

FULL POSSESSION OF A LIFE

HAVING learned from present-day essayists and a recent preface to one of his books that Henry David Thoreau is every year more widely read in this country, we again felt the pressure of an old question: What sort of man was Thoreau, so different from nearly all his contemporaries, and different from ourselves? He was moved to think and act in ways which become familiar by reading his books, but what it was that moved him remains a mystery. He is at once embarrassing and fascinating. There is hardly a dull line anywhere in his writing—this in paragraphs that some times last for three pages without break—in disquisitions that range from Concord to Australia, with hardly a pause for breath, its variety having in common only the stance of the author. Yet it is the stance that embarrasses, so elevated that we wonder how he reached it, and apparently without effort maintained it. He must, we think, have been made of different stuff, but *what* stuff? What transcendental gene produced his mind and character? He has no duplicate anywhere in history, although he located some relatives or ancestors in books.

The plain implication of his life is that he was drawn by some invisible magnet to behave as he did, but we have only hints concerning the nature of its attraction. He uses words that we commonly understand, yet gives them meanings that break the rules of usage. From one reviewer of his time he called forth the lament that "there runs through many of [his essays] a vein of impracticable and half-insane theorizing." Perhaps the writer had in mind a passage in one of Thoreau's literary commentaries, concerned with moral reality:

He who is conversant with the supernal powers will not worship these inferior deities of the wind, waves, tide, and sunshine. But we would not disparage the importance of such calculations as we have described. They are truths in physics, because they are true in ethics. Suppose we could compare the moral with the physical, and say how many horse-power the force of love, for instance, blowing on

every square foot of a man's soul, would equal. No doubt we are well aware of this force; figures would not increase our respect for it, the sunshine is equal to but one ray of its heat. The light of the sun is but the shadow of love. . . . Love is the wind, the tide, the waves, the sunshine. Its power is incalculable; it is many horse-power. It never ceases, it never slacks; it can move the globe without a resting-place; it can warm without fire; it can feed without meat, it can clothe without garments; it can shelter without roof; it can make a paradise within which will dispense with a paradise without. But though the wisest men in all ages have labored to publish this force, and every human heart is, sooner or later, more or less, made to feel it, yet how little is actually applied to social ends. True, it is the motive-power of all successful social machinery; but, as in physics, we have made the elements do only a little drudgery for us, steam to take the place of a few horses, wind of a few oars water of a few cranks and hand-mills; as the mechanical forces have not yet been generously and largely applied to make the physical world answer to the ideal, so the power of love has been but meanly and sparingly applied, as yet. . . . Still less are we accumulating its power, and preparing to act with greater energy at a future time. Shall we not contribute our shares to this enterprise, then?

Here, tucked away as the opening clause of a reproachful sentence, is statement of the law of our common life: Love "is the motive-power of all successful social machinery." Some day this law will be admitted and applied to wider purpose. At present, however, we have heard it repeated only by unofficed statesmen and by frustrated military commanders who informed us, during the Vietnam War, that guns and bombs would never be able to reach the hearts and minds of the people we had come to liberate. We think that love is a matter of sentiment, but with other names it is the bond that holds both communities and countrymen together; it is the feeling of mutuality and respect which makes us trust one another, abide by compacts embodying that trust, and devise and observe rules of order that reduce the unnecessary friction in our lives. Least of all is coercive power the means of making the social

machinery operate, as every tyrant or dictator must eventually learn, from wasting and destroying the lubricant of regard which in its highest expression is love. If scholars were able to isolate this factor from the complex mix of human nature, they could show that without it nothing but tangles would remain of our human relations, that nations could no longer exist, and as a further consequence populations would die away. So, being Americans, we might claim that Thoreau was the founder of social science, and that when his genius is recognized in full, he will have turned our theories of order and authority around, making them issue from their natural source. What good to us are learned men unable to discern in his splendid rhetoric the root principle of social life?

Walden has been called by a perceptive reader "an epistemology of conscience." Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know—in this case by conscience what we ought and ought not to do. Thoreau leaves what we ought to do to the instruction of the moment, but on what we ought not to do he is prolific. Our misdeeds are tangible, numerous, and stand out in shocking relief as he frames them. He is, indeed, a great complainer, but what we are after here is the ground of his complaint, which is hard to find. What would he have us do, and why?

Perhaps he is silent on this question, save in flights of lofty generalization, because he knows that one who does only what he is told has ceased to be a man, become as much a captive as an obedient evildoer. Yet his complaints of what his neighbors do, as of the men in the great cities, are made from a plateau of being we cannot even see for the intervening clouds. But he is a man who complains in a way that gives us wry delight. As in the following from "Life Without Principle"—for lovers of Thoreau very nearly a sacred text:

I hardly know an *intellectual* man, even, who is so broad and truly liberal that you can think aloud in his society. Most with whom you endeavor to talk soon come to a stand against some institution in which they appear to hold stock,—that is, some particular, not universal, way of viewing things. They will continually thrust their own low roof, with its narrow skylight, between you and the sky, when it is the unobstructed heavens you would view. Get out

of the way with your cobwebs, wash your windows, I say! In some lyceums they tell me that they have voted to exclude the subject of religion. But how do I know what their religion is, and when I am near to or far from it? I have walked into such an arena and done my best to make a clean breast of what religion I have experienced, and the audience never suspected what I was about. The lecture was as harmless as moonshine to them. Whereas, if I had read to them the biography of the greatest scamps in history, they might have thought that I had written the lives of the deacons of their church.

What was Thoreau's religion? Nobody knows. We know only what it was not. In this essay he spoke of those who go to Church, "make a clean confession, give up all, and think to start again," adding: "Thus men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up."

What were Thoreau's politics? He had none. His essay on Civil Disobedience begins:

I heartily accept the motto,—"That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—"That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they have.

Here Thoreau announces his Taoist persuasion. In another essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts," he becomes a Gandhian:

I am more and more convinced that, with reference to any public question, it is more important to know what the country thinks of it, than what the city thinks. The city does not *think* much. On any moral question, I would rather have the opinion of Boxboro than of Boston and New York put together. When the former speaks, I feel as if somebody *had* spoken, as if *humanity* was yet, and a. reasonable being had asserted its rights,—as if some unprejudiced men among the country's hills had at length turned their attention to the subject, and by a few sensible words redeemed the reputation of the race. When, in some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special town-meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing the land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States.

What did Gandhi say? "It is the city man who is responsible for war all over the world, never the villager."

Since we are entering Thoreau's interests in our account, we turn to the business of America—which is business, as Calvin Coolidge needlessly informed us. What did Thoreau think of this?

Let us consider the way we spend our lives.

This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. I cannot easily buy a blankbook to write thoughts in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me make a minute in the fields, took it for granted that I was calculating my wages....

If a man walk in the woods for love of them half each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down! ...

The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. If you would get money as a writer or a lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. Those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man.

What if you are an employer? "Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it." He says nothing, here, about those who love money, except by implication:

It is remarkable that there are few men so well employed, so much to their minds, but that a little money or fame would commonly buy them off from their present pursuit. I see advertisements for *active* young men, as if activity were the whole of a young man's capital. Yet I have been surprised when one has with confidence proposed to me, a grown man, to embark in some enterprise of his, as if I had absolutely nothing to do, my life having been a

complete failure hitherto. What a doubtful compliment this is to pay me! ...

The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise enough money to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding *his own business*. . . .

Perhaps I am more than usually jealous with respect to my freedom. I feel my connection with and obligation to society are still very light and transient. Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee, that, if my wants should be much increased, the labor to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure, that for me there would be nothing worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage. I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunder than he who consumes the greatest part of his life getting his living.

Does *nothing* about us please this man? How shall such uninterrupted critical disdain ever gain attention or hold an audience? Yet it did, and the audience, we are now told, is growing. His lowest opinion is reserved for the press, which, he declares, "exerts a greater and a more pernicious influence than the church did in its worst period." This is from "Slavery in Massachusetts." He continues:

The newspaper is a Bible which every man carries in his pocket, which lies on every table and counter, and which the mail, and thousands of missionaries, are continually dispersing. It is, in short, the only book which America has printed and which America reads. So wide is its influence. The editor is a preacher whom you voluntarily support. Your tax is commonly one cent daily, and it costs nothing for pew hire. But how many of these preachers preach the truth? I repeat the testimony of many an intelligent foreigner, as well as my own convictions, when I say, that probably no country was ever ruled by so mean a class of tyrants as, with a few noble exceptions, are the editors of the periodical press in *this* country. And they live and rule only by their servility and appealing to the worse, and not the better, nature of man, the people who read them are in the condition of the dog that returns to his vomit. . . .

But thank fortune, this preacher can be even more easily reached by the weapons of the reformer than could the recreant priest. The free men of New England have only to refrain from purchasing and reading these sheets, have only to withhold their cents, to kill a score of them at once. One whom I respect told me that he purchased Mitchell's *Citizen* in the cars, and then threw it out of the window. But would not his contempt have been more fatally expressed if he had not bought it?

Could no one, past or present, gain more than casual appreciation from Thoreau? Well, he greatly admired John Brown. He thought well of Thomas Carlyle and wrote a long essay in appreciation of his work. More to the point, however, is that Emerson loved him, as did the others who knew him, and in an introduction to one of Thoreau's books (*Excursions*, 1866) Emerson wrote of his friend:

He was bred to no profession; he never married; he never voted, he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, wisely, no doubt, for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and Nature. He had no talent for wealth, and knew how to be poor without the least hint of squalor or inelegance. Perhaps he fell into his way of living without forecasting it much, but approved it with later wisdom. "I am often reminded," he wrote in his journal, "that, if I had bestowed on me the wealth of Croesus, my aims must be still the same, and my means essentially the same." He had no temptations to fight against,—no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles. . . .

Yet, hermit and stoic as he was, he was really fond of sympathy, and threw himself heartily and childlike into the company of young people whom he loved, and whom he delighted to entertain, as he only could, with the varied and endless anecdotes of his experiences by field and river.

To illustrate Thoreau's Yankee resourcefulness and color, Emerson quoted from an unpublished manuscript: "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk." To end this biographical essay, Emerson recalled the Alpine plant called *Edelweiss* by the Swiss, signifying *Noble Purity*, then saying:

Thoreau seemed to me living in the hope to gather this plant, which belonged to him of right. The scale on which his studies proceeded was so large

as to require longevity, and we were the less prepared for his sudden disappearance. The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost. It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst of his broken task, which none else can finish,—a kind of indignity to so noble a soul, that it should depart out of nature before yet he has been really shown to his peers for what he is. But he, at least, is content. His soul was made for the noblest society; he had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world; wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home.

In the chapter of *Walden* called "What I Lived For," Thoreau wrote:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

What is there left to say about this man?

The really puzzling thing is the state, condition, or heavenly country of his origin which he left for the excursion on earth that began in 1817. If, according to the Platonic doctrine of anamnesis, the soul of Thoreau, which became the absorption of his whole being, brought with it memories that shaped his life and outlook, it is natural to wonder if we can hope for other colonists from the same ennobling sphere. Or to ask: How can such souls take such full possession of a life on earth? Was he indeed a human, whatever he declared himself to be? If so, he was one of more than exquisite taste.

REVIEW WHEN THE OIL GETS SCARCE

FROM John Seymour, a man who has done more things in his life than three ordinary fellows, we learn that Roquefort cheese is made from sheep's milk—we didn't know that sheep give milk, although they must, since they have little lambs—and that the black Karakul fur worn by fashionable ladies is taken from day-old desert ram lambs in country north of Afghanistan and in Namibia. The Karakul lambs must be skinned soon after they are born or the fur loses its curl. Seymour, who is old enough to be called venerable, has written a charming little book about the days of his youth as a shepherd, first in Kent, an English county on the Straits of Dover, then in the Cotswolds, and after that in the Karoo, in South Africa. The Karoo country, he says, is ideal for sheep—no trees or grass, just little bushes a foot or two high, just right for grazing. Seymour's job was to scrape maggots off the afflicted among 30,000 sheep, that would be eaten alive by these legless grubs if left alone—which shows, Seymour remarks, "how far they have come from the tough wild mountain animals they originally were."

His book is filled with little items of the sort you'd expect from a man with imagination. In the chapter on sheep dogs, for example, he says:

Sheep are prime practitioners of the flocking instinct—an instinct that baffles animal behaviourists. Obviously, individual safety for defenceless herbivores should rest in flight and dispersion. A pack of wolves or wild dogs would not know what to do with a herd of deer that scattered in all directions, but deer that keep together in a mob are easily hunted. Konrad Lorenz, who explains so much of animal behaviour, cannot satisfactorily explain this. But if you watch a flock of sheep being savagely dogged you realize that each individual animal appreciates that its safety lies in *not being on the edge of the flock*. The ones in the middle are quite safe. You actually see the sheep on the outside jumping on the backs of others to get towards the middle. It is *always* one of the ones on the edge that gets bitten or, in the case of wild animals, killed. And thus so many humans seek the anonymity of the crowd.

One time in Africa Seymour was sent on horseback to bring in a few hundred merino rams. No dogs were used on that farm, so he cantered around, herding them along.

But one young ram, and one only, showed individuality. He would *not* stay with the flock—he broke out of it again and again. Finally my horse and I both made the same decision: to discipline him.

Horses which are used to herding animals derive great fun from it and are extremely skillful at it. Instead of driving the errant ram back into the flock, as we had been doing, we kept him from getting back. Now the ram's attitude changed completely. He wished desperately for anonymity again. He wanted back, but we wouldn't let him. Turn and twist as he would, my horse was quicker and—only twenty as I was and not very humane—I was always ready with a cut from the *sjambok* [whip]. The horse and I kept this up too long. It became a game and we overdid it. The ram suddenly dropped to the ground—apparently dead.

Seymour dismounted and tried to get the ram back on its legs, but the animal remained inert. Such rams were pedigreed and valuable; what could he do? He drove the herd around the body of the ram, then urged it toward the farm.

And behold, there was no dead ram! The disciplined animal had gained the anonymity of the flock again, and I will wager he never again made any bids for independence. Thus do totalitarian regimes discipline their citizens. Orwell's *1984* is about just that.

The book we have been quoting is Seymour's *The Shepherd*, one of three attractive little volumes published as a set in England by Sidgwick & Jackson, printed in Spain, and sold in this country by Merrimack Publishers' Circle, Salem, New Hampshire. The other two books are *The Smallholder*—this means a man with a family-size farm—and *The Woodlander*, each priced at \$8.95. Each deals with a dimension of John Seymour's career in the agricultural arts, each salted with the author's humor. He is a knight of the earth, armored with agricultural know-how and ecological wisdom. No other writer we know can make a life on the land seem so tempting, yet his cautions and warnings are frequent. The book

on the woodlands is about a John-Henry-type duel between the cross-cut and the chain saw.

John Seymour was himself a "smallholder" in Wales for twenty-one years, where farmers survive working twenty or thirty acres, which requires much ingenuity:

One pair of old bachelor brothers I knew felt they desperately needed a muck-spreader and they had not the money to pay for one. So they took turns at having a bad back. One had a bad back for a couple of months while his brother ran the farm. And he drew National Health money for it of course. Then the other took his turn. They are the only people I know (but probably not the only people) who acquired a muck-spreader on the National Health.

Some of these small farmers, Seymour says, are making a very good living. How on earth do they do it?

The successful ones have, almost all of them, used very open minds and great originality to find some completely new ways of performing a service or producing something their neighbors want.

I cannot help being reminded, when I consider the smallholding movement in the British Isles, of the advent of the mammals in the Eocene age. The reptiles had grown huge and apparently invincible. If they could have thought at all, which is doubtful, it would have seemed to them that the earth was theirs and theirs alone. But then, between their feet, began to scuttle tiny warm-blooded animals, but with more brain. Where are the giant reptiles now?

The huge farms in Britain are still getting huger. Amalgamations still go on. The ditches are still being piped and filled in, the hedges and stone walls bulldozed out, the woods and spinneys cleared away as interfering with the movements of giant machinery. The countryside resembles more and more a vast barley prairie in the mid-west of America. The number of people actually deriving a living from the land dwindles by the year. And yet, in the overlooked interstices, the areas of country that have proved, as yet, too rough and infertile for the giant farming companies, a few of the old traditional smallholders have held out—held out against all official advice and despite every discouragement. They have been assured again and again that they are anachronisms.

But, when the oil gets too scarce to run the giant tractors—who will be the anachronisms then?

One talent owned by John Seymour we have said nothing about—his writing. But this is hardly necessary now.

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Now and then we receive for review a book that seems excellent in many ways, yet is almost impossible to review—that is, review to the satisfaction of the reviewer. Such a book is *Old Farms—an Illustrated Guide* (Schocken, 1983) by John Vince, an Englishman who, we are told, "has been writing about and drawing objects and buildings from our past for many years." Well, the drawings of the tools, equipment, and buildings of the farms of past centuries in England are fun to look at, and the text, all in calligraphy that is quite legible after you get used to it, gives information to go with the drawings. We mention this book here because it would provide atmospheric background for reading John Seymour, who could have written a fine introduction to *Old Farms*. The book is filled with pictures of sickles and scythes, barns and stables, horses and harness, shears and sheep, kitchens' and pots, pans, fireplaces and stoves, and the tools of washing and ironing. One picture was especially fascinating. It showed a horse-drawn hay rake of the sort a MANAS associate was permitted to use for gleaning on a Connecticut hayfield during the teens of the century (our friend was all of eight at the time). Most of the tools drawn by Mr. Vince are in museums or curio cabinets, but some—a very few—are still in use, while others may be revived as times change. Anyway, the book will be more interesting on a coffee table than the current *House and Garden*.

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Reviewers, naturally, write about what they read, and, browsing recently in the British anarchist paper, *Freedom* (Sept. 10), we came across some comment on the trouble in Sri Lanka that is so much better than anything we've seen on

this subject that we lift it (the last paragraph) whole for quotation:

Please, please do not take sides. This is not melodrama, the conflict of right with wrong. This is tragedy, the conflict of right with right. The recent and early incursion of Tamils into Sri Lanka over a strait one could swim across is as natural and inevitable a historical process as that of the white man into the Americas and into Australia, the Belgae into Britain and the ancient Chinese into Japan. Like birth, it will not be stopped, but it can be made a damn sight less painful and dangerous if its unstable side-effects are understood and controlled by able and sympathetic bystanders. Concrete walls, whether between countries or set around parks, are no more eternal than the sun. They weather, crumble, become a haven for flowers and children and eventually turn into an acceptable, even loved, part of the surrounding landscape.

The writer is Trevor M. Artingsoll, who now lives in Holland. He identifies himself as a Colombo Plan Scholar (1962-64) who learned enough Sinhalese to get by in Lankan villages. He says:

I found myself, as an ax-soldier and anarchist, giving advice to the occasional passing revolutionary, and was eventually foolish enough to commit it to paper in the form of a twenty-page treatise on raising a revolutionary army. For this ridiculous slip I was deported to the UK in November 1964, and rightly so.

COMMENTARY THOREAU'S "JUXTAPOSITION"

ON the day for making up this issue we received in the mail a new book, *Henry David Thoreau—in the Woods and Fields of Concord* (\$6.95), edited and with an introduction by Walter Harding, published by Gibbs Smith in Salt Lake City, Utah (1982). Harding is a lifelong student of Thoreau materials and well qualified to introduce the reader to the man who, of all the writers of Concord, was the only one actually born there. Thoreau's journals made fourteen volumes (published in 1906 by Houghton Mifflin) and Harding's book is a selection from its entries, from 1837 to 1861. Here is a sample note, made on Aug. 22, 1851, which gives some idea of what to expect:

I saw a snake by the roadside and touched him with my foot to see if he were alive. He had a toad in his jaws which he was prepared to swallow with his jaws distended to three times his width, but he relinquished his prey in haste and fled; and I thought, as the toad jumped leisurely away with his slime-covered hindquarters glistening in the sun, as if I, his deliverer, wished to interrupt his meditations,—without a shriek or fainting,—I thought what a healthy indifference he manifested. Is not this the broad earth still? he said.

Thoreau lived in his mind but very much on earth, too. When he got home from Harvard, Walt Harding says, "he almost immediately established a routine of spending from two to five hours each day, usually in the afternoon, exploring the countryside, observing the constantly changing phenomena of nature." These domesticated wanderings were an essential part of his life, as important to him as breathing. Socrates, one may recall, preferred the city to the countryside, where he could find people to converse with. There was perhaps a touch of this quality in Thoreau. Harding says:

Paradoxically, when Thoreau visited the then truly wild Maine woods, he found himself not quite at home. Nature there was a little too wild for him and he felt himself a trespasser when he climbed to Mount

Katahdin's peak. He returned to Concord with a realization that what best suited his temperament was the juxtaposition of man and nature he found in his home town.

This book seems just right for one beginning to read Thoreau. We are grateful to Mr. Harding for its 150 pages by a man who knew his way on earth.

CHILDREN ... and Ourselves

WORDS: TOOLS OR WEAPONS?

WE live in an age of specialization and as a result our lives are subdivided into various areas of impotence and dependence, except for our own specialty. How can this be changed? We know or are learning what specialization does to us. It makes us all psychological strangers. You meet for example a man who is a doctor. He is introduced to you as a doctor. To make conversation you ask him what kind of a doctor. He might turn out to be a professor in the university, a Ph.D., and not a real doctor at all. He says that he is a vascular surgeon. But unless you happen to have looked up "vascular" in the dictionary, and have not forgotten what it means, you still don't know what kind of a doctor he is. So you ask more questions, and learn, finally, that he takes care of the arteries and veins, the little tubes that carry blood from and to the heart. A pretty complicated job, and you can't think of anything more to say. He knows so much about his specialty and you know so little. So the conversation flags. There are other things to talk about, and you decide to leave medicine alone. It's just as well. If he talks about his specialty he will use a lot of words you have never heard before, much less understand. A few new words would be natural enough, but so many of them makes conversation hopeless.

Later we thought of a woman, Lini de Vries, a nurse, a teacher of public health, who in 1949 had gone to Mexico because she couldn't get a teaching job in this country. She had volunteered and gone to Spain during the Civil War (1937) to care for wounded Republicans and members of the International Brigade. Her reputation was ruined. So she went to Mexico to work, to Oaxaca, where she was to teach public health to both children and other teachers in the mountain villages. Later she wrote a book about her adventures, calling it *Please, God, Take Care of the Mule*. (A mule carried her from village to village over mountain trails, and her life depended on this sure-footed beast.) In her book she tells how she explained "vascular" to the people

of one village, where, learning that a foreign woman would be speaking, "they stood six deep at the wall."

Knowing that Mexican third-graders understood a little about physiology, she decided to tell them more about the circulatory system to "show it as a life-giver, a huge transportation system carrying foods, life-giving oxygen, protectors to fight invaders, and a means of carrying away waste materials."

Since water had recently been piped up to community taps in their village, the children knew what a pipe was, as well as a pump. These objects I could use as analogies for the circulatory system. Trying to capture their interest at once, I asked: "Do you have pipes in your bodies like the water pipes the village now has?" They looked at me as though I were mad. As they shook their heads, I continued:

"But you do have a piping system, and a pump that pumps a river carrying many things to all parts of your body." Drawing a pipe on the blackboard, I gave it three layers, explaining that the middle one was of elastic tissues. "Now let's prove it. Each of you place your three middle fingers, not too hard, on your wrist just below your thumb. Press gently. What do you feel?"

Swiftly, I slipped through the room and placed the children's hands on their pulses. Teachers waved their hands for help. I had to keep them waiting a bit, for I did not want to lose the attention of the students, their interest now centering on themselves, making them more attentive, creating a better learning situation. "Now Juan, count your pulse. Now you, Julia and you, Maria. Feel it pulse, feel the elastic in your piping system." Great excitement reigned as they felt their pulses, while I, who could hardly draw, was sketching a pump, the heart, on the blackboard. It did not look too much like the professional chart hanging on the wall, but I was holding the students' interest in their own circulatory system.

"Where does the liquid in your pipes go?" I asked. "Does the mouthful of tortilla you bit off and ate—does it go as such to your big toe? Is there oxygen in the liquid? Hold your hands as tightly as you can around your leg. Does it feel cold? Does it turn blue? What is happening? What is the liquid? What is blood?"

The lesson continued, too good to interrupt here, except briefly. The teacher, Lini de Vries, born of Dutch parents, educated in New York, may have

picked up a little Spanish as a nurse in Spain, but she was far from fluent. Yet somehow she was able to hear, think, and speak in Spanish. "I had discovered a trick: if I took a word like *idea* and pronounced it in Dutch, it became good Spanish. The vowels were pronounced the same in Spanish as in my native Dutch." A teacher will always find a way.

Drawing a big, yellow river, I made it change color by adding red cells, red with oxygen and iron. I added farmers carrying machetes who fought off invaders, germs that were harmful. Now, with another colored chalk, I added bits of food broken down by the digestive system, separating the fats, proteins, carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, etc. On the blackboard, we listed all that one of the boys, then one of the girls, had eaten that day. We checked the river to see if what was needed for growth had been fed to their bodies. Had they supplied the river in each of them with the needed materials for their proper destinations? The pupils were learning a lesson in nutrition and the circulatory system, as well as parts of the digestive system, without being overwhelmed by frightening pictures and words.

We began to draw rivers, pumps, foods going into rivers, farmers fighting disease germs with machetes. Children were to take these drawings home to explain what they had learned to their parents. The sun was sinking as we finished the afternoon class.

Here was a magnificent demonstration of how specialized knowledge can be made into general knowledge—knowledge we all need.

A comparison suggests itself—a comparison of this demonstration with the walling off of what is supposed to be educational knowledge by the specialists in education in this country. Our example is of administrators of schools who seem determined to make parents unable to understand what they are trying to do in the schools. In *Better Than School*, Nancy Wallace, mother of two children, five and nine, describes her trouble in explaining why she was insisting on teaching her children at home. The superintendent of schools had demanded an outline of the "curriculum" she planned to use—in "mathematics, science, language arts, reading, social studies, fine arts, and socialization." Somewhat desperate, she wrote to John Holt for advice. Holt, author of *Teach Your Own*, said in reply:

To another parent who is in much the same situation, I said that the thing to do is to take the most ordinary events of daily life and dress them up in fancy school language. Thus I suggested that in going to the store, the kid could be called "participating in consumer experience." I'm dead serious! As for what to *call* the business of having kids learn according to their own curiosity, I suggested, "intrinsically motivated thematically interconnected organic learning." She has tried it on them and finds that some of them are quite impressed. Think of all the things you do, all the things you look at, all the things you talk about, all the things you are interested in. Turn each one of them into a fancy school subject and you will have a curriculum three times as fancy as anything they have in school. . . .

One more word. The curriculum *can't* be too long. I know that it's a nuisance to write, but each additional page will be more intimidating than the one before. It's a shame we have to play such games, but for a while we probably do.

Nancy Wallace, author of a richly instructive book about teaching her children at home (*Better Than School*, Larson Publications, Burdett, N.Y. 14818, \$14.95), followed Holt's letter with this comment:

I also went and talked to a teacher friend in hopes that she could translate some of the "teacher jargon" on that miserable "topic outline" for me. She explained that "language arts" meant writing and grammar, but she advised me to ignore "behavior," "attitudes," and "subject fields" since she had no idea what they meant. Basically, she agreed with John that I should include some "fancy school language" in order to appear more professional, and she told me about the latest educational rage—"uninterrupted silent sustained reading" (which was actually plain old reading) and "uninterrupted silent sustained writing" (commonly known as writing). She suggested that I incorporate them into our curriculum, preferably in a prominent place for all to see.

Apparently, there is no hope of re-educating the educators. Their special language has made them impervious to any sort of teaching. Only intimidation with their own weapons of words will work for self-reliant parents. (We have to add that there are wonderful exceptions.)

FRONTIERS

Poles to the Rescue

THROUGH the years, MANAS has received some letters of complaint, along with comment nourishing to the editors. These criticisms are answered as best we can, sometimes agreeing with readers who have put their finger on certain weaknesses, such as our inability to equal the pungency of Tom Paine or the wisdom of Socrates—our adopted heroes. We are told that our frequent quotation from Plato grows monotonous, that there are good psychologists besides Maslow, that Ortega was a "conservative," Gene Debs a trouble-maker. Hardest to bear, perhaps, was the adjective "languid" applied to our prose, except for the charge that we lack humor.

The trouble with this last accusation is that no one is able, on demand, to say funny things. Humor, when successful, is without artifice, surprising the humorist as much as the reader. In such circumstances, we are at least able to repeat the jokes we come across in contemporary journals and related sources, awaiting the inspiration of . . . who was the patron god of laughter? Of course, the joke, to be worthy of attention, needs to be pertinent to our lofty themes, as for example the one that we found in *Solidarity Update*, which arrived recently from the group of that name (2425 Spaulding St., Berkeley, Calif. 94703). It seems that a "Comrade" of Polish officialdom, Stanislaw Kolankowski, was recently dismissed from his job of engineering because he was found to have "caused a financial loss to his enterprise [the story doesn't say what kind] of about 4.5 million zlotys." A zloty, according to our 1961 desk dictionary, is the Polish monetary unit, worth in those days, twenty-five cents. While, at the present moment of international exchange, the zloty is valued at only a little less (pegged at that level by the Polish government), a local financial editor remarked that here you probably couldn't give zlotys away. Yet in Poland the sum probably seems quite

respectable. Anyway, Kolankowski was dismissed—that is, being a reputable communist, promoted—and the leaders of *Solidarnosc* are wondering how they should feel about the affair. The Berkeley *Update* reports a spokesman as saying:

The workers are racked by mixed feelings: whether to regret that Kolankowski was not properly put behind bars, or to be happy that he has left? I think we should be happy about it. Now there are decent people in prison.

Jailing him, moreover, would enable him to say, after the fall of the Communist Party ("in a few years"), that "he was imprisoned for his convictions."

The trouble with having high standards of humor is that you soon run out of jokes. That being the present case, we turn to another subject—the conventions. Conventions, after all, disclose how we met the challenge of yesterday's frontiers. What are they? The dictionary says that they are "usage or custom, especially in social matters," and that what is conventional is "representation that simplifies or provides symbols or substitutes for natural forms." That seems about right. We evolve ways of doing things, in a given time and place, that seem in conformity with nature. In nature, the social animals, including the social insects, provide many examples of "behavior patterns" of creatures who survive best in herds or groups. Most societies, whether animal or human, are hierarchical in structure, and while the animal "customs" are spontaneous compared to ours, we seem to imitate them, no doubt unconsciously for the most part, with surprising fidelity. The best fighters rule the life of the herd, and the man with the most soldiers rules the country, or used to. Conventions change, although it may take a revolution to introduce new ones. Could anything less than a revolution get you to call a bureaucrat a comrade?

From the collective life of chickens we have the term "pecking order," indicating a way of behaving that is duplicated in human society at

every level and in the definitions of the levels themselves. In the eighteenth century at the top of European societies were various monarchs who made the rules for all below them, creating customs and consolidating their power. As Paine put it in *Common Sense*:

In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which, in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society, in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.

Paine may have been the most expert convention-changer in all our history. He understood how to make past habits and ways of thinking ridiculous to people who had actually outgrown them without realizing the implications of their progress. In *Common Sense* he went to work on the exaltation of kings as no other writer knew how. Of William the Conqueror he said:

A French bastard landing with armed banditti and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it. However it is needless to spend much time in exposing the folly of hereditary right; if there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and the lion, and welcome. I shall neither copy their humility, nor disturb their devotions.

But he *did* disturb their devotions, and not only to the royalty of England. He composed a longer essay on the Bible, which doomed him to live outside the pale in his adopted land, and to die unsung. Yet Paine was also the designer of new and better customs, modelled on the highest possibilities of *human* nature. Living in France during the Reign of Terror, Paine spoke before the revolutionary Convention against the execution of the French king, arguing that he was but a man mistaught by royal tradition. Do not kill him, he said. Send him to America, as plain Louis Capet, where he will learn the lesson of equality from others who are the same as himself.

For such offenses against the revolutionary convention of removing the heads of the aristocracy, Paine himself was very nearly executed, escaping death, it is said, only by chance. But he could not escape the conventional hatred of the orthodox in religion. So generally decent a man as Theodore Roosevelt called him "a dirty little atheist."

Well, there are customs which reflect our ignorance and others which anticipate our dreams and extend our decencies. Paine was an architect of conventions in the latter.

This is an inexhaustible subject to which we should return. In conclusion, we have another Polish story that seems worth repeating. As Americans may or may not remember, the Soviets took a medium slice of Poland after one of the wars of this century (we are still in the dark ages), and one Polish peasant's farm was neatly divided by the new frontier. Accordingly, he was visited by a Commissar who said: "You must decide: Do you live in Poland or in Russia?" Vacantly, or perhaps pensively, the peasant replied: "Hmmmm, well, it's hard to decide, but, you know, those Russian winters are so cold!"