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THE ABIDING POINT

MUCH of human life seems passed in a state of complaint. There are so many things we don't understand or consider unjust. There is something in us that expects the good, the true, for our portion, and when their opposites come, we are bewildered and sometimes outraged. It is difficult if not impossible to suppress this response. Even if we have had thorough instruction in the materialism of the time—taught to believe that chance and blind forces have shaped not only the world we live in, but ourselves as well—we resist this claim spontaneously when we witness or suffer acts which are quite plainly *wrong.*

It seems right to say that all human life above the level of animal function, animal pleasure and pain, is a quest for meaning. Perception of meaning involves answers to three questions: What? How? and Why? The "What" question is the most difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer. Apply it to a leaf, a large leaf that hangs over the opening of a primitive dwelling: Is it a leaf or a door? Well, we say, it is both. It is a leaf because it grew on a tree, and it is a door because that has become its use. We use available answers to how and why to establish the what. But a scientist—or any one of us—may not be satisfied. He will insist on a more fundamental inquiry: What is it made of? Botany, chemistry, and finally physics have their working replies, but stop with subatomic particles—with, at the moment, *quarks*, which prove to be conceptual elements in the intellectual structures of quantum theory, and as Werner Heisenberg has said, "even if quarks could be found, for all we know they could again be divided into two quarks and one anti-quark, etc., and thus they could not be more elementary than a proton." He went on: "Just as Copernicus and Galileo in their method abandoned the descriptive science of Aristotle and turned to the structural science of Plato, so we are probably forced in our concepts to abandon the atomic materialism of Democritus and to turn to the ideas of symmetry in the philosophy of Plato." Developing this idea, he said: "I would like to say that the mathematical structures are something behind or beyond the whole thing, not only in our mind. . . . Mind or matter is a *consequence* of mathematical structure."

For all we know, then, the leaf is a mathematical structure in continual (invisible) flux, which is to say that it has the reality and substance of a shaping idea.

So, except for a handful of philosophical physicists in serious danger of becoming metaphysicians, we give up on what "matter" is. The best we can do, following Arthur Eddington, is to call it "mind-stuff," and turn to another line of inquiry. Since we have or are minds, what then are we?

Again we must resort to the how and the why questions for help. How do we behave? Empirically, taking our experience as given, we are *aware.* We see and feel. We *think,* as Descartes declared. As we see, we define the world around us, and as we feel we identify ourselves. But this skips a step. Not only are we aware, but we are aware of our awareness, which Leibniz called apperception. We are able to transfer our attention from what we are conscious of to the fact that we are conscious. We are self-conscious. We are able to think of ourselves as thinking individuals, and to judge our own thinking, rating it according to the consequences which result. We have words which record our judgments on thinking and acting—wise, foolish, cruel, kind, efficient, wasteful, perceptive, obsessive, rational, irrational. We speak of ourselves as "intelligent," which means the capacity, at a practical level, to answer the what,

how, and why questions, and point to the achievements of industry in construction, transport, and communications as evidence. At the level of social, moral, and political intelligence we exercise self-criticism in pointing out the numerous failures and stupidities of human action. Not a year goes by without publication of hundreds of catalogs of human failure, mismanagement, and folly. We are, we tell ourselves, ruining the planet through short-term exploitation and what seems deliberate neglect of the laws of nature. Then, of course, there are critics of the critics, and historians of culture who try to make sense of these developments.

But this account is too civil, too bland. Why did the Carthaginians worship the child-devouring Moloch? Why did the Romans feed the Christians to the lions? Why did the Nazis slaughter six million Jews, and Gypsies, Poles, and other defenseless people? Why did Stalin cause the death of millions of kulaks? Why did the United States incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Such incredible offenses seem almost continuous, whether in Cambodia or Lebanon.

Individuals are similarly misused. There seems a merciless force in prejudice, political power, and righteous certainty. Think of the decent men ruined by Senator McCarthy, the honest businessmen wiped out by monopolies, the small shopkeepers driven to bankruptcy by merciless competition.

So with each one of us in our personal life, its unpredictable turns. We are driven to wonder what lies behind the veil of everyday existence, whether there is actually a content of meaning back of what happens to us, and in the way our projects turn out. There are some who brood fruitfully upon these things. Robert Louis Stevenson was one who said (in *Pulvis et Umbra*):

> Poor soul, here for so little, cast among so many hardships, filled with desires so incommensurate and inconsistent, savagely surrounded, savagely descended, irremediably condemned to prey upon his fellow lives; who should have blamed him had he been of a piece with his destiny and a being merely barbarous? And we look and behold him instead filled with imperfect virtues: infinitely childish, often admirably valiant, often touchingly kind; sitting down, amidst his momentary life, to debate of right and wrong and the attributes of the deity; rising up to do battle for an egg or die for an idea; singling out his friends and his mate with cordial affection; bringing forth in pain, rearing with long-suffering solicitude, his young. To touch the heart of his mystery, we find in him one thought, strange to the point of lunacy: the thought of duty; the thought of owing something to himself, to his neighbor, to his God; an ideal of decency, to which he would rise if it were possible, a limit of shame below which, if it be possible, he will not stoop. . . . ah! if I could show you this! If I could show you these men and women, all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging, in the brothel or on the scaffold, to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls! They may seek to escape, and yet they cannot; it is not alone their privilege and glory, but their doom; they are condemned to some nobility; all their lives long, the desire of good is at their heels, the implacable hunter.

Did Stevenson know more than the rest of us know about what human beings are? Did he make "a study"? Consult the right authorities? He did indeed. The authority lies before us in what he wrote. We need go no further. The human heart, no open book, disclosed itself to him. Not altogether, but enough—enough to end by saying:

> And as we dwell, we living things, in our isle of terror and under the imminent hand of death, God forbid it should be man the erected, the reasoner, wise in his own eyes—God forbid it should be man that wearies in well-doing, that despairs of unrewarded effort, or utters the language of complaint. Let it be enough for faith, that the whole creation groans in mortal frailty, strives with unconquerable constancy. Surely not all in vain.

Apparently, there is something apart from the answers to our three questions—something that adorns ignorance with both calm and courage. Call it a sense of the fitness of things. Stevenson speaks of this.

Another brooding on the human condition was set down in an essay, "Human Personality," by Simone Weil, in 1943, the last year of her life, while she was working for the Free French in London. Oppressed by the omnipresent afflictions of that time—which are hardly less today—she wrote:

> There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction, because both of them are mute suppliants, eternally condemned to stand mute in our presence.
>
> Just as a vagrant accused of stealing a carrot from a field stands before a comfortably seated judge who keeps up an elegant flow of queries, comments, and witticisms while the accused is unable to stammer a word, so truth stands before an intelligence which is concerned with the elegant manipulation of opinions.
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> It is always language that formulates opinions, even when there are no words spoken. The natural faculty called intelligence is concerned with opinion and language. Language expresses relations; but it expresses only a few, because its operation needs time. When it is confused and vague, without precision or order, when the speaker is deficient in the power of holding a thought in his mind, then language is empty or almost empty of any real relational content. When it is perfectly clear, precise, rigorous, ordered, when it is addressed to a mind which is capable of keeping a thought present while it adds another to it and of keeping them both present while it adds a third, and so on, then in such a case language can hold a fairly rich content of relations. But like all wealth, this relative wealth is abject poverty compared with the perfection which alone is desirable.
>
> At the very best, a mind enclosed in language is in prison. It is limited to the number of relations which words can make simultaneously present to it; and remains in ignorance of thoughts which involve the combination of a greater number. These thoughts are outside language, they are unformulable, although they are perfectly rigorous and clear and although every one of the relations they involve is capable of precise expression in words. So the mind is unaware of being in prison, it is living in error. If it has recognized the fact, even for a tenth of a second, and then quickly forgotten it in order to avoid suffering, it is living in falsehood. Men of the most brilliant intelligence can be born, live, and die in error and falsehood. In them, intelligence is neither a good nor even an asset. The difference between more or less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to life imprisonment in small or larger cells. The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell.
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> A man whose mind feels that it is captive would prefer to blind himself to the fact. But if he hates falsehood, he will not do so; and in that case he will have to suffer a lot. He will beat his head against the wall until he faints. He will come to again and look with terror at the wall. And so on endlessly and without hope. One day he will wake up on the other side of the wall.
>
> Perhaps he is still in prison, although a larger one. No matter. He has found the key, he knows the secret which breaks down every wall. He has passed beyond what men call intelligence, into the beginning of wisdom. (*Two Moral Essays*, Pendle Hill pamphlet No. 240.)

Here, at the end, there seems a thought that fits with Stevenson's "Surely not all in vain."

Neither of these writers, however, considers the ultimate puzzle or frustration named in passing by Stevenson as "the imminent hand of death." Only Plato and the Stoics gave attention to death, in ancient Western thought—attention in terms of acceptance of it, not as an evil but a good. The art of the philosopher, Plato maintained, includes learning how to die easily—which means learning how to let go of the drives of bodily existence and Epictetus said that it is a curse for a man not to die, just as, after it is ripened, it is a curse for corn not to be reaped. But can we apply this to ourselves? Can there be a flowering after death? Epictetus did not say.

This is a matter on which our world of learning has no interest in hearsay. Not words, but proof, is demanded. And if we are immortal, what sort of future would it be that leaves us in doubt or unbelief? A lot depends upon whether we think that our experience, when we understand it, should make ultimate sense, or that this is an unreasonable expectation.

Well, suppose you knew the answer to such questions: How would you make it clear to people

in the ordinary condition—people unable, that is, to immediately (or soon) verify what you say, for themselves? Would it be your object to turn them into "believers"? This has been tried again and again, with indifferent or even terrible results. On the other hand, who has been able to turn anyone else into a "knower"? Knowing is an exclusively individual matter which cannot be performed for anyone else. So "teaching" immortality would be a rather delicate affair, to be handled as Plato handled it, by inventing suitable myths. The myth does not declare the truth, but tells a story in symbolic octaves. It gives impulses and a measure of direction to the mind. Pedagogically speaking, telling children or anyone the answers they need to discover for themselves may be the very worst of practices, although less harmful in matters we call "public truth."

Allegory, then, is a mode of instruction. There is also metaphysics, which outlines in abstract ideas what may be the structure of the world, of ourselves, and the relations between the two. But just as the map is not the territory, so a metaphysical outline is not the stuff of experience, whether in life or after death. Yet both myth and metaphysic are useful in suggesting avenues of inquiry.

We are indeed solitary in thinking about the immortality of the soul. Yet we all have our feelings on the subject—for some strong, for others weak. And we are not entirely alone, since there is a vast literature on the subject, recordings of what articulate men and women have said concerning their own convictions, sometimes set down matter-of-factly, sometimes with poetic splendor. On the whole, these expressions are celebrations, not tracts intended to convert. A book filled with such material—more than 600 pages—is *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery* (published by Warner in paperback at $7.95), compiled and edited by Joseph Head and S. L. Cranston. In terms of time, the book starts with ancient Hindu teachings or belief, then provides extracts from thinkers throughout the past, with much from Plato and the Neoplatonists, and from scattered sources from antiquity to the present. One modern writer—of this century—W. Macneile Dixon, offers this essential account of his own thinking and convictions:

> It is Plato's doctrine, and none more defensible, that the soul before it entered the realm of Becoming existed in the universe of Being. Released (at death) from the region of time and space, it returns to its former abode into communion with itself. After a season of quiet "alone with the Alone," of assimilation of its earthly experiences and memories, refreshed and invigorated, it is seized again by the desire to keep in step and on the march with the moving world. There it seeks out and once more animates a body, the medium of communication with its fellow travelers, and sails forth in that vessel upon a new venture in the ocean of becoming.
>
> Whatever the soul may be, it is never found apart from a self. Apart from the self, the center of everything, there is neither consciousness nor thinking. The attempt to derive the self from atoms and the void, from space and time, to deny it any constructive role in the system of nature, has not failed for lack of unceasing and desperate effort. It has failed because you cannot explain the self in terms of the not-self. The philosophies of the future will, I think, take another and more promising way. They will allow to the self its unique status, its standing as a factor, a primary factor and an organizing factor in the universal whole. Man may be more interesting and important than our modern teachers suppose, possibly even a star of some magnitude in the celestial universe.

Our own interest in this subject was generated by a letter from a reader who said:

> Inevitably, at my age, I often wonder what will happen to me when I die, which must be rather soon. And I am rather shocked to find that I am not at all sure in my mind that this individual personality will continue in an identifiable form. I suppose my main difficulty is that any existence without a "body" will be so different from this life that it is difficult even to begin to imagine it. This is not a new thought with me. I remember talking of these matters when I was an undergraduate with a highly intelligent aunt who was quite disturbed when I said that perhaps we got absorbed again into some vast "mind," to which we already belong—"To God who is our home," as Wordsworth put it. Would you agree that the poets

> tend to say the things that can only be hinted at, and that don't make sense in plain prose? I think of the personality not only being absorbed, but also breaking up. . . .

A passage by Huston Smith in *The Phoenix Fire Mystery* (taken from *The Religions of Man*) has parallel and extended suggestions:

> Science tells me there is nothing in my body that was with me seven years ago. In the course of my lifetime my mind and personality have undergone changes that are equally radical. Yet through all these revisions I have remained on some level the same person. What is this something in our make-up deeper than either body or personality that provides this continuity in the midst of incessant change?
>
> Our word "personality" comes from the Latin *persona* which originally meant the mask an actor donned as he stepped onto the stage to play his role. The mask carried the make-up of the role, while the actor behind it remained hidden and anonymous. This mask is precisely what our personalities are—the roles into which we have been cast for the moment in this greatest drama of all, life itself.
>
> The disturbing fact, however, is that we have lost sight of the distinction between our true self ant the veil of personality that is its present costume, but which will be laid aside when the play is over. We have become completely under the fascination of our present lines, unable to remember previous roles or to anticipate future ones. The task is to correct this false identification. Turning his awareness inward (man) must pierce and dissolve the innumerable layers of the manifest personality until, all strata of the mask at length cut through, he arrives finally at the anonymous actor who stands beneath.

Never during its pilgrimage is the spirit of man completely adrift and alone. From start to finish its nucleus is the *Atman*—the self-luminous abiding point, "boundless as the sky, indivisible, absolute," the only reality.

REVIEW
NEW BEGINNING IN PHILOSOPHY

IN the middle of *The Heart of Philosophy* (Knopf, 1982, $14.95). Jacob Needleman says:

> There are two stages in the study of philosophy corresponding to two principal stages of human life itself. At the beginning, the purpose of philosophy is to bring the mind back again and again to the need to see the world as though from another level, another dimension, that gives everything in front of us a different cast and value. This is a power of the mind that points us to a higher level of being within human nature. It is not yet the higher level itself. It is adolescent, in between the unformed openness of the child and the formed individual ego of the adult. It is an orientation of the mind, a feeling in the mind—that same mind which is also being shaped and limited on all sides by the pragmatic needs and influences of the everyday world with its psychological and physical survival values, its material and social exigencies.
>
> The second stage occurs when great ideas conduct us toward a direct encounter between this feeling in the mind, this love of truth on the one hand, and on the other hand the formed individual ego itself with its specific desires and fears, the deeply ingrained opinions that support them and, most importantly, the knowledge gained, the tastes formed, and even the philosophical views reached in that part of the psyche which is generally understood to be the adult human personality. The second stage of philosophy corresponds to that stage of human development, not reached by everyone in their lives, in which it is seen that all one's material, all one's data—scientific, ethical, religious, artistic—have been acquired in a small part of oneself and have been fatally shaped and locked in that part where they serve only social and survival values such as the desire for recognition, safety, physical health, fame; identification with one's country, race, or social group; the desire for pleasure and satisfaction; the craving for tidiness in explanations or personal life. The second stage is the confrontation between the love of being and the mind of the ego. These two parts of human nature are experienced as utterly incommensurate and express themselves in completely opposed sets of values. To bring an individual to this confrontation is the ultimate purpose of the philosophical study of great ideas, beyond that confrontation quite a different kind of study is necessary. This second stage is not for children.

Philosophy is commonly thought of as a way of knowing things, perhaps ultimate things. Prof. Needleman shows that it is actually the means of choosing, not only thought but act. This is the foundation of Western humanist philosophy, made clear by Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man.* Humans are self-creating beings. Philosophy begins—true human life begins—with this discovery. Before this happens we are only repeating the past—everybody's past.

Prof. Needleman is openly and deliberately a Socratic philosopher. He, like Socrates, lives in a moral universe. He finds the real issues of life to be moral issues, human development to be moral development. His book is a return to the Platonic outlook. He feels no need to bring Plato up to date. Plato's understanding of our time is good enough as it is, since the issues and problems of the Athenians were very much like our own.

> First, let us realize that as the center of culture of the ancient world, fifth-century Athens contained, in essence, every sort of artistic, intellectual, and pragmatic current that we know of in our own culture. We have modern science; ancient Greece had the equivalent in the natural philosophers of the time—the equivalent of our physicists, mathematicians, biologists. We have the religions of Christianity and Judaism; ancient Greece had its religions as well, its gods, its orientation toward salvation, the other world, its sacred rituals, its symbols, its spirituality. In short, Socrates knew about religion—quite as much as you or I or anyone in our world knows about religion. It counts as nothing to say that Socrates did not know about Christ and therefore was not exposed to the same depth of religious truth as modern man. It counts as nothing to say this, because of the quite obvious fact that very few, if any, human beings today can be said to know about Christ. In every culture in all times there exists religion; and let us grant that Socrates understood, at the very least, the depths of the religious impulse.

With books like this being published, it seems clear that the saturnalia of Christian conceit—"ours is better than all the old religions"—and the succeeding epoch of scientific and technological arrogance are now really over. The shadows of both these influences may darken the present and extend for a while into the future, but awakening minds will no longer be distorted by them. We are able to make a new beginning in philosophy and in life, and to regard the ancients as at least equals, at best teachers, who were themselves free from the clouds of anthropomorphism in religion and materialism in science.

Prof. Needleman goes back to Pythagoras for an account of self-knowledge, the goal of philosophy:

> Certainly, according to Pythagoras, the cosmos, the deep order of nature, is knowable through self-knowledge—man is a microcosm. But this sort of self-knowledge involves a total inner inquiry into all aspects of the human structure as well as the arising within man of a conscious attention that can penetrate into the unconscious and harmonize all the disparate impulses within the human organism. So-called *a priori* knowledge on the other hand—knowledge independent of sensory experience—bears only an imitative resemblance to this idea of self-knowledge. It is intellectual knowledge alone that is at issue in the problem of the *a priori* rather than contemplative knowledge in its ancient sense. Intellectual knowledge alone—concepts alone—can do no more than organize the data provided by the instruments of perception. The ancient idea of knowing the cosmos through knowing oneself is based on the possibility of man's developing new powers of perception within himself. The issue in its modern form ignores or misunderstands that possibility.

Philosophy, according to Needleman, means encounter, struggle, even the pain of partial self-destruction. Great ideas invite to this ordeal. He says:

> I am asserting that the primary function of philosophy is to inject into the mind of man an influence of a very special kind. By helping an individual to think about life and the world from the perspective of a greater scale of reality, it points him toward something, he knows not what, behind the world of appearances in which he is caught from the moment he is born to the moment of his death. At the same time, it points him to something in himself, he knows not what, that is more real than the personal identity which his social environment has thrust upon him—a certain feeling for truth, a certain love or yearning that is the embryo of something very great in him. In its second stage, philosophy brings man to the realization that this embryonic immensity within him is opposed by his personal ego and that out there, in the external world, there are also two great forces opposed to each other. It is this realization of the twoness of himself and the world which man needs to "digest," impartially and over a long period of time under "Socrates," that is, under an entirely different kind of influence. Through the guidance and influence of "Socrates," inner work leading to transformation begins and the strictly philosophical study of ideas ceases. The embryo is nourished by philosophy, but the child is delivered by "Socrates" and grows under "his" parentage.
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> In short, the principal task of philosophy is to bring something new into the wretched sleep of man, to trouble that sleep with a great and tremendous dream that finally stirs a man into an instant of awakening.

Prof. Needleman tells of a man who, in a gathering of friends, begins to speak in "broken chains of thought" about the immortality of the soul. "He is compelling because he is speaking from his search, not from his knowledge."

The same may be said of the author. Needleman is an unembarrassed searcher. He speaks from the side of the mountain, not its peak. He is like ourselves, and we understand him, and may be grateful that he is so well-informed about the various uphill paths, and even climbing techniques.

His defense of Plato against the charge of advocating "totalitarian" rule deserves repetition. He says:

> Of course, anyone who has lived in the twentieth century and has witnessed the horrors inflicted on mankind through totalitarianism and paranoiac political repression can hardly be blamed for misreading Plato in this way. Nevertheless, a misreading it remains. What is forgotten, and it is always the first thing forgotten, is that the *Republic* is a metaphor about the inner structure of man: myself. This single fact puts everything in a different light. Where Plato speaks of the rule of the guardians, he is speaking of the development of a ruling presence within the self. Where he speaks of the strength and courage of the warriors, he is speaking of a specific inner energy that obeys and struggles to execute the vision of truth; in a word, will. And where he speaks of the laborers, artisans, and merchants, he is speaking of the multitude of desires and appetites within oneself that can voluntarily submit to the goodness, wisdom, and striving of the higher centers of perception and action within human nature.

Plato, it seems to us, is at last beginning to be understood. This is an especially good reason for reading Prof. Needleman's book.

COMMENTARY
THE LEAVEN OF AN ARTFORM

THE film, *Gandhi,* produced and directed by Richard Attenborough, is all that the reviewers, almost without exception, have said of it. Speaking of this three-hour movie in *Fellowship* for January-February, Richard Deats says that while many people in India feared it might "turn out to be a Hollywood version of the Mahatma," after seeing it they recognized it as faithful and accurate, as will all others who know something of Gandhi's life and work. Movies are collaborative productions—many minds are involved—and for this reason they are a conventional expression. This film is a magnificent convention in the good sense of the term, the best, we think, that the motion picture industry is capable of. It shows that there are enough people in the world who seek to know the real Gandhi, to make such a film possible.

The producer, Attenborough, the *Fellowship* writer says, was attracted to Gandhi twenty years ago, by reading Louis Fischer's biography, and set to work to make the film, ignoring claims that it would be "uncommercial."

> Resisting pressure to get a star to play Gandhi, Attenborough chose the unknown Ben Kingsley, who is half English, half Indian. His choice was a stroke of genius. Like Attenborough, Kingsley became profoundly influenced by the life and work of Gandhi. He studied Gandhi extensively, filled his room with Gandhi pictures, learned yoga and the use of the spinning wheel, and fasted before the fasting scenes in the movie. The results are overwhelming. It is reported that during the filming an old man knelt at Kingsley's feet and kissed his sandals. When Kingsley told him he was only an actor playing Gandhi, the old man said, "Yes, but you have brought him back to us."

Any dramatic production of so colorful and diverse a life must of necessity leave out a great deal. The choice of episodes for the film seems just right. They succeed in standing alone, marking decisive moments and the high points in Gandhi's career. The casting is almost perfect, including Gandhi's wife. The good taste throughout the story is manifest. But most important of all, what comes through to the audience is Gandhi's absolute fearlessness showing that, at last, it has become possible for a man committed to non-violence to be admired as a modern *hero*—something we had not thought possible. It is this, we think, that justifies the closing paragraph by the *Fellowship* reviewer.

> *Gandhi* will awaken many to the power and relevance of non-violence, some for the first time. Gandhi once wrote, "Non-violence is like radium in its action. An infinitesimal quantity of it embedded in a malignant growth acts continuously, silently and ceaselessly until it has transformed the whole mass of diseased tissue into a healthy one. Similarly, even a little of true non-violence acts in a silent, subtle, unseen way and leavens a whole society." Vastly more significant than the rave reviews the movie is getting will be what happens in the lives of those who see *Gandli* and begin to live out their own experiments with truth.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
THE LIGHT WENT ON

IN No. 30 of *Growing Without Schooling,* John Holt, after a visit to Europe, reports that "Italian laws on education allow for home schooling." He goes on:

> A Dutch friend I met there, Dick Willems, told me that under Dutch law (as in Denmark) groups can start their own schools and then after five years, during which they must get a provisional permit each year, can get a permanent charter and government financial support. He added that under this provision more than 500 small schools have been started (in Denmark the number is only about 40). Whether many of these are free schools in our sense of the word, he did not know.

Nearly twenty pages of this issue are devoted to letters from parents (and others) about their experience in teaching children at home. (And sometimes reports from lawyers on defending home schooling in the courts.) One value of these reports is that they utterly destroy the stereotype of what it's like to teach your own children. There are no "models" for this activity—each family is different, although all seem to have in common a great deal of ingenuity. The letters remind you of the prerevolutionary "Committees of Correspondence" through which people working for political change in America exchanged ideas. These parents are working for *cultural* change, starting ~n the only place it can begin—in the home.

One of them, Sally Wellborn, was quoted at length in an article in the Oct. 18, 1982, *New Hampshire Times.* She explains why she decided not to make her sons go to school:

> School seemed to us to be essentially a factory geared to programming children into average contributing members of an industrialized bureaucracy. I did not want my children's enthusiasm for learning increasingly complex manual and intellectual skills, their delight in discovering the interrelatedness of all things, their down-to-earth sense of social responsibility, their ingenuity and self-reliance, to be muddled by the school's unavoidable compartmentalization of such matter, classroom discipline and busywork. I did not want my children to be forced to accept, until they were old enough to confront, certain exploitative attitudes that cause grown-up people to fight wars and destroy the environment.
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> [A third-grade text used in local schools says] "We are quickly using up coal, oil, and other minerals. . . . The land may become truly a desert of waste. But in the ocean there are enough minerals to supply our needs." I wanted to spare my children the confusion they would experience when encountering teaching materials so appallingly antithetical to the values cherished by our family.
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> [With home education] the learning that takes place is very amorphous, organic. Children learn by connection; everything is correlated to everything else. We would often start off with books from the public library—during the winter the boys read hundreds of books, not many in the summer—but it is impossible to predict or to program where a book or an experience would take them. The boys would often pursue something they were interested in at a breakneck pace, but when I would try to organize or program their learning, they were apt to resist and walk off. . . .
>
> [After the boys decided to go back to school, to see more of their friends:] We have found the boys' public school teachers to be genuinely concerned for our children's intellectual growth . . . and we have enjoyed a reasonable and mutually respectful dialogue with school administrators. But these pleasant relationships make a frail bridge indeed across the chasm which separates my understanding of what constitutes useful, permanent learning from the system of public education used in public schools.

The fact that the boys wanted to go back to school in no way weakens what this parent says. Instead, it strengthens it. She is not polemical, needing to "prove her point." The welfare of the children is the point.

Another home-schooler was quoted in the same *New Hampshire Times* article:

> Last year I had two children in school. It was rush, rush, rush. Rush the children up, into their clothes and through breakfast; hurry them into bed at night so they could get up in time for school. Recesses at school were so short and hectic, I felt it

was important for the children to have time for extended, imaginative play with their friends on weekends. As a result, we had no family time, no quality time. The only time I was with my children, we were all rushing around. They saw their father intermittently, since he works a rotating shift and many weekends.

The boys were cranky and overtired; they were anxious; they suffered from frequent leg and stomach cramps and headaches. And their social behavior was deteriorating badly. I saw my children becoming more and more negative and aggressive toward each other and their friends. I felt so helpless, since I couldn't be around to see what was precipitating this behavior.

When they were in school, the children also simply had no time for exploring in depth the subjects that had once really excited them. They were too worn out. And Sean was becoming so spoon-fed that he had lost his motivation to learn on his own. If it is important to learn to read, write, and compute, and if we want children to sustain a love of learning throughout life, why not let them learn what interests them?

A Louisiana youth reports on what interests him:

I wanted to tell you [John Holt] how I followed your advice in finding work. I am presently taking a veterinary medicine course at LSU. (This course is being given for "Gifted and Talented" junior high and high school students—l had no trouble registering as a home-schooler.) I became interested in learning more about it and decided to ask a local veterinarian if I could help out at his clinic in return for watching them work.

It has been very worth while. The three vets who work there have been very kind and helpful to me. They explain everything they do and not only allow me to watch but actually let me perform certain duties. They say I'm "indispensable."

So far some of the most interesting things I've done are: watch an autopsy on a cat, learn to draw blood from animals and prepare slides, take temperatures and fecals, watch surgery performed, and go along on emergency calls.

I go to the clinic every day now, for several hours a day. I plan to take an animal science course next.

I recommend this way of learning to everyone. At first I was afraid no one would want my help, since I'm only twelve, but the people I talked to were happy to have free help. . . .

You realize in reading these reports that children are not "interchangeable parts." Each youngster is different, and each one carves out of life what he wants and needs. The system is to have no system.

One more report—from a victorious mother:

Unfortunately, my husband and I don't see eye to eye on the home-schooling issue. We began talking one evening about the upcoming school year. My husband started going on and on about how our daughter (5½) just "isn't doing anything. She should be reading," and so on. For the hundredth time, I tried to explain my views on what "learning" is, but to no avail. . . . I tried to explain that her achievements should not be how well she can read or memorize, following everyone else, raising her hand—"book learning," so to speak. The discussion became hot and heavy, and I decided it was time to change the subject.

"Let's talk about our dream house that we want to build," I said. I suggested that we go to the library and begin learning all about building a house, solar heating, organic gardening, etc. "Oh," he said in exasperation. "We just can't get much from reading books. You have to get out there and do it!" I smiled as I saw the light bulb click over his head!

FRONTIERS

The Man and the Movement

IN *Losing Ground* (Norton, 1976), Erik Eckholm writes of three major mountain ranges where the forest cover is being lost—the Himalayas, the Andes, and the East African highlands. Mountain slope forests, he says, "are among the most fragile ecosystems on earth."

> Trees are becoming scarce in the most unlikely places. In some of the most remote villages in the world, deep in the once heavily forested Himalayan foothills of Nepal, journeying out to gather firewood and fodder is now an *entire day's task.* Just one generation ago the same expedition required no more than an hour or two. . . . The Indians are worried about environmental trends in Nepal, but the fact is that virtually identical problems plague even larger hilly expanses within India itself in such states as Himachel Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir. In large mountain regions the fertile valley floors have long been overcrowded, and cultivation is constantly pushed onto steeper slopes by population growth in the absence of nonagricultural employment opportunities.

Eckholm calls this lack of firewood "The Other Energy Crisis," and Indian writers agree. In *Science for Villages* (June, 1982) a reporter noted that today nearly a thousand million people around the world are suffering from shortage of firewood, a number expected to grow to 2,300 million by the year 2000. "Tree-felling," this writer says "is threatening thousands of plant and animal species, which are essential for pharmaceuticals, other chemicals, and genetic materials to breed new crop strains."

Happily, there is now an effort in India to reverse this trend—the Chipko movement, begun ten years ago by a man named Chandi Prasad Bhatt. As related in *Asian Action* for January-February:

> Shri Bhatt worked as a ticket clerk in a private transport company before his deep humanism drew him to the local [Gandhian] Sarvodaya movement. With ten other local youths he formed an organization named Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh in 1962 to provide employment to the local people by utilizing local forest resources. Soon after setting up a small turpentine factory they discovered that local people were not a priority with the State Forest Department.

His group was charged twice the price for pine resin supplied to a large factory nearby. Then—

> When the Sangh tried to manufacture basic agricultural implements for local farmers at a low profit, they were denied the timber they required for it. Instead the Forest Department leased the trees to a major sporting goods manufacturer.
>
> It was on March 23, 1973 that the contractors arrived in Gopeshwar, one of the eight hill districts of the Central Himalayas [in northernmost India, between Pakistan and China, some fifty miles north of Kedarnath], to fell ash trees for the sports firm. The Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh called a meeting at which it was decided that the felling would have to be stopped. But nobody quite knew how. It was then that Bhatt announced impulsively that people would have to cling to the trees to save them.

This became the non-violent means of saving the trees, used by women throughout the villages of the hill district in incident after incident of confrontation with the contractors from the plains.

> "Saving the trees is only the first step in the Chipko movement," says Shri Bhatt. "Saving ourselves is the real goal—our future is tied up with them." People in the hills are even poorer than in the rest of the country. While no conservation is possible without their cooperation, they can be involved only when ecodevelopment strategies are based on their needs. . . . The realization is now slowly dawning on the developing countries that there is no real conflict between development and conservation, if we equate development not just with roads and dams and factories, but with providing a better life for the people. It would be no exaggeration to say that no other single person has been more responsible than Shri Chandi Prasad Bhatt for this.

The *Asian Action* article continues, showing why the Chipko movement has gained worldwide notice, if not fame:

> Shri Bhatt's finest contribution is his recognition that if the local village communities want the right to control their surrounding resources, they must also undertake to conserve and develop these resources.

> He has organized India's largest voluntary afforestation program through ecodevelopment camps sponsored by the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangh. These bring together local villagers, students, and social workers who have planted close to a million trees since 1976.

The volunteers plant saplings on both community and state government land, achieving a survival rate of up to 85 per cent, in contrast with the 15 per cent rate of Forest Department plantings. When the Department failed to supply local species for planting, "the Sangh started its own nursery." *Asian Action* concludes with an indication of the achievement of the Chipko workers:

> The Alaknanda river valley, a main tributary of the river Ganga [Ganges], where the worst landslides occurred after the floods of 1970, has seen a good deal of afforestation by Chipko volunteers in recent years. Village after village has been organized to build breast walls and plant trees in a sustained effort to conserve soil and restore a vegetative cover to eroded crops.

The Magsaysay Award for 1982 was given to Bhatt for community leadership. (The Award is named after a Filipino hero of World War II, Ramon Magsaysay, who became the third President of the Philippines, and died in an accident in 1957.) The *Asian Action* writer says of Bhatt:

> The world has honored the man and the movement and one can only hope that his homeland will honor them too by changing its policies into a genuine attempt at reforesting the Himalayas, by really involving the masses in the task.

Of more than passing interest is a review in *Asian Action* of an anti-nuclear primer for the peoples of the Pacific, titled *A Call to a New Exodus*, available from the publisher, Lotu Pasifika Productions, P.O. Box 208, Suva, Fiji, for $4.00 plus postage. The address of *Asian Action* is G.P.O. Box 2930, Bangkok, Thailand.