VOLUME XXXVIII, NO. 46
NOVEMBER 13, 1985

HOW PEACE WAS DISCOVERED

[This essay, entered in a national contest, fortunately for us, did not win, so we have it for publication here. The writer is Richard Heinberg, of Loveland, Colorado. The essay is available as a booklet from Foundation House, 4817 North Country Road 29, Loveland, Colorado 80537, at $2.00. Copyright by the author.]

WHEN we look back 25 years on the world of 1985, it is with a combination of great relief and even greater bewilderment. We are of course, relieved that the unthinkable global nuclear holocaust did not occur, but amazed that matters were ever allowed to come to such a pass. Here was the entire human race—never more advanced in scientific knowledge and achievement—teetering on the brink of self-annihilation, and daily adding to the means by which annihilation might come about. It is a horrifying memory. But since our transition from that precarious state of affairs is still very much in progress it is useful to look back occasionally, so that the destructive passions that led to that dark hour of history only a quarter of a century ago may never again dominate human hearts.

People think differently today, they act differently toward one another, and they have a different appreciation of life and its meaning and purpose. It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this change, for we are only beginning to see the fullness of its implications; and yet it is a difficult thing to describe, since it is utterly unprecedented. If the full story of the circumstances surrounding this renaissance of the human spirit were to be recounted it could run into volumes. I am hardly qualified to present a definitive record of these remarkable events, and in fact I doubt that anyone is, because in so many ways they defy analysis. Therefore what I have to say in this brief report will necessarily be something of a personal view, admittedly colored by my own unique perspective.

In the early 1980s I was preparing for a career as a classical musician, hoping to spend my life sharing with others the joys of refined music-making, savoring the fruits of a great culture. It was during the middle years of that decade that I began to awaken to the fact that my imagined future could be obliterated in a moment by the decision of a fear-struck statesman or general. Not only was my career in jeopardy, but the possibility of home, family and all the pleasures of life a young person takes for granted the future will hold. And not only was my future and that of my friends and family at stake, but that of my civilization and culture as well: art, music, literature—everything noble and beautiful—could be swept away in a moment. And not only did Western culture hang in the balance, but every human culture, every human life, now and forever. It was beyond the capacity of mind and emotions to adequately respond to the awful contrast between the present beauty of our planet—a living jewel hung in space, a sacred home given in trust to mankind—and the potential results of nuclear war. But there could be little doubt about the nature of those results: in studies published in the *Scientific American* it had been shown with inexorable logic how a nuclear exchange of even moderate proportions would lead to the lofting of vast dust clouds into the upper atmosphere, blocking the sun and causing a catastrophic drop in world temperatures lasting for years. Moreover, high-yield thermonuclear air bursts would chemically destroy the atmospheric ozone layer which protects animals and plants from the ultraviolet rays of the sun. These combined effects—prolonged bitter cold and deadly ultraviolet radiation—would virtually ensure the extinction not only of the human race but of most life on the planet, with the likely exception of micro-organisms, insects and grasses. Meanwhile I watched and listened as politicians justified the

creation and deployment of even more weapons, as though the threat of extinction required constant reinforcement. The destruction of the earth through nuclear war was not an abstract possibility—like the sun exploding or the earth being struck by a huge comet—but was an event of increasing likelihood. Had human beings ever before invented a weapon, produced it in great quantities, and then refrained from using it?

I realized that I had a fundamental choice to make. I could either push these thoughts to the back of my mind and pursue my personal ambitions, or do something extraordinary—I didn't really know what—to intervene in the world situation. Every hereditary and environmental influence constrained me toward the former choice; reason, and a mysterious inner urge compelled me toward the latter. It was a remarkably simple decision to make, actually: reason prevailed. My own personal wants, desires, fears and expectations would have to be put entirely to one side while I sought to find some solution to mankind's dilemma. Though I was utterly without qualifications as a statesman or leader, and had no more assurance of ability or success than any other ordinary citizen would have had, I determined that I would devote myself to acting on behalf of all humankind: whatever integrity I possessed would be satisfied with nothing less.

Since I was only one person, I decided that what little leverage I had should be most effectively applied: I would look for solutions, but at the same time I would seek to identify the root of the current global impasse so as not to waste my efforts by merely worrying at symptoms. I examined political, diplomatic and social approaches, but quickly saw that even the simplest and most obviously constructive idea—such as a freeze on the production and deployment of nuclear weapons—could easily be sabotaged on its way to acceptance or implementation. Every plan I studied was ultimately subject to the attitudes of people—the most intangible of quantities. Even if a brilliant diplomat were to succeed in negotiating a treaty, its peaceful effect depended upon human goodwill—which, had it been present in the first place, would have made the treaty unnecessary. The more I turned the matter over in my mind the more clearly it came to me that the source of the world's unrest was not a lack of bright ideas, policies, programs or initiatives, but some basic flaw in human nature.

One way of describing that flaw, it seemed, was as the tendency to blame and accuse. Of course the blame constantly being heaped by the superpowers on each other was a major cause of tension in the world, but those who were ostensibly seeking world peace seemed to spend a great deal of their time at the blame game as well: they blamed political leaders for being too unyielding and aggressive, and even blamed nuclear weapons themselves, though a moment's thought should have revealed that were all the bombs to have been gathered into one place and ground to dust the fears and enmities that compelled their original construction would have urged new batches onto the assembly lines in a matter of weeks or months. All this blame had the effect of shifting responsibility away from the individual and of putting those in positions of power on the defensive, making a relaxation of tensions ever more difficult.

Thus, I decided, if I were to blame anyone or anything for the world situation I would merely be perpetuating the attitudes helping to fuel the world-wide engine of terror. As I observed my own thoughts, feelings and actions, I saw that whatever tendencies I abhorred in nations or in political leaders were present to some degree in myself as well. Unless I could learn to deal creatively with these tendencies in my own heart and mind, so that they no longer controlled my behavior in any way, there would be little hope for the world as a whole. I resolved to become a microcosmic testing-ground for the possibility of human regeneration and transformation.

In the early months of my awakening experience I tended to think that I had chosen a hopelessly naive and simplistic approach. After all, the essence of my realization had been offered in various forms over the millennia by innumerable moral and spiritual teachers, and yet here was mankind on the brink of suicide. Jesus, Buddha, Krishna and scores of lesser saints had taught compassion, love and forgiveness, and invariably their sayings had been codified by followers into dogma, which often then served as a basis for more war and conflict. Could I hope that now, with the world at the end of its rope, human beings would suddenly respond to the voice of wisdom? There was no way to know, no apparent cause for optimism. Yet reason led inescapably to this as the only approach that could make a real and lasting difference.

To my surprise and delight, not long after I came to this point of decision within myself I began to meet others who had made a similar commitment. I will never forget the excitement of meeting a friend who shared my new awareness—the depth of our individual understanding, determination and ability to act quadrupled immediately!—and then another friend, and another. Gradually I became aware of an anonymous, spontaneous network of men and women around the world who were interested in putting the well-being of the whole ahead of their own opinions, beliefs, likes and dislikes. We all had come to realize that the survival of our species could result only from a basic change in human character. We had seen, in effect, that WE were the only possible hope: if we merely demanded that governments change without experiencing that change first within ourselves, nothing worthwhile would result; but if we could demonstrate a quality of character that was sane, rational and loving, then perhaps we might provide the seed for an entirely new state of being for the body of mankind.

As I became aware of more and more people who were interested in personal transformation, a few came into view who had pioneered the way many years before. One was Buckminster Fuller, who in 1927, penniless and with wife and child to feed, nevertheless resolved to dedicate his life to mankind. In his later years "Bucky" had spoken of the trim-tab factor. The trim-tab is a small adjustable flap on a ship's rudder; by maneuvering it, one person can easily turn the entire ship. He was saying that one person can make a difference, that in fact it is *always* individuals who make the difference. Other pioneers were less well-known than Fuller, but had explored other essential aspects of global renewal. Some thought in political terms, some in spiritual terms, some in economic terms, but all emphasized personal responsibility.

As I came to realize, the fact that the world was at the end of its tether was in some unforeseeable way a positive element in the equation rather than a negative one. In our generation, for the first time in history, all of mankind was faced with the full consequences of its actions. Always before there had been the illusion that we human beings could and would get away with our self-centeredness: even if a given individual did not survive, his offspring would presumably have the same opportunity he had had to extract as much as possible from the earth and from other people, while giving as little as possible in return. Now we were faced with the very real possibility that there would be no future generations, and, as human beings, we had no one to blame but ourselves. Thus for burgeoning numbers moral regeneration began to take on the imperative of the survival instinct.

As the years went by the amorphous movement I am seeking to describe began to encompass every field of human endeavor. It was not a matter of men and women leaving their professions to become full-time anti-war activists; rather, businessmen, doctors, politicians, artists—people in every conceivable trade and profession—brought a new awareness with them into their work. And the awareness was not "anti-"

anything, not even anti-war: in retrospect one could say that we were discovering the real nature of peace. Peace as merely the absence of war was a hollow goal; instead, we were learning that peace is a palpable, living, loving atmosphere which one is personally responsible for maintaining. Both the realization and the atmosphere were infectious.

Even though more and more people began to resonate with the new tone being sounded in human consciousness, specific effects were at first difficult to put one's finger on. Because what we were up to was neither violent nor sensational, the media paid little attention to us. Since we were uninterested in finding villains to blame, no one saw us as a threat. Since we were expressing a spirit rather than promoting a program, cause or religion, some of us were not even aware that we were part of what in retrospect we might call a "movement"—indeed, many of us were individualists who avoided joining organizations. Yet we all felt compelled to learn how to work together in a spirit of loving friendship, in order both to share our awareness with others—through newsletters, symposiums, films and other projects—and also simply to demonstrate in our relationships the attitude of yieldedness to Life that we were talking about.

Yet in spite of our invisibility to the media and our lack of traditional organizational structure (or perhaps because of it!) we *were* producing results. Merely because we saw the stupidity of blame and accusation, others began to see it too; the awareness spread as if by osmosis into the general population. Public figures—who increasingly wished to appear genuine, compassionate, balanced and sane—were more or less forced to let go of whatever tendencies they'd had toward dogma, inflexibility or egotism. Even the electioneering hyperbole of politicians lost its harsh, accusatory tone as candidates saw that in order to be respected they needed to appear respectful of each other.

Moreover, this new awareness knew no national boundaries. As leaders in one nation moved toward a reasonable, compassionate stance, other world leaders felt safe to relax their hard-line approach to various issues. Treaties became easier to negotiate, and distinctions dissolved: socialists found that only by promoting individual initiative and personal responsibility could government actually help people, while capitalists began to see for themselves that greed, and its resulting uncontrolled devouring of resources, weren't in anyone's ultimate interest—their own included.

So far, I have been describing only the constructive, integrative aspects of the transition. But the fact is that not everyone responded to the new spirit on the move—far from it. For instance, businesses and corporations which insisted on putting profits above people began to find resources and raw materials vanishing. Because international money manipulators traded on the average person's acquisitiveness and fear, when the character of the average person began to change subtly the world monetary system was thrown into disarray. Years of economic chaos resulted; but it is safe to say that today virtually everyone is thankful that the arcane and incredibly fragile global monetary system of the twentieth century, which was based on debt and speculation, has been replaced by a more natural order in which transactions of material goods are kept as simple and straightforward as possible, with spiritual values as the underlying medium of exchange.

In addition, and of far greater immediate consequence, those who were determined to press their own ideology, religion, program or profit were somehow deeply frightened and angered by the ineffable change in the mass consciousness. Dogmatic governments seemed determined to get into a battle—but since it was so difficult to fight with those who were becoming increasingly reasonable and flexible, it was necessary for the doctrinaires to contend with each other. Unfortunately, their contentions became

increasingly violent, so that by the mid 1990s lines of tension were stretched to the breaking point.

Some say that the hostile exchange of four multiple-warhead nuclear missiles in late 1995 was the catalyst which showed mankind once and for all the futility and senselessness of war. It is true that the horrendous, instantaneous carnage of that fateful week in November marked a distinct turning point, since now everyone could see the options in stark contrast. Yet, had a positive alternative not already been in place the destruction would simply have spread and engulfed the whole world. In retrospect, the significant event was not the apocalyptic detonations which immediately commanded the world's horrified attention, but the slow, invisible changes in hearts and minds which had been going on for years—subconsciously for most, but consciously for at least a few. Enough awareness and practical experience had emerged through and among us pioneers that when the powderkeg blew there were just sufficient stable, clear men and women on hand to pick up the pieces and show a new direction.

And it was an *entirely* new direction: prior to the events of November, 1995, virtually no one would have thought it possible for human beings to change so deeply and so quickly. We were suddenly and forcibly brought to terms with the hollowness of all our institutions and philosophies, and the inherent destructiveness of human nature itself. The old voices of greed and hate fell silent in one long moment of shame and sorrow. All of mankind was at last united—in tragedy, yes, but united just the same—and the unprecedented, profound and unified silence of the moment left space for a new voice to be heard.

It was then that gentleness first had its way. The simple truth of oneness could not be denied, and the small, quiet minority became the way-shower for all mankind. The prophecies of all the ancient cultures—of a time of global conflict followed by the beginning of a new age of peace, "a new heaven and a new earth"—were suddenly clear in meaning. Our individual lives took on a new context and a new sense of purpose.

In the fifteen years since the Great Destruction we have come far: not only have weapons been put aside, but governments and institutions have themselves become virtually meaningless, and the assumption of individual responsibility for wholesome, healing function is virtually everyone's concern and priority. Yet the deeper the internal changes go, the more acute is our awareness that we, humankind, have for millennia been in grievous violation of the natural order. Clearly, we have a long way to go before innocence is restored. The choice has been made, however, and the process is inexorable.

If I could send a message back through time to the people of 1985, it would be one of encouragement and hope, but I would certainly stress the insidiousness of complacency. Had it not been for those brave few who were willing to stop accusing and blaming and to make changes in their own living it is clear the direction events would have taken. It was the individual who made the difference, not organizations, governments, religions or philosophies; and it is to the individual I would speak. "Only you can do it," I would say. "It is up to you. What we call human nature is not inevitable; beneath your acquired human identity you are inherently divine. Let the light of truth shine through you, no matter what . . ."

Loveland, Colorado RICHARD HEINBERG

REVIEW
THE TALL BANANA TREES

KAY BOYLE is a writer, we are somewhat ashamed to admit, of whom we knew little or nothing (although her name was familiar) until we read *Words That Must Somehow Be Said*, providing selected essays she wrote between 1927 and 1984. In this book (North Point Press, 1985, $16.50) is material that, once you start reading, it is almost impossible to stop. The subject hardly matters. It is her way of telling things—jumping back and forth from generalities to particulars—that makes them come alive and demand close attention.

She wrote a piece on "The Teaching of Writing" for the *NEA Journal* in 1964. She began by quoting from a sixteen-year-old girl student the opening words of a composition:

> All during dinner I was sitting in the Chablis wine bottle, oblivious to what my father was saying. The cool, clear liquid held me up buoyantly, like a turtle on a lake in spring. I saw myself swimming gently, easily, over to the side of the bottle nearest to my father, and I was treading wine. The green glass distorted his face horribly so that his mustache and lips were merged in a snarl which became grotesque every time he moved his lips to chew.

Well, that's one way to begin a composition. What does Kay Boyle say about it? "The picture these sentences evoke is startling in its purity and far more revealing than a long discourse on the lack of communication between a father and his daughter. Words like these make an oasis, richly green and deep with shadows, in the parched wasteland of daily talk."

What is trying to teach writing like?

> How to release reluctant students to speech is the first problem for the teacher of writing. At times the young find it as difficult to express their inner thoughts in words as do those whose minds have solidified into all but unbreakable moods. But why, after all, should this inability to speak with the heart as well as with the lips be blamed on "restrictive teaching"? Is it not more a case of restrictive thinking (induced by restrictive living) causing this muteness, which perhaps no teacher can cure? One can suggest reading to such students—great poetry, great novels—to help allay the fear of speaking. But one cannot be sure that the students will dare to understand the words that other men have said. It takes courage to say things differently: Caution and cowardice dictate the use of the cliche.

If you think about this, and reflect on how hard it is for some people to think of simple metaphors for what they want to say—their inability to dramatize—you wonder why so many righteous souls attack the idea of hierarchy. There are countless "ordinary" writers, but only a few who are great. Hierarchy describes this fact of life. It is so in everything—in business enterprise, in driving a car, and in all the arts. We don't know why, but there are these extraordinary differences among people. The differences are not accounted for by anything we can name, but there they are, and we may thank the stars that they are real, for what would we have to aspire to and strive after without the great! As a teacher of writing, Kay Boyle, who really has the touch, did what she could.

> One can speak of Dylan Thomas crying out in fervor and eagerness, while still in his early teens, "If *Paradise Lost* had not already been written, I would have written it!" One can suggest to one's students that they forget for the moment the daily, insoluble problems of family conflicts, or creative writing courses, or difficulties in transportation, and write of the night mind, of their own night minds. But this does not mean they will instantly begin to probe beneath their conscious thoughts for the great fortune that is lying there like hidden gold.

The gold was there for Kay Boyle, but is it there for the rest of us? We can only say that she, as a teacher, would be better able to help us find it than most others. Yet—

> Once I quoted to a class of adults André Malraux's statement that to fulfill one's destiny one must never cease converting one's life to wider concepts and wider uses.
>
> "Well, how would you suggest I do that here in this small town?" a gentle old lady student once asked.

"Perhaps each one of us has to find the way himself," was the only answer I could give her. "In the Connecticut town where I live, for instance," I added, "I entered into the lives of the men on skid row, tragic derelicts of men who stood all day in doorways, or leaned in huddled groups against a wall, where the sun would warm their blood for a little while. . . ."

And the little old lady asked me then, "Well, if I did that here, what kind of a dress do you think I should wear?"

But Kay Boyle is a teacher who does not give up.

For the benefit of one of my students who actually believed that writers must be intellectuals, Robert Frost sat down with me and her and explained the vast difference between the two. "Intellectuals," he said, with a gesture of impatience at the thought of them, "deal in abstractions. It's much safer that way. Writers take risks. They deal in anecdotes and parables."

It is not always easy to convince students that what Frost said is true. To the recalcitrant who may, quite paradoxically, accept the miracle of Christianity while rejecting the inner world created by the mind of man, I tell the following anecdote:

My friend, a French painter and Resistance fighter, was put in a concentration camp by the Nazis. Every evening during his long incarceration, he and two or three of his fellow prisoners created a world to which their jailers had no access. Entirely by means of conversation and gestures, they dressed for dinner in immaculate white shirts that did not exist, and placed, at times with some difficulty because of the starched material that wasn't there, pearl or ruby studs and cuff links in those shirts.

Then they went to dinner in some fashionable restaurant and pursued wonderful conversations.

On the evenings that they saw themselves as men of letters, they quoted from the great poets while they dined, reciting all the lines they could remember of Homer, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare. If they were scientists, at least one among them would be a Nobel prize winner, and they would discuss da Vinci and Spengler and Einstein. The words they spoke were real, if nothing else was, and the lonely courage that other men have expressed gave them the courage to survive.

To students who did not know how to write from inside a bottle of Chablis, she gave finer wines from the riches of her own mind.

And one can ask them as well to listen to the words of a very great young writer of our time, James Baldwin, whose fervent essays put much of contemporary, so-called creative writing to everlasting shame. "Although we do not wholly believe it yet," Baldwin has said, "the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect upon the world." If we as writers and as teachers can communicate that quite simple truth to others, then we shall have fulfilled our roles.

Who *is* Kay Boyle? She is a writer full of "words that must somehow be said." People who are writers never sit down to learn the art; they don't go to school for help. They simply write, because they can't help it, because they must. This book we have been quoting from has a good introduction by Elizabeth Bell, its editor, in which she says that Kay Boyle was born in 1902 in St. Paul, Minnesota. Two extraordinary women, her mother and her grandmother, introduced her to the world, taking her about and reading to her. "From childhood on, then, she became accustomed to new concepts and to new ways of seeing the old ones."

During the 1920s Kay Boyle herself became a member of the movement of protest against conventional art and thought, first in America and later in Europe. She worked first as an assistant to Lola Ridge on Harold Loeb's New York magazine *Broom*, which published then-unheard-of young writers such as Glenway Wescott, Waldo Frank and Matthew Josephson, and here she developed friendships—for example with William Carlos Williams—that would last a lifetime.

Kay Boyle married a Frenchman and remained with him in France until 1941, when she returned to America. By that time, her short stories and other writings had "established her as a major literary voice." After the war she went back to Europe as a correspondent for the *New Yorker.* In the 1950s she became a target for McCarthyisrn and all the journals stopped publishing her except the *Nation,* in which many of the essays in this book first appeared. At this

time she continued to produce novels, short stories, and poems, and "her nonfiction gained a stature that could not be ignored." She was active in the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, protested U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and more recently has been an organizer and active supporter of Amnesty International in San Francisco, where she was teaching.

> As a writer she has always recognized her responsibility to the human community: to convey the realities of human existence, even when those realities shatter our carefully constructed illusions. She wants her readers to care, as deeply as she does, about our relationships as human beings.

A good example of her work is the sketch (published in the *Nation* in 1949) of two women who met in the diner of the Orient Express, both en route to Frankfurt, Germany. One is a girl, the other an old lady. They become acquainted and share a half-bottle of red wine with their dinner. The girl speaks first:

> "How I hate it," she said . . . "How I hate going back to Germany," she said, and she reached quickly and blindly out and took her glass up, and drank down the first swallow of red wine. . . . "Every time it's a little bit harder than it was the time before," the girl was saying quickly. She sat with her arms resting on the table, turning the glass of wine between her fingers. "You see, I go to Paris perhaps once a month, just for the weekend. And every time I have to go back it's like cutting my heart out and throwing it away."
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> "And you can't stay in Paris?" the woman said quietly.
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> "Well, I have a job," the girl said, . . .
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> "Yes, Frankfurt," said the faded little woman. "It's been a long time, but I could tell you the name of almost every street still. You know, I went there as a bride once," she said.

She explained that her husband had been a teacher at the university and died in 1934, after twenty-five years of happy married life. They were Jews and the old lady had to leave soon after (she went to China), with two of her four sons. The other two died at Dachau. And now, after fifteen years, she was returning to Frankfurt because foreign families were being evacuated from China.

> "I shall make out very well," she said . . . "I have a widow's pension accumulated at the university. It will be enough to begin again on," she said. . . . "It will be enough to pay my way into the Palm Garden in the afternoons, and there'll still be the orchid house. . . . and there'll be the camelias flowering. . . . And then she stopped talking "Unless," she said quickly, "I mean, was the Palm Garden bombed—are the greenhouses there still?"
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> "Yes, they are there," said the girl, and then the two women began to laugh across the table at each other.
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> "I must write to my sons at once, to my two boys in China," the woman said, wiping the tears of laughter away "and tell them how tall the banana trees have grown."

COMMENTARY
FOR STUDENTS OF SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

THE Land Institute is an agricultural research center near the Smoky Hill River southeast of Salina, Kansas, with 188 acres, various experimental plots, a classroom, library, lab, and solar greenhouse. It was founded nearly ten years ago by Wes and Dana Jackson. It has a staff of researchers, making six in all who teach. It is now offering ten internships in sustainable agriculture beginning Feb. 17 of next year and ending Dec. 19, 1986. These interns will receive $93 a week for the 43 weeks, with full tuition scholarships for the three sessions of spring, summer, and fall.

In a recent announcement it is said:

> Researchers at the Land Institute design and conduct experiments which they hope will lead eventually to a sustainable agriculture based on high seed-yielding, herbaceous, perennial mixtures, or what might be called "domestic prairies. Currently, all of our plant breeding and ecological studies are directed toward answering four questions: (1) Can perennialism and high seed yield go together? (2) Can a perennial polyculture have an economic advantage over a perennial monoculture? (3) Can an herbaceous perennial seed-producing polyculture capture and fix sufficient quantities of nitrogen to support itself? (4) Can such an ecosystem control weeds and avoid epidemics of insects and pathogens?

The Land program seeks a kind of agriculture that will conserve the soil (perennials need much less plowing) and be less dependent on fossil fuels and chemicals. Applicants for the internships should be in good health and able to work hard, not only on experiments aiding research, but on other tasks involving maintenance. They should be graduates or upper level undergraduates. The letter of application should give academic background and interests and goals, describe jobs held, tell what books on sustainable agriculture have been read, why the applicant wants to study at the Land Institute instead of a university, and enclose a letter from a professor who knows the applicant. Particular consideration will be given to those who plan for a Ph.D. and to become teachers in the area of sustainable agriculture. Applications should be sent to the Agricultural Intern Program, The Land Institute, Rt. 3, Salina, Kans. 67401.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves

"THINKING IS NOT A PERFORMING ART"

IN *Et cetera,* of which he is the editor, for the spring of this year, Neil Postman presented the text of his keynote address at the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, 1984. He began with a comparison of Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* with Huxley's *Brave New World,* noting that Orwell's predictions did not come true in the democratic West. But what about Huxley's anticipations?

Contrary to common belief, even among the educated Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orweli warned that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother or Ministry is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As Huxley saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

For us, Postman proposes, Orwell was wrong and Huxley right. He presents what seems to him the evidence:

> According to the 1983 Nielsen Report on Television ninety-eight per cent of all American homes have a television set. Fifty-one per cent have two or more television sets. Seventy-five per cent have color television sets. The average household has its television sets on approximately seven hours a day. The average American child watches 5000 hours of television before he or she ever gets to school about 16,000 hours by high school's end. The only activity that occupies more of an American youth's time than TV-viewing is sleeping. Americans who have reached the age of forty will have seen over one million television commercials, and can expect to see another million before their first retirement check arrives.

This is not a new subject for Mr. Postman. He has watched television a lot and written about it. Now he says:

> Television in America, it would appear, is the *soma* of Huxley's *Brave New World.* But let me hasten to say that America's immersion in television is not to be taken as an attempt by a malevolent government or an avaricious corporate state to employ the age-old trick of distracting the masses with circuses. The problem is more serious than that and far from being age-old. The problem is not that TV presents the masses with entertaining subject matter, but that television presents all subject matter as entertaining. What is dangerous about television is not its junk. Every culture can absorb a fair amount of junk, and, in any case we do not judge a culture by its junk but by how it conducts its serious public business. What is happening in America is that television is transforming all serious public business into junk.
>
> As our politics, our news, our religion, our education, and our commerce are less and less given expression in the form of printed words or even oratory, they are rapidly being reshaped and staged to suit the requirements of television. And because television is a visual medium, because it does its talking in pictures, not words; because its images are in color and are most pleasurably apprehended when they are fast-moving and dynamic; because television demands an immediate and emotional response, because television is nothing at all like a pamphlet, a newspaper, or a book; because of all this and more, all discourse on television must take the form of an entertainment. Television has little tolerance for arguments, hypotheses, reasons, explanations, or any of the instruments of abstract expositional thought. What television mostly demands is a performing art. Thinking is not a performing art. Showing is. And so what can be shown rather than what can be thought becomes the stuff of our public consciousness. In all arenas of public business, the image now replaces the word as the basic unit of discourse. As a consequence, television makes the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas obsolete. It creates a new metaphor: the marketplace of images.

Mr. Postman is a persuasive writer. Some of his sentences leave no ground for standing anywhere else. We must nonetheless ask: Is he wrong or right? His address takes several pages. At the end he warns that television has the power to alter culture.

> Among other things, the printed word created the modern idea of prose, and invested exposition with unprecedented authority as a means of conducting public affairs. Television disdains exposition, which is serious, sequential, rational and

> complex. It offers instead a mode of discourse in which everything is accessible, simplistic, concrete, and above all, entertaining. As a result, America is the world's first culture in jeopardy of amusing itself to death. . . . I wish you to understand me to be saying that there are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shrivelled. In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque. The first way is far easier for us to recognize and to oppose. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the walls begin to close around us. We are not likely to be indifferent to the voices of the Sakharovs and the Timmermans and the Walesas. To take arms against a sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Luther, Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe, and Jefferson. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture dying of laughter? I fear, ladies and gentlemen, that our philosophers have as yet given us no guidance in this matter.

As we said, Postman is persuasive. But is he wrong? We go now to something reported by Jack Smith, a columnist on the *Los Angeles Times.* Last June 3 he said:

> . . . I have received a report from Keith A. Dixon, professor of anthropology at Cal State Long Beach, that casts some doubt on the sophistication of high school students who have made it into college. Dixon tested his freshmen and sophomore anthropology students on some popular beliefs, with these results in one of his two classes:
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> Astronauts or aliens from other planets or stars have had a significant impact on human cultural evolution: 25% agreed; 35% had no opinion.
>
> The Creationist Christian view of the origin of humans is correct: 46% agreed; 20% disagreed; 34% had no opinion.
>
> Noah's Ark is only a legend and does not really exist on Mt. Ararat: 14% agreed; 56% disagreed.
>
> Human brains have the same range of variations biologically among all peoples, and therefore there are no differences in intelligence or mental ability (as opposed to different learned knowledge) among human races: 47% agreed; 46% disagreed.
>
> The different patterns of cultural behavior of people around the world are due mostly to their biological (racial) differences: 29% agreed; 64% disagreed. . . .
>
> Dixon's findings suggest that at least half of today's high school students, if we include those who had no opinion, seem to have been raised on supermarket newspapers, rather than newspapers like this one.

Is there a connection—a connection between the hours spent by the young in front of a television screen and the opinions of college freshmen in Long Beach, California? Who can tell? All one can say is that there is a consistency of mood between the assumptions of a TV program and the opinions of students: both are indifferent to matters of fact. In entertainment, facts don't matter.

The state of mind of the freshmen in Long Beach recalls something that Gregory Bateson said in an interview with Stewart Brand in *Harper's* for November, 1973:

> My complaint with the kids I teach nowadays—graduate students and such—is that they don't really believe anything enough to get the tension between the data and the hypothesis. What they may find out doesn't really impact on theory, because they don't have any theory they're willing to hold tight enough to get an impact. It *slides* all the time.

Which might be to say that an audience that is continually entertained is a bunch of people who are convictionless, and who have little or no idea of what is wrong with them.

FRONTIERS

Anxiety about the Schools

IN the lead article in *Teachers College Record* for the Winter of 1984, John Hardin Best surveys the continuous attempts throughout the history of the United States to reform the country's public schools. In one place this professor in education policy studies at Pennsylvania State University says:

> Throughout the nineteenth century these efforts continued as new educational leaders in state after state took up the crusade for establishing free, tax-supported, compulsory public schooling. To maintain America's democratic freedoms was a prime motive of these school reformers. And in the reports of "crisis" today there is a continuing reflection of this motive. From the Jeffersonian concern for the leadership of the nation through the nineteenth-century reformers' claims that the schools will keep us free, the arguments are persuasive: Failure of the schools, and in fact the public schools, poses a threat to the very roots of our democratic political system.

And today?

> We have ardently wanted to believe, and we do today, that all Americans possess a basic equality of opportunity that permits any one of us to rise to a position of inequality in our society. How is it possible to maintain this belief in the face of so many contradictions and exceptions around us? How can we continue to hold that this dream of equality of opportunity could be reality? The school, the great American public school has always been our answer.

But now America is failing in many ways, and we blame the schools. In his conclusion, Prof. Best says:

> At risk in the decline of America's schools, in sum, is our leadership in technology and production, our economic prosperity, our military security, and our civil and social order at home. The burden placed on the schools is staggering in that the health and well-being of the whole society seems to rest on their success or failure. Excellence, according to the reports, is the key, but there are many ways of defining excellence for our schools, many ways of achieving it and measuring it. Some are as simple as upping the SAT scores reported annually, or setting rigid standards for awarding a high school diploma. . . . No doubt excellence is a fine slogan for us all, but simply repeating it to ourselves, comforting though it may be, will hardly change the schools.
>
> The risks of failure are unquestioned. Our failure to chart a course and to reach a point of success in our schools is a far graver risk than even the reports have said. The failure of our schools will mean the end of our vision of achieving a just society, the end of the ideal of that delicate balance of liberty and equality. The decline of our schools will mean no less than the decline of the United States.

Whenever we read such measured and well-intentioned criticism of the institution of the schools, we remember what happened to Albert Einstein in Munich:

> Einstein was dropped from his *Gymnasium* in Munich because the school felt his attitude to be negative and to have caused other students to be disrespectful toward their teachers. He applied for admittance to the Polytechnic Institute in Zurich and failed to pass the entrance examination in mathematics. When finally admitted he did not do well. In an autobiographical note he said:
>
> "The hitch in this was, of course, the fact that one had to cram all this stuff into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring [upon me] that, after I had passed the final examination, I found consideration of any scientific problems distasteful for me for an entire year. . . . It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail." (Quoted in James Marshall's *The Devil in the Classroom.*)

It would be exceedingly interesting to make a list of accessible people who have been both distinguished and influential in public affairs and ask them how much importance they assign to their public school education or its equivalent. From what we have read, a great many of such people are likely to say an important part of their development was in turning away from what they learned in school. And how can an institution teach you to resist institutional pressures and doctrines? Individuals may bore from within,

inspiring distrust, but these teachers are secret antagonists of institutions.

Also to be considered is the fact that we live in a society in confused but rapid transition. To whom does the future belong? To the Pentagon and political advocates of "military security" or to the Gandhian and other champions of non-violence? More and more this decision must be made, since neither half-hearted war nor halfhearted peace will work. The schools, we learn from recent authorities quoted by Prof. Best, "are the base for military strength." Education is required for the operation of high-tech military hardware. "Our security is based on our schools."

If this is so, then we must be sure to keep pacifists and unilateralists away from the children. But if we do that we may be locking the door against a liveable future for a great many of the young. This one dilemma is enough to show the futility of expecting to improve the future through the public schools. Education is or ought to be the responsibility of parents, with public schools a kind of "last resort" for children whose parents are indifferent or neglectful or who are without parents. We may need or have to have an establishment; all large organizations require standards of a sort, but these should be consciously modest and unassuming, while the State, as long as states continue to be necessary, should be as apologetic as possible. Our hope for the future lies with great individuals, not in institutions. We have text after text to point this out, starting, in the West, with Plato's *Apology*. Our best men, beginning with Tom Paine, have always been hated and opposed by institutions.