be designed to minimize the chance that infants will suffocate between the mattress and the slats.

Who could be against such a commission? But what, one wonders, will argument either for or against it disclose about our relationship to "the human scale of experience"? Are such arguments really part of the fight to restore it?

The *Nation* writers maintain that the free market does not really protect us from unsafe products—safety may be the first thing to go for a manufacturer subjected to price competition. "Thus," they say, "to kill the CPSC would be effectively, to kill people."

They might also say, quite properly, that they are not "storytellers" but deal in facts—*important* facts. But if this be conceded then someone ought to add that these facts are important only for very badly lived lives—lives too long out of human scale—on the part of us all.

Are there any stories which bear on such situations—stories put together since "The Pied Piper of Hamlin," and a little more hopeful than "The Brave Cowboy"?

COMMENTARY
A RARE CASE

IS the story of Prof. Schmidt's benign influence on some school children in Denver (see "Children") an argument for "Prussian" methods in teaching?

Hardly. The point of this story is that claims about "method" have only limited validity. The subtlety of intention is involved. Prof Schmidt was not seeking to establish conformity—although he seemed to achieve it—but to convey an attitude of mind. "The twist that Herr Schmidt had given Prussianization was that we were taught to project the disciplining authority not onto him or any external autocrat but onto an inner officer figure."

In short, the austere, seventy-year-old man from Germany made himself into a symbol of the iron self-control of the disciplined individual. He must have had feelings which represented this idea or his "leadership" wouldn't have had the effect it did. We can say, then, that the matter is exactly as Northrop Frye puts it: "the real Utopia is an individual goal, of which the disciplined society is an allegory."

The crimes of politics—and they are many—usually occur when this distinction is ignored. No system, per se, can take cognizance of this distinction. Only human beings can be aware of it. Arguments about systems, therefore, tend to become vulgarizing arguments. They are concerned with technical merits, not intentions. They have some importance, but only when related to the motives they are intended to serve. In isolation from motive, devotion to technique becomes a kind of nihilism.

Gandhi understood this. He wrote in *Young India* in 1931:

> To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a state everyone is his own ruler.

Prof. Schmidt wanted to teach the children to be their own rulers. He went at it as a Prussian, with the manners and speech of one commonly taken as a symbol of authoritarian rule. The result he obtained is puzzling, even mysterious. Gandhi also understood this. He wrote in *Young India* in 1928:

> If there was a national government, whilst I should not take any direct part in any war I can conceive occasions when it would be my duty to vote for the military training of those who wish to take it. For I know that all its members do not believe in non-violence to the extent I do. It is not possible to make a person of a society non-violent by compulsion.
>
> Non-violence works in a most mysterious manner. Often a man's actions defy analysis in terms of non-violence; equally often his actions may wear the appearance of violence when he is absolutely non-violent in the highest sense of the term and is subsequently found so to be.

Gandhi may here be calling our attention to a rare case. But Gandhi was himself a rare case. And so, perhaps, was Prof. Schmidt. But the development of more rare cases may be the only possible basis we have for evolving a Utopia in the future.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
LOOKING BACKWARD—AND FORWARD

A MAN needs a pretty good excuse to write an autobiography, and some excuses are better than others. We have a brief life story—forty-two pages—that was certainly worth setting down, and was set down for two reasons: First, the writer was goaded into it by his eldest son, and second, it is more an account of ideas than events, although the events come in, now and then, as something to hang the ideas on. The goading began when the son was eleven. One day he asked, "Dad, are you the secret chief editor of Mad Magazine?" When an astronomer is confronted by a question like that, he has to do something about it, sooner or later. So, as he approached his sixtieth birthday, he put together this "autobiography."

Right at the beginning, the writer tells about his school days. What counted most were the teachers, so he tells about some teachers he encountered in the public elementary and high schools of Denver. Back in the days when Lindbergh flew the Atlantic a phys ed teacher showed up in the elementary school, giving a half hour of gymnastics:

> He was in his 70's, tall, heavy set, but ramrod erect with close clipped gray hair and a huge gray mustache. He was a cartoonist's Teuton—German in every respect from his wing collar to his heavy accent. He was a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War and had a distinguished academic career in Germany before coming to Colorado at the turn of the century. He was introduced to us simply as Professor Schmidt (I never knew his first name). Whenever Herr Schmidt appeared (he was always escorted by the Principal and never pre-announced), everyone was thrilled. It not only meant a break in the three-A routine with a chance to move about, but we were always imbued with a sense of personal importance in his presence. Not just that someone important had come into the classroom, but that *we* were important was the reason he had come.
>
> The Prussianization of the elementary school children went to the extent that we leaped to attention when he walked into the room and remained rigidly motionless until he would greet us with, "We will begin with a breathing exercise." Somehow our standing at attention inculcated us with the idea that this was a most important form of endurance. To scratch, giggle, or even move was unthinkable. Such acts would not have been rebellion toward Herr Schmidt, they would have been an absolute disgrace, a manifestation of a defect in our self-control.
>
> I still wonder how Herr Schmidt was able to create such enthusiasm for stoical attitudes in 8- and 9-year-old children. However he did it, the effects were lasting. Discipline after that for me always became self-discipline and was afterwards seen as the real key to freedom. The twist that Herr Schmidt had given Prussianization was that we were taught to project the disciplining authority not onto him or any external autocrat but onto an inner officer figure.
>
> My inner Prussian Drill Sergeant is still with me. He has proved both an asset and a liability. When I am alone he is a good companion, but he has often made relationships difficult for me, and through him, I am very much alienated from the drifting, hang-loose, do your own thing world of today. But I look on Herr Schmidt and his influence on my life as positive, for in the subtlest sense he was an emancipator. However, there remains the question: In exchanging the slavery to our undirected, uncoordinated, unconscious desires for disciplined direction, are we yet free? While in this step an important measure of freedom has certainly been attained, what is the discipline of the further path to a higher freedom?

Two comments occur. One is the sage remark, made years ago, by an educator in Pennsylvania (as we remember): "The curriculum is an ocean; the student has to teach himself to swim." The point of course is that not every child learned the same things from Herr Schmidt. No school can plan the lessons this autobiography reveals, but any school can do a lot to prevent them.

The other comment is a quotation from Northrop Frye on the intentions of Plato and Thomas More:

> Plato and More realize that while the wise man's mind is rigidly disciplined, and while the mature state

is ordered, we cannot take the analogy between the disciplined mind and the disciplined state too literally. For Plato certainly, for More probably, the wise man's mind is a ruthless dictatorship of reason over appetite, achieved by control over the will. When we translate this into its social equivalents of a philosopher-king ruling workers by storm troopers (not "guardians," as in Jowett, but "guards"), we get the most frightful tyranny. But the real Utopia is an individual goal, of which the disciplined society is an allegory. The reason for the allegory is that the Utopian ideal points beyond the individual to a condition in which, in Kant's kingdom of ends, society and the individual are no longer in conflict, but have become aspects of the same human body.

Well, that's one explanation for the allegory, probably the best. But another one would be that Plato knew people were more bothered by political problems than they were by individual moral issues, so he wrote about the community and the state as a means of getting what he had to say read. He knew that, eventually, if people became at all wise, they would realize what Northrop Frye explains and make his all-important distinction. Meanwhile, they would also do some thinking about the Good.

Next our astronomer author tells about a home-room teacher in Junior High. The pupils were with her for about forty-five minutes a day:

This proved to be a deeper relational continuity than we had yet experienced outside our homes, and the home room teacher became as familiar and close to us as a member of our own families. The intensity of this relationship magnified the influence that this teacher would have on our lives. To this day, Alice Watson's is a voice as pervading in my psyche as that of my mother. It is the voice with which my conscience frequently speaks and a voice that prepared me for many of the crises of life. It showed me the existence of a "star map" by which I could successfully navigate if I would but become familiar with it.

Perhaps the most accurate description of Alice Watson was that she was a real moral philosopher. Her concern was with all the difficult situations that arise in human relationships—individual and group, and like Dear Abby, she had answers for them all. To borrow from Margaret Mead—her language could get values across to children in such simple terms that even a behavioral scientist could have understood her.

Her central message was the morality of minimization of pain and suffering—a morality she taught without requiring either philosophical foundations or religious revelations. It was all quite simple: Be sensitive to what hurts in yourself and in every creature. But never assume that others will feel only the same pains that you feel. Develop a sensitivity to their unique pains. Go beyond the Golden Rule: Do unto others as they would be done unto. A splendid doctrine but a bit advanced for a world that has not yet caught up with even the Golden Rule.

But there is no teaching, however wise, that ever stands solely on its own merits. All great teachings ultimately stand on the living example of the teacher. And it was the example of her life that gave life to what Alice Watson taught. She did understand each of us and led us in our own way—not in hers.

Then there was a Latin teacher who, in addition to communicating subjunctives and ablative absolutes, stirred uncertainty.

He *fanned* it by giving numerous inside exposés of higher-ups taken from his years of practicing law in Washington. Evidently Watergates have been around for some time. . . . He *channeled* our uncertainties by introducing us to the classics. To replace our crumbling belief in personalities—no matter how highly placed—he gave us principles. . . .

This goes on, getting better all the time. Our space has run out, but not our material. We haven't even got him out of high school—nowhere near Cal Tech! We are prohibited from giving the author's name and address, since there are only a few copies of the "autobiography," prepared for a number of friends. But if anyone wants one enough to write this department, we'll undertake to see what can be done.

FRONTIERS

A Simple Answer

THERE are various ways to react to the conscientious reports which keep coming in from Washington on the doings of government. We think of two responses. First, there is the reflection: I'm being informed, but how could I do anything about that awful mess? Second, there is the strong feeling of *déjà vu*—I have been here before. And there may be the moody conclusion: Intelligent people ought to be able to arrange the practical side of their lives in a far better way.

Then the thinking usually stops. What else is there to say?

The inspiration for these dark sayings came from reading a recent issue of Tristram Coffin's *Washington Spectator* (Aug. 15), entirely devoted to the question: *How To Cut Federal Government Spending.* The net result of absorbing this well-compiled material—an economic horror story that goes on and on—is deciding that it can't be done. That is, it won't be. There are ways of course, and Mr. Coffin lists some of them, but he knows, and we know, that such constructive steps have become practically unnatural for a nation which orders its affairs with the dynamics of voracious self-interest.

What then? If we take stock we eventually discover that the back rooms of the newspapers and magazines of the country are filled with observers who understand all this quite well. They keep on "exposing" the ridiculous things politicians do, the hypocrisy of what they say, and the nonsense the people put up with, year after year. As we said, *déjà vu.* We have heard it all before. In this evident futility of going on as we are lies the "Frontier."

It is possible, despite the confusion, to get a more searching diagnosis. We have two critics in mind: Ivan Illich and Richard Goodwin. Illich has said:

> Any social structure must disintegrate beyond some level of energy use. Beyond this critical level, education for bureaucracy must take the place of initiative within the law. . . . technocracy must prevail when mechanical power exceeds metabolic energy by a certain ratio.

This is abstract, but worth thinking about. Elsewhere Illich adds:

> The major institutions now optimize the output of large tools for lifeless people. Their inversion implies institutions that would foster the use of individually accessible tools to support meaningful and responsible deeds of fully awake people. Turning basic institutions upside down and inside out is what the adoption of a convivial mode of production would require. Such an inversion is beyond the managers of present institutions.

Richard Goodwin, author of *The American Condition*, has provided ample evidence of the immediate helplessness of "the managers of present-day institutions" (*New Yorker,* Jan. 6, 1975). He writes on inflation, reaching this conclusion: "The result of all these considerations—theoretical, psychological, and political—is an absence of any policy decisive enough, except, perhaps, among those who think that in the long run things will right themselves." Goodwin notes that the big companies are now so powerful they control the market forces, immune to influences traditionally supposed to keep them in line:

> Without market forces to reward productivity or efficiency, no one—not even the companies themselves—can measure the waste or misuse of resources. In more general terms, this means that there is no way to know whether America's existing wealth—resources, capital, plant and technological capacities—if differently organized and invested, might be able to raise the present standard of life by a factor of two, three, or as much as ten . . . . impossible though measurement is, we can be certain that the waste is huge.

Elsewhere he says:

> Whenever knowledge appears to be at an impasse—when each new circumstance, each seeming contradiction can be explained only as some complicating variation of an earlier understanding—

> one must always suspect that the right question is not being asked.

The reason why those who do ask the right questions remain unheard is clear enough: "the public wants action, or the appearance of action, but will not accept painful or drastic measures."

In *The American Condition* Goodwin points out that Americans participate in government only with fragments of themselves. A couple of hundred years ago, this was all right: the problems were comparatively small, the issues clear, the people able to decide. But now everything is so complicated that only real experts know enough to realize that they don't understand it at all and that things are out of control.

Thomas Jefferson foresaw such dangers, remarking that his greatest fear was that "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs." And Benjamin Rush, something of an opportunist, declared that while "all power is derived from the people, they possess it only on the days of their elections. After this it is the property of their rulers."

Today, not even the rulers know what to do. They can't do what they ought to, they will privately explain. The voters won't let them. Tristram Coffin summarizes:

> So Washington has been filled with pious phrases of "economy." The drama has a synthetic air. The tax cuts voted will benefit chiefly the wealthy, and budget reductions were symbolic.

A candid congressman said to his colleagues after one decision: "This won't cut a dime. I hope you enjoy yourself when you pretend to your constituents that you're actually saving money."

So there is moral decay, intellectual decay, cultural decay, and economic decline. What does one do? If you say that the moral decay must first be corrected, or nothing else will work, what then do you do? Preach? Exhort?

Schumacher gave an answer in simple terms—one that each one can do something about. In *Resurgence* for May-June 1975 he wrote:

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

In that parenthesis, is he talking about *us*? If so, we must all begin to rescale our lives with simpler, less complicated relationships—wherever we can. Most people still have enough freedom to begin. Could a frontier be more clearly defined?