

## A HERITAGE OF METAPHORS

THAT there are various levels of existence on which activities are conducted according to differing habits and rules seems evident enough. "Barbarism" has a comprehensive meaning applying to the human relations of one level, while "civilization" suggests attitudes and acts informed by a conception of identity and order unknown to the barbarian. We need this distinction, even though it is no longer much used. The statistical sociologists have emptied it of meaning because, starting with a biological model of the human species, they have no way of taking the subtle excellences of civilization into account. Before us, in any event, is the spectacle of a number of societies or peoples, once touched and inspired by the ideals of civilization, who are lapsing into barbaric modes. A peculiar sort of ugliness is the result—the ugliness of rude behavior by people who have reason to know better.

There are of course complications behind this decline. The qualities of both barbarism and civilization are mixed in human beings. So far as individuals are concerned, total barbarism is as much of an abstraction as high civilization. These are concepts having great utility, but not representing things we come across in their purity. While some men and women live in ways that make them good examples of civilized people, they may have much in common with barbarians at the practical level of life. And at least the germs of civilized behavior can be found among barbarians.

Yet the authentic barbarian gives little offense. He is virtually an animal, and we don't blame animals for behaving like animals. We know what to expect from animals. It is the mixture of the animal and human that we find upsetting. When you add memory, imagination, and a range of free will to an animal, the combination soon becomes offensive, since the

animal does what he pleases and is aware of no reason for self-restraint. So we call him a barbarian and devise constraining rules to limit his behavior. Many of the forms of declining civilization are devoted to this purpose.

A declining civilization is one which finds less and less reason for self-restraint. The ways of barbarism increasingly intrude, but they retain the pretensions of civilization, so that people who don't see what is going on feel increasingly bewildered and oppressed. The organizers of the pretension are seldom complete barbarians; they are not "evil," but men who believe that they are doing what is necessary to "save" civilization. We see, however, that the pretenses don't work, or only for a little while. It is then, as now, when the fraud becomes obvious, that questions begin to be asked. The old hearsay about a level of existence above or beyond civilization is revived and after two or three generations of casual attention to such proposals we wonder if, after all, there may be something to them.

Deep questions are being asked in the present, which is an age of worn-out faiths. Minds no longer submerged in old beliefs begin to open. We begin to read books once again. Yet turning to books can be vastly frustrating. People have been reading books for thousands of years, assembling great libraries, instructing the young in their contents, extracting quotations, compiling anthologies, drawing up constitutions, recording laws, and still the seeds of barbarism come to fruition in defiance of civilization.

It is easy to write books. People put words on paper and the books flow out into the world in blizzards of ideas and opinions. They have little effect but they keep on coming. What good, then, can books do? The good books are as easily ignored as the ordinary ones. And the good

books can be as carelessly read as the ones that don't deserve attention. The barbarian doesn't know the difference and does not listen to explanations.

Yet books have in them a record of the difference between levels of existence. They show that each level has its own sphere of discourse. There are books which suggest that the writers lived above the level of civilization, at least for moments and sometimes longer. These are the ones that have use in the time of declining civilization—use in wondering about a level of life above instead of below the habits and customs of our time. There is something of this quality or promise in all good books, skeins of meaning which bridge from one level to the other. Are they, it is natural to ask, only speculations, flights of fancy?

A time of sliding down is also a time for leaping up. When old ideas are dissolving, old methods failing, when barbarism outdoes itself and makes a caricature of civilization, we need to examine the authority of our rules. When rules become counter-productive, it may be time to adopt a code of possibilities instead.

The pioneers of human development sense the onset of failure in the old rules and begin, themselves, to live in terms of possibilities. Fortunately, sometimes the pioneers write books, allowing us to have at least the outline of the possibilities they realized, or felt or suspected.

Sometime over a hundred years ago we had three such pioneers in America. They used the stages of civilization as stepping stones and spoke of barbarism only in simile. They seemed to inhabit regions of the imagination, although they had bodies and a share of earthly troubles. They acted as though they might be, unknown to themselves, planks of salvation for the men of the world, yet they would not drag or coerce anyone to join their company. We speak, of course, of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, poets who had highly individual speech although a common noetic language. All three seem to us to have the

power of flight. They know about the order of transactions which governs the doings of civilization, but permit buying and selling only a minor presence at the edge of their lives, which are flowing interdependencies without bargaining. They believed in conversion without persuasion, and would calculate only the incalculable. Generous to a fault, they knew they could give nothing away.

What, they asked, can be given to those who are themselves so rich in secret possibility? Yet they often repeated the rules of a transcendent level of life. Emerson wrote:

There is something not solid in the good that is done for us. The best discovery the discoverer makes for himself. It has something unreal for his companion, until he too has substantiated it. It seems as if the Deity dressed each soul which he sends into nature in certain virtues and powers not communicable to other men, and, sending it to perform one more turn through the circle of beings, wrote "*Not transferable*," and "*Good for this trip only*," on these garments of the soul. There is somewhat deceptive about the intercourse of minds. The boundaries are invisible, but they are never crossed. There is such good will to impart, and such good will to receive, that each threatens to become the other; but the law of individuality collects its secret strength: you are you, and I am I, and so we remain.

We read books, hoping to collect wisdom, or at least some negotiable mental security, but we fool ourselves: the least part of the book is its content. What is valuable is the presence of the writer having converse with himself. It is this dialogue to which he invites, not any instruction.

What such writers do is perform a colorful charade on the horizon; they act out what they have learned; they celebrate the harvest of their existence, pointing to rewards which flow home to the points of their origin with the tides of life. They can hold out a hand to us, but never lift us up. The "whereon to stand" is in us, not in them. What they propose seems so simple we cannot believe in it. This leaves them helpless. And lonely.

In a book composed as invitation to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—*Spokesman of the Self* (Chandler, 1971)—the editor, William E. Bridges, gives a letter which Thoreau wrote to a friend, telling about a complaint he had received:

He says that he sympathizes with much in my books, but much in them is naught to him,—“namby-pamby,”—“stuff,”—“mystical.” Why will not I, having common sense, write in plain English always; *teach* men in detail how to live a simpler life, etc., not go off into—? But I say that I have no scheme about it,—no designs on men at all; and, if I had, my mode would be to tempt them with the fruit, and not with the manure. To what end do I live life at all, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives—and so all our lives be *simplified* merely, like an algebraic formula? Or not, rather, that I may make use of the ground I have cleared, to live more worthily and profitably? I would fain lay the most stress forever on that which is the most important,—imports the most to me,—though it were only (what it is likely to be) a vibration in the air. As a preacher, I should be prompted to tell men, not so much to get their wheatbread cheaper, as the bread of life compared with which *that* is bran. Let a man only taste those loaves, and he becomes a skillful economist at once. He'll not waste much time in earning those. Don't spend your time in drilling soldiers, who may turn out hirelings after all, but give to the undrilled peasantry a *country* to fight for.

What can you learn from a man like that? Is he telling you anything? Whitman, no more than Thoreau, pretended to teach. In *Leaves of Grass* there are these lines:

Whoever you are, holding me now in hand,  
Without one thing, all will be useless,  
I give you fair warning, before you attempt me further,  
I am not what you supposed, but far different.  
. . . These leaves conning, you con at peril,  
For these leaves, and me, you will not understand,  
They will elude you at first, and still more afterward—I will certainly elude you,  
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!  
Already you see I have escaped from you . . .  
Nor will my poems do good only—they will do just as much evil, perhaps more;

For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit—that which I hinted at;  
Therefore release me, and depart on your way.

You must, the poets say, recover yourselves. But how have we lost ourselves? We hold ourselves tightly, counting the hours to the next satisfaction, dreaming of tomorrow's guarantees. Thoreau might say that we have got hold of the wrong self. He wrote in *Walden*:

By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. . . . I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you.

We commonly treat the presence of this witness as a vagrant of the mind, giving him no home. But what if he is a species of guardian angel? What do we know of the populations of psychic space? Have we even a reliable inventory of ourselves? There are so many books about “ourselves” that we feel no need to make a personal inspection. “I hate quotations,” Emerson said. “Tell me what you know.”

A wise man's life may seem like a diagram for following, but it is not. It is the code he has made, or left behind, and if you ask him for a translation he may burst into incomprehensible song. What else can he do? You ask him fateful questions as though answers could be written on the blackboard, and he knows you must transcribe them from yourself. Yet we, alas, plead ignorance. We go to the psychologists, who are not ourselves, and ask them questions about the knots in our own hearts. Then, after a time, we may carry our unraveled selves around in baskets, hoping to find a reweaver competent to make us whole. But our humanity lies in our own weaving capacities. We are laced to our possessions, tied

to our environment, bound by threads of a tapestry made outside ourselves.

The being that concerns us is therefore external, a reflected self that absorbs all our attention. We are creatures of our past and of our dreams, dissolving the present in memory and longing. Mr. Bridges has this passage:

To Emerson, the tendency to view the present as the intersection of time-past and future-time robbed it of its whole meaning by making memory and anticipation the only real states of mind. Man ought, he urged, to consider the present as a state of awareness and of being, and to regard past and future as mental constructs—logical patterns created to enhance man's ability to calculate and control. Emerson readily admitted that man could not live without the power of calculation that he called the Understanding, but he argued that this power tended to feed on itself and to destroy the person's ability to respond fully to the here-and-now. Speaking of the resulting habits of displacing the highest potentialities of the present into past and future, he wrote, "We say Paradise was; Adam fell; the Golden Age; & the like. We mean man is not as he ought to be; but our way of painting this is on Time, and we say *Was*."

He had, however, a recommendation:

A person could escape from this world of sequence, where the present was lost between tomorrow's purposes and yesterday's regrets, by going out into the woods and fields.

Describing nature as a setting conducive to a state of presence in which the person could flourish in all his fullness, Emerson wrote that there the person's attention is "absorbed by new pictures and thoughts fast succeeding each other, until by degrees the recollection of home was crowded out of the mind, all memory obliterated by the tyranny of the present." The process that he was describing was obviously what we should call therapeutic, for in his journals he describes the woods as the place where "the mind integrates itself again. The attention, which had been distracted into parts, is reunited, reinsphered. The whole of nature addresses itself to the whole man. We are reassured. It is more than a medicine. It is health."

"Our health," Emerson wrote on another occasion, "is our sound relation to external objects." The concept of *relation* seemed so important to him,

in fact he announced "that a man is a bundle of relations, that his entire strength consists not in his properties but in his innumerable relations."

What he makes of his relations is a clue to what he is making of himself. For most of us, our selves are so widely spread, lashed to circumstances, that we are practically uncollectible when we need to be together.

It is then that we seek out the wise, but usually misuse what we learn in this way. We study our hero or model, and then make rules of conduct out of what we suppose to be his behavior, his example. We make a rule or a dogma out of the relics of an act of creation. The wonder and the sacredness, as Emerson put it, of the thought and act is "transferred to the record." And the record becomes a tyranny.

None of these things can be proved. Not in the terms of the barbarian nor with the equations of the civilized man. They have the similitude of proof in a certain symmetry of reason, but the evidence is far above familiar facts and processes. Do the hungers of our hearts and the wonderings of our minds constitute proof? Not really. Yet we go on reading Emerson and Thoreau and Whitman.

The truth, Emerson might tell us, is not the result of a calculation. It is not a thing we have to put together to know. We have skill in putting things together, and even more in taking them apart, but truth lies in things that cannot be severed—is seen at a level where all flows into all, in rhythmic currents of life. Emerson made the poet the knower of that level:

Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value, as the carpenter's cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze. "Things more excellent than every image," says Jamblichus, "are expressed through images. Things admit of being used as symbols, because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part. Every line we can draw in the sand has expression; and there is no body without its spirit or genius. . . ."

The Universe is the externalization of the soul. Wherever the life is that bursts into appearance around it. Our science is sensual, and therefore superficial. The earth and the heavenly bodies, physics, and chemistry, we sensually treat, as if they were self-existent; but these are the retinue of that Being we have. "The mighty heaven," said Proclus, "exhibits, in its transfigurations, clear images of the splendor of intellectual perceptions; being moved in conjunction with the unapparent periods of intellectual natures." Therefore, science always goes abreast with the just elevation of the man keeping step with religion and metaphysics; or, the state of science is an index of our self-knowledge. Since everything in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark, it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active. ("The Poet.")

The argument is this: That a range of "corresponding faculties" became active in these men of the nineteenth century—not only in them, but most noticeably in them—and that they held public dialogue with themselves as a service to their time and the future. They left, as heritage, not their early awakening, for that was not possible, but the metaphors of their awakening. There is no question of believing them—who can believe a song?—but of beginning to believe ourselves.

After all, we have given belief in everything else but ourselves every possible chance. We have spoken in every parlance but the parlance of soul. If these three can be credited with understanding, the language of the soul lends itself to affirmation, but not to dispute. Its expressions are reasonable but not reasoned. What we hear at low pitch, under the breath, such men hear in full tone, and make transcriptions.

## REVIEW

### "FOR LACK OF ELEMENTAL THINGS"

IT is rightfully customary, when speaking or writing about "Nature," to refer reverentially to Henry David Thoreau, and then to add the name of Aldo Leopold, whose *Sand County Almanac* deserves a place on the shelf beside *Walden*. There is another fine book that might qualify for this position, or one close by—Henry Beston's *Outermost House*, first published in 1928. Beston wrote fairy tales for children, he wrote about his farm, and about the resilience of European peasants who kept their continent alive throughout war after war, renewing the fertility of the land for "fifteen patch-work centuries of invasions, massacres, burnings, pillage, and shifts of sovereignty."

While Beston could speak out strongly against attacks on the earth, his essential quality, for those who knew him, was a splendid Elizabethan serenity. He perhaps gives its source in the Foreword to *Outermost House*:

It is the privilege of the naturalist to concern himself with a world whose greater manifestations remain above and beyond the violences of men. Whatever comes to pass in our human world, there is no shadow of us cast upon the rising sun, no pause in the flowing of the winds or halt in the long rhythms of the breakers hastening ashore.

Some time in the 1920s he drew a plan of a little house to go on the beach, near the Eastham bar, on Cape Cod. It was not to be a dwelling, but a place to visit in the summertime, but his friend and neighbor built so well that he was not obliged to leave when the cold weather came. He thought to himself:

The world today is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot. In my world of beach and dune these elemental presences lived and had their being, and under their arch there moved an incomparable pageant of nature and the year. The flux and reflux of ocean, the incomings of waves, the gatherings of birds, the pilgrimages of the peoples of the sea, winter and storm, the splendour of autumn and the holiness of spring—all these were part of the great beach. The longer I stayed, the more eager I was to know this coast and to share its mysterious and elemental life; I

found myself free to do so, I had no fear of being alone, I had something of a field naturalist's inclination; presently I made up my mind to remain and try living for a year on Eastham beach.

The book is the story of that year, although no chronicle of day to day. One theme grows out of another, with the seasons presiding as austere but friendly deities over the transformations of land and sea. Reading Henry Beston is like listening to Brahms.

He wonders at the variety of birds—"land birds and moor birds, marsh birds and beach birds, sea birds and coastal birds, even birds of the outer ocean."

No aspect of nature on this beach is more mysterious to me than the flights of these shorebird constellations. The constellation forms, as I have hinted, in an instant of time, and in that same instant develops its own will. Birds which have been feeding yards away from each other, each one individually busy for his individual body's sake, suddenly fuse into this new volition and, flying, rise as one, coast as one, tilt their dozen bodies as one, and as one wheel off on the course which the new group will has determined. There is no such thing, I may add, as a lead bird or guide. . . . By what means, by what methods of communication does this will so suffuse the living constellation that its dozen or more tiny brains know it and obey it in such an instancy of time? Are we to believe that these birds, all of them, are *machina*, as Descartes long ago insisted, mere mechanisms of flesh and bone so exquisitely alike that each cogwheel brain, encountering the same environmental forces, synchronously lets slip the same mechanic ratchet? Or is there some psychic relation between these creatures? Does some current flow through them and between them as they fly? Schools of fish, I am told, make similar mass changes of direction. I saw such a thing once, but of that more anon.

What is a wave?

A continent rises in the west, and the pulse beat approaches this bulwark of Cape Cod. Two thirds of a mile out, the wave is still a sea vibration, a billow. Slice it across, and its outline will be that of a slightly flattened semi-circle; the pulse is shaped in a long, advancing mound. I watch it approach the beach. Closer and closer in, it is rising with the rise of the beach and the shoaling of the water; closer still, it is changing from a mound to a pyramid, a pyramid which swiftly distorts, the seaward side lengthening, the landward side incurving—the wave is now a

breaker. Along the ridge of blue forms a rippling crest of clear, bright water; a little spray flies off. Under the racing foam churned up by the dissolution of other breakers the beach now catches at the last shape of sea inhabited by the pulse—the wave is *tripped* by the shoaling sand—the giant stumbles, crashes, and is pushed over and ahead by the sloping line of force behind. The fall of the breaker is never the work of gravity alone.

Living alone on the beach, except for his trip to a store for supplies, Beston saw few human beings during his stay on Cape Cod. Coast guards would patrol by, and they became his friends, but solitude, another kind of friend, was his chief companion.

Dwelling thus upon the dunes, I lived in the midst of an abundance of natural life which manifested itself every hour of the day, and from being thus surrounded, thus enclosed within a great swirl of what one may call the life forces, I felt that I drew a secret and sustaining energy. There were times, on the threshold of spring, when the force seemed as real as heat from the sun. A sceptic may smile and ask me to come to his laboratory and demonstrate; he may talk as he will of the secret workings of my own isolated and uninfluenced flesh and blood, but I think that those who have lived in nature, and tried to open their doors rather than close them on her energies will understand well enough what I mean. Life is as much a force in the universe as electricity or gravitational pull, and the presence of life sustains life. Individuals may destroy individuals but the life force may mingle with the individual life as a billow of fire may mingle for a moment with a candle flame.

Toward the end of the book there is a chapter on night on the beach. Here the writer, who has felt the dark around him as an embrace, speaks of the alienation which overtakes humans who hide the dark with artificial light.

Our fantastic civilization has fallen out of touch with many aspects of nature, and with none more completely than with night. Primitive folk, gathered at a cave mouth round a fire, do not fear night; they fear, rather, the energies and creatures to whom night gives power; we of the age of machines, having delivered ourselves of nocturnal enemies, now have a dislike of night itself. With lights and ever more lights, we drive the holiness and beauty of night back to the forests and the sea; the little villages, the crossroads even, will have none of it. Are modern folk, perhaps, afraid of night? Do they fear the vast

serenity, the mystery of infinite space, the austerity of stars? Having made themselves at home in a civilization obsessed with power, which explains its whole world in terms of energy, do they fear at night for their dull acquiescence and the pattern of their beliefs? Be the answer what it will, today's civilization is full of people who have not the slightest notion of the character or poetry of night, who have never even seen night. Yet to live thus, to know only artificial light, is as absurd and evil as to know only artificial day.

Night is very beautiful on this great beach.

*Outermost House* is chamber music for human sensibility, giving hope that there will some day be whole communities, and finally whole races of humans, who will feel and think this way.

We have space left for a note on what seems, despite the limiting title, a generally useful book for parents—*The Complete Guide and Cookbook for Raising Your Child as a Vegetarian* (Schocken, 1981, \$8.95) by Nina and Michael Shandler. One way or another, vegetarianism is a coming thing. Sometimes it overtakes a child or adolescent who can no longer make himself eat meat. Sometimes an adult will look at the figures of food production and say to himself that the world can't produce enough food for everyone so long as meat-eating continues. Sometimes people simply feel better on a vegetarian diet. This book is a fine answer to the familiar question, "But do you get enough protein?"

There is common sense as well as a vast amount of information. In one place the writers say:

Some vegetarian teenagers will have no attraction at all to junk food or meat. Often these teenagers are a part of a small high school subculture: all vegetarian, all against nuclear power, and all with some sort of spiritual inclination. They usually consider themselves an intellectual elite. While you may be proud of your adolescent's choice of friends, you may also want to ensure that he does not develop an inflated sense of his own superiority. . . . Perhaps you yourself have communicated an attitude of superiority, judgment, and alienation from society. If so, you must pay particular attention to the unconscious messages you are sending your teenager.

There are 122 pages of recipes. Our vegetarian editorial consultant can't wait to try some of them out.

## *COMMENTARY* A CANDID HISTORIAN

ON April 4 a *Los Angeles Times* science writer described the proceedings of a three-day conference on Disarmament held at the University of California in Los Angeles, sponsored by the University.

The conference was an outgrowth of the UC Board of Regents' debate over continued management of the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos laboratories, which have designed nuclear weapons. It was decided that the university will maintain its association with the weapons labs, but will also put its intellectual resources to work in the pursuit of peace.

According to the report, these "resources" did not prove impressive. "At one session," the *Times* writer said, "there was outspoken unhappiness about the conference's failure to propose much that was new." Bennett Ramberg of UCLA remarked that "The same thing that has been said now could have been said 10 years ago." The report summarizes:

Virtually every speaker was a "deterrence man" in one way or another. That is, they subscribed to what has been consistent American policy since the end of World War II. The way to prevent war, this strategy advises, is to have enough big bombs to keep anybody from attacking.

One explanation of the lack of new ideas at the conference might be found in what, in 1979, shortly before his death, Gregory Bateson told his fellow regents. Declaring that the University should "renounce any part in the research or development of nuclear weapons," he said that application of deterrence theory leads to increases of weapons strength on both sides, giving the system "the quality of *addiction*." The present conference, one might say, revealed the pervasive effects of this addiction. (For related evidence, see *Frontiers*.)

Only Barbara Tuchman, the non-academic historian (she has no Ph.D.), spoke to some actual effect. She called the attempt to control war by disarmament a failure, and summed up the

complaints of many participants by saying: "The major predicament of the subject of nuclear arms is that it is incomprehensible to the layman." "Experts on both sides," she added, "give us diametrically opposite appraisals of the situation." To those who offered theories of Soviet intentions and of how war might break out, she said: "If there is one thing that is certain, it is that wars develop in ways that are unpredictable." While the *Times* reporter called Mrs. Tuchman's lecture "pessimistic," she at least declared what seems the truth of the matter—that only people, not governments, are able to make peace.

She gave a long and detailed history of the attempts at arms control and the renunciation of war in the 20th Century, all of which failed. "There is nothing governments sign they will not break," she concluded.

Arguing that governments in general, and the Soviet and American governments in particular, do not really want arms control, she called for a groundswell of public opinion that would result in a political change, which she saw as the only possibility for disarmament. "When control of arms becomes a goal for the mainstream," she said, "then it will prevail."



## CHILDREN

### ... and Ourselves

#### CABBAGES, KINGS, AND POONHARPS

LIKE most other readers, we first came across Herbert Kohl by reading *36 Children*, which appeared in the 1960s. This report of his experiences teaching the sixth grade in a Harlem public school is memorable for Kohl's ingenuity in using "words" to lead these talented and imaginative children into the mythic lore of Western civilization. To read Kohl once is to want to see anything he does, so we got for review his *Half the House* (Dutton), which came out in 1974. This is a collection of autobiographical musings on the question: "Is it possible to live a healthy life in an unhealthy society?" His discussion—filled with impersonal evaluations, candid personal admissions, and useful comment on human behavior—soon makes the reader who has children wish that they could have the experience of going to school to Herbert Kohl. We say this because of the following in *Half a House*:

It is difficult to live a healthy life in this culture, since we are all in complicity with its worst aspects. Paying taxes, using the freeways, buying more than we need, tolerating someone else's poverty, saving for our personal futures, worrying exclusively about our own children—all are acts of complicity. This is true . . . for me in my home in the Berkeley Hills, and for the people in communes, collectives, alternative institutions of any sort. The sustained and responsible attempt to change aspects of this culture leads us into inconsistencies, into supporting what we want to destroy, in many subtle and unexpected ways. However, assuming responsibility for this complicity and for our own failures is the only way I know to develop sustained action that might eventually lead to a humane society. This brings a lot of unexpected pain and uncertainty, especially if one is involved in alternative institutions. . . .

By some happy accident we acquired a paperback edition of an earlier book by Kohl—*The Age of Complexity*, in which he examined the currents of "philosophy" in the universities of a few years ago, reaching this conclusion:

Most contemporary American philosophers may be suffering from an unconscious dose of pragmatism—from which they suffer more in the form of an attitude than a doctrine. They read and glean all they can from foreign sources and then see what they can "use"—what they can criticize or develop. . . . There are usually no over-all principles that govern their digestion of foreign matter, just as there are no over-all values that are to be imposed on experience in pragmatic philosophy. . . . Just as pragmatic philosophy is ultimately empty and meaningless, philosophy governed by unconscious pragmatism has no over-all coherence or motivation. There is no point to it, finally, other than whatever simple analytic tasks individual philosophers choose.

Hand in hand with a lack of motivation in philosophizing goes an equal lack of concern for the lives of individual men. American philosophy usually abandons concern for individual lives to psychology. Whenever this happens philosophy itself ceases to be important.

This may be the reason why Herbert Kohl decided to teach literature and other things to a sixth grade in Harlem instead of what goes under the name of philosophy to university students. His *Reading, How to* (Dutton, 1973) is based on case studies of children he worked with, sometimes using word games at the start. This book takes the process of learning to read from the beginning to the advanced stage of learning how to read critically. Here the skills of reading and writing become practically interchangeable.

All this is introductory to Kohl's latest, *A Book of Puzzlements* (Schocken, 1981, \$14.95), which combines "Play and invention with language" for all ages. Games, puzzles, and exercises using words are stimuli to the mind. In a section on making up proverbs, he starts with some his grandmother made up or repeated—

Poverty isn't a disgrace—but it isn't an honor either.

If I try to be like someone else, who will be like me?

Explaining that he first heard them in Yiddish, he said:

They didn't seem like clichés or formulas for behavior so much as provocations to think and laugh

and not take oneself too seriously. I find it harder to use English proverbs with a straight face since they seem like clichés to me. However, statements that are trite and preachy to me often seem like marvelous metaphors to young children. I remember telling Josh [his son], who was five at the time, that there was a park just a stone's throw away from our vacation house. He paused, looked thoughtful for a minute, and then asked whose throw, his or mine. Measuring distances by a stone's throw was a new and interesting idea, only he wanted to know how the measure was standardized.

Kohl lists a lot of familiar "sayings" in common usage—"in a nutshell," "in a lather," "in Dutch," "on the warpath," "in hot water," "in the nick of time," "in my hair"—and suggests asking children to draw pictures of what sentences using them said literally, "and then to consider what the metaphoric meaning of the phrase might be."

These phrases embody images even though some of them are so worn out and clichéd that most adults avoid them or think of their metaphoric meanings as almost literal. This isn't so for children. These phrases are often striking to children since they can picture the literal meaning and often haven't encountered the metaphoric use of the phrase.

Children are children, and reading Kohl helps you to avoid talking to them like grown-ups. He also knows how to take the child's imagination on a trip, and then spur him to go further on his own.

It is possible to experiment with image and metaphor by taking one of the common phrases above and varying it, and then finding meanings for the created images. For example: "in a nutshell" can be varied to produce "in a coconut," "in a molehole," and "in a volcano," so that "He put his ideas in a volcano" could mean that he expanded on his ideas in a broad context and even then they were likely to overflow the vehicle he chose.

*Puzzlements* has nearly three hundred pages of diverse suggestions, including a section on how to invent a pictograph language, one on riddles, and one on how to write amusing little news stories for titles that the children make up first.

One day, when Josh was six, he and his father went to the beach. They talked about whales.

Josh picked up a sharp piece of driftwood and threw it at a log.

I asked him if he was hunting whales and he replied that, no, he was hunting the hunters with his poonharp. My immediate impulse was to correct him and I told him it was a harpoon, not a poonharp. He insisted it was a poonharp and explained that a harpoon went from hunters to whales and a poonharp went from whales to hunters. He was right, it was a poonharp.

. . . The experience for him consisted of that combination of play and seriousness which is an essential component of most creative work. . . . Language is flexible and full of possibility. This is apparent in children's word play, but also in adult language in punning, comedy, poetry, and other forms of experimentation with language. However, most play with language is neither random nor arbitrary. For example, just the other day a nine-year-old girl in my writing class began a story with these sentences: Once there was a man who was a worrywart. He had a wife who was a hurrywart."

And so on. This is a rich book.

## *FRONTIERS*

### The Right Sort of Minority

IN a long article in the *Center Magazine* for January/ February, John Ernest, who teaches mathematics at the University of California in Santa Barbara, proposes to the "University Community"—meaning, not only "the researchers, teachers, and administrators" in his university, but those in *all* universities—that they unite to organize "a major ongoing seminar" which will have for its purpose "to arrest our relentless drive toward cultural suicide." Occasion for this appeal is the fact that "Human society has developed and stockpiled nuclear weapons adequate to insure its own demise." He asks:

Why does human society so quickly and fervently appropriate its scientific and technological skill for its own ghastly self-destruction? Why does the intellectual community appear so complacent in the face of the steadily mounting peril? What ideological differences among groupings of people can be so crucial and unresolvable as to justify devastation of whole social systems?

"I would like," he says, "to ask my fellow academics . . . to think about the relevance of their expertise and research to this issue." He quotes illustrious sources on the importance of such an inquiry—Albert Einstein, Andrei Sakharov, Dwight Eisenhower, and George Kennan, among them. A statement signed in 1955 by Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and nine other scientists (all but two Nobel laureates) show what is involved:

Here, then, is the problem which we present to you stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race, or shall mankind renounce war? People will not face this alternative because it is so difficult to abolish war.

The abolition of war will demand distasteful limitations of national sovereignty. But what impedes understanding of the situation more than anything else is that the term "mankind" feels vague and abstract. People scarcely realize in imagination that the danger is to themselves and their children and their grandchildren, and not only to a dimly apprehended humanity. They can scarcely bring themselves to grasp that they, individually, and those

whom they love are in imminent danger of perishing agonizingly. And so they hope that perhaps war may be allowed to continue provided modern weapons are prohibited.

This hope is illusory. Whatever agreements not to use the H-bombs had been reached in time of peace, they would no longer be considered binding in time of war, and both sides would set to work to manufacture H-bombs as soon as war broke out, for, if one side manufactured the bombs and the other did not, the side that manufactured them would inevitably be victorious.

The idea of "regulation," or what people call "arms control," occupies much attention these days, but experts say that its devices may work backward. In *Arms Control and Salt II*, Wolfgang Panofsky pointed out that "the actual frequency of nuclear testing *increased* after the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963, and few would maintain that the evolution of nuclear weapons technology was significantly retarded at all." Panofsky adds that this is only one instance "in which arms control efforts actually had the net effect of contributing to an increase in military technological activities." Quite evidently, "arms control" is not the way to put an end to the possibility of nuclear war.

Moreover, it may be wondered whether the universities will really *want* to be host to the "major ongoing seminar" that Prof. Ernest has in mind. What will happen to their budgets if federal subsidies for military purposes are withdrawn? One of his footnotes seems (at the end) to suggest the importance of this point:

We allocate enormous resources to developing and producing these terrifying weapons in the hope that they will never be used. But what are we spending to insure they will not be used? A reasonable formula might be to spend two dollars to prevent their use (by mounting a large-scale effort to build a safe and peaceful world order) for every one dollar we spend on armaments. This would involve a most unlikely change of budgetary priorities. The projected funding of \$1.5 to two million dollars a year for a University of California Center for Global Security and Cooperation is but a minute fraction of the budget for the University of California Weapons Laboratories.

The most effective way for the professors to stand in the way of preparation for nuclear war might be to refuse to work for any institution that has a "weapons laboratory." One might take a look at the amounts of money received from federal agencies in 1974 by the ten top universities—the University of Washington got the most, more than \$81 million, U.C.L.A. was second with \$73.7 million, and the University of Wisconsin a close third with \$73.6 million. Could such temples of higher learning really afford an effective peace program?

Toward the end of his essay Prof. Ernest wonders about the effect of university education on present students:

The graduates of the universities of the world will mold the future as they work in politics, trade, communications, journalism, science, and technology, or just as ordinary citizens of their countries, as they travel, speak, write, and vote. Can we honestly claim that the education we offer them will be adequate for the portentous challenge they face? Or should our texts and lecture notes carry warning labels, like cigarettes and diet drinks, that the ideas being offered may be inadequate to insure their survival? Do our graduates comprehend just how precarious their future is? Do they understand enough of the elementary facts of nuclear physics to comprehend the nature of atomic technology? Or is their knowledge based only on superficial political speeches or short newspaper articles? Do they know more about astrology than they do about the problems of the Third World?

These are not rhetorical questions. I do not know the answers. I would like to know how well our educational system is preparing our students for coping with the increasingly dangerous world they will encounter.

Well, it seems fair to say that the only people who are equal to coping with the world of today and tomorrow are those who realize that the last place to begin the work toward change is in big institutions. This means simple rejection of war as individuals—of war and the things that make for war, which include most of the big institutions, even the universities.

Can very many people be expected to undertake "rejection" on this monumental scale?

Of course not. But the right sort of minority can be expected to do it. Thoreau put this possibility well: "A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight."