

## For The Record: The Tree Of Life

MAXINE GREENE

Walter Lippmann, writing as a participant in "Dialogue Between the Generations," said in the October Harper's:

When young people ask the older generation for translators and guides, I have to remind them that one great characteristic of the modern scientific and technological revolution is that no one understands all of it, and only the specialists really understand some of the parts of it. So in the face of what has actually been happening, fathers and grandfathers have, all of them, been unprepared and uneducated men. They do not understand the results of the science and technology about them, and they don't even know how the products which they utilize are made. We cannot expect them to hand down the knowledge one needs in order to live and to live well. Young people will have to educate themselves to understand the infinite complexity of the modern age.

What does this signify for the schools, the agencies held specifically responsible for providing "translators and guides"? Is it indeed the case, for all we now presume to know about teaching subject matter, that we are unable to communicate "the knowledge one needs in order to live and to live well"? "To be wise," Lippmann added, "is to have a certain familiarity with the deposit of human values that persist in any human environment." But is such wisdom ever teachable? Is it teachable in days like these, when so many values are open to question, when so many people are challenging traditional codes and notions of what is appropriate and right? ("I deeply feel the inadequacy of the values learned while growing up," wrote Rita Dershowitz in answer to Lippmann. "Categories of social worth; drive for possession of things and people; the academic definitions of what is worth knowing and doing; the myth of America's good intentions around the world—all of these break down in the search for what is really important, and for a style of life that has dignity.")

It occurs to us that young people are not the only ones beginning to realize that they "will have to educate themselves." Artists, intellectuals, dissident young black men, ghetto parents, and, yes, public school teachers seem to be engaged in a process of self-definition and self-education. It is as if they have suddenly recognized that the way of "the fathers and grandfathers" is no longer sufficient in the new day. It is as if they are saying that, in order to cope with the complexities and obscurities of the present, they must invent their own techniques for making sense of things, their own modes of discovering values in the ambiguous environments of our time. So the artists and intellectuals resort to print in such symposia as "Intellectuals and Just Causes" (Encounter, September 1967) and "Liberal Anti-Communism Revisited" (Commentary, September 1967). Negro youth, talking "Black Power" or organizing Black Caucuses, insist on determining their own strategies in defiance of former allies. The parents of children in the slums demand the right to share in educational policy-making; in diverse ways, they hammer out novel techniques of criticism and evaluation, standards to help them select administrators and decide what "quality" shall imply. Public school teachers in Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, and New York invent new devices for exerting pressure on school boards so that they will finally be recognized as professionals, with a proper role to play in shaping policies in the schools.

There are many who sum up such phenomena as "disorder," "lawlessness," "irresponsibility." Although we are appalled by violence, however it occurs, and disturbed by the proliferating attacks on what is called "abstract legality," we cannot dismiss the restiveness we perceive around us as some troublesome deviation from our nation's traditional course. We prefer to see in it elements of a traditional democratic restiveness, a daring, experimental spirit like that of the frontier. It was on the frontier that the "fathers and grandfathers" were exposed as unprepared and ineffectual. It was there

that new models had to be made, new and untried strategies devised. They were not always pretty models or humane strategies; nor were they always appropriate in the new situation and the unfamiliar land. Nevertheless, there was no one present to educate the early settlers; and they had no alternative but to try to educate themselves. After a time, one way or other, they learned.

We choose, therefore, to perceive the unease and uncertainty around us as responses to a frontier—or a boundary—situation. This does not require us to welcome every protest, every gesture of defiance, every "cop-out," nor to perceive every one as valuable. It simply requires us to judge each phenomenon within a specifically contemporary context—and, at least, to affirm the general stirring and vitality. It seems better, in our view, for there to be overt controversy than a resentful silence. We much prefer a clamor and a turmoil to a ball of wax, even as we prefer an irritatingly curious, hyperactive child to the one who is acquiescent and "good."

Consider the intellectuals' symposia. In Encounter, John Osborne, Herbert Read, Hans Morgenthau, Kingsley Amis, and others were asked to express themselves in response to questions on where they stood on such matters as the Arab-Israeli war and the war in Viet Nam. Osborne, well-known playwright, and once an active peace demonstrator, said he now smelled "an odour of psychopathic self-righteousness" about the protesters against war. Philosopher-educator Read explained his life-long pacifism and his present feeling that "Nationalism has been the curse of the modern world. . . ." The paranoia resulting from it is, he wrote, "a problem for intellectuals, for philosophers, poets, writers of every kind, and above all a problem of education." Political scientist Morgenthau discussed what he saw as a growing doubt in the United States about "the legitimacy and relevance of the intellectual's involvement in public affairs." In spite of this doubt and even fear, he pointed out, the intellectual continues to have a significant part to play; since he, of all men, is committed "only to the truth" as he sees it and capable of providing "an independent standard of evaluation" for those now

suspicious of his work. Novelist Kingsley Amis said succinctly that "To do something, however trifling, and however economical of effort, towards opposing the interests of totalitarianism is in the interests of any intellectual." They came to no agreement, not even on the matter of the Arab-Israeli dispute; and, certainly, they held different opinions on whether or not the intellectual was obligated to take a stand. The point is, though, that there was no "book" for them to turn to, no predetermination of what it was to be an intellectual or artist in confusing times like these. Responding to a difficult and somewhat ambiguous question, each one was attempting to define himself.

The same thing can be seen in Commentary's even more elaborate symposium, to which twenty one writers contributed. Focusing on Viet Nam and the nature of individual responsibility for American policy, the editor had asked them to discuss this from the vantage point of "anti-Communism," as well as to discuss the meaning of "anti-Communism" in the recent past and today. The contributors were prominent thinkers, critics, artists, and teachers—people like Sidney Hook, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Paul Goodman, Robert Lowell, Lionel Trilling, and Michael Harrington. Most were at least of middle age; all had worked in the world of ideas long enough to be recognized as intellectual or artistic pace-setters and taste-makers. Yet they, too, seemed—as a group—to be relatively "unprepared and uneducated" when it came to identifying the nature of their public responsibility. They were in disagreement on crucial points, especially on the matter of "anti-Communism" or "anti-anti-Communism." Again we had the feeling that "translators and guides" were lacking, that even these highly gifted individuals were struggling to cope with what Lippmann called "the infinite complexity of the modern age."

It should not be surprising that the young radicals of our day find themselves to be without models, without guides. The proceedings of the National Conference of New Politics, which met in Chicago early in September, were a case in point. Ostensibly, the Conference was called to organize a third party movement in opposition to the

war and in support of civil rights. James Ridgeway (in "Freak-Out in Chicago," *The New Republic*, September 16) began his description of it by saying: "Even before the New Politics Convention began . . . some black militants broke away into a black caucus which met in secrecy to determine what role, if any, they would play in what looked to be yet another white, middle-class, lib-lab gathering which was more interested in the peace ticket than the ghetto." Was it any wonder that the young men and women in charge had no notion of what to do?

The black militants experimented with a device never used before in a liberal or radical movement. A numerical minority at the convention, they demanded and received the right to be counted as 50 percent every time there was a vote. According to Ridgeway, the convention "made fools" of the new left and of the serious blacks "who were struggling to build up some kind of community institutions in the black ghettos. . . ." The reading public was startled by the resolutions emanating from the Conference, by the chaos in which it seemed to dissolve. Images of fierce militancy were summoned up; echoes of anti-Semitism hung unpleasantly in the air. But who was there to teach the young radicals what they needed to know "to live and to live well"? Were they not, all things considered, trying to educate themselves? It may well be that it was better for them to gather, mill around, debate, maneuver, talk at and against each other—than simply to simmer in retreat at home.

The parents of slum children are not so quixotic nor so ambivalent; but they break just as much with conventional wisdom when they demand to participate in planning for the schools. In spite of a purportedly "grass roots" educational tradition, the members of America's poorest communities have never before asked for direct control of the schools. In recent months, urban ghetto parents have been demanding (and sometimes receiving) the right to select administrators for local public schools, to screen teachers, to hold the staff accountable for what they do or do not do. Giving up hope for integration in the school systems, they have put their stress on quality and separatism. "Black identity"

should be given priority, they say. The values of the group, the local community, should be taught, not the values of the affluent white majority.

This is new. It is probably one of the unlocked for consequences of the War on Poverty, with its built-in demands for community organization and giving the poor a voice in their own rehabilitation. It is also, of course, a reaction to disillusionment and discouragement with present educational practices. We may object sometimes to a slum parent's angrily uttered complaint about her child's inability to read. We may refer to accumulated research, to everything we "know" that tells us about the complex, apparently ineradicable factors which seem to cause reading deficiency. We may attempt to explain that the charges against the schools and the teachers are largely unwarranted—given new curriculum innovations, new insights into teaching and learning processes. Understandably, none of this will assuage the resentment of the parent who knows the necessity for literacy and who sees his third or fifth grade child already lagging behind. Nor will it "educate" that parent to acquiescence. Like the early settlers, again, like those who first penetrated the forbidding frontier, such people are intent on forging the tools of "community involvement" for themselves. Where is their guide? Where is their book of rules? They can only write it as they live.

The tradition of the public school teacher is an older one; but the organized and at once professionalized teacher is clearly a pioneer. For generations he has been a mere employee of a school board, someone presumably dedicated to public service but granted minimal status, training and commitment despite. As this is being written, the New York City school teachers have not yet returned to their classrooms. There is growing criticism of their leaders in newspaper editorials and in the meeting rooms of ghetto communities. But, according to an affidavit filed by the president of the United Federation of Teachers, the situation "has been brought about by an inept and isolated Board, out of touch with the realities of its own school system and the needs of its teachers to provide a good education for the children of the City of New York. . . ."

(The New York Times, September 17). Whether Albert Shanker is right or wrong about the "supportive services" needed by teachers, about the educational relevance of class size and teacher preparation periods, he is nonetheless talking as if the lay Board of Education were composed of "fathers and grandfathers" like the ones Lippmann described. If the Board is indeed too "unprepared and uneducated" to cope adequately with current educational demands, if the experience of older, more complacent teachers is in some sense irrelevant now, the teachers of the metropolis are justified in taking steps which are unprecedented. They may even be justified in breaking with history. After all, who is there to serve as guide through the forest? Who is there to say what should be done on the unexplored frontier?

To acknowledge the existence of crisis, of course, is not to find answers to the disturbing questions crisis has raised. We can only hope that some way will be found to reconcile the conflicting interests now exposed. Also, we hope that those now involved—and those who are affected—will play reasonable roles in the resolutions achieved. We do not believe it likely that the resolutions will be total; for we have learned too much about "rising expectations" to expect the limit ever to be reached. But we do believe that some consideration of the "deposit of human values" even now persisting in our environment may do something to allay distrust, refine commitment, and increase the possibility of good faith.

What is this deposit? How can we define it in such a way as to identify some of the shared commitments still held (if obscurely) by Americans?

We were fortunate enough during the summer to spend some days on the fringe of Appalachia, in the foothills of Tennessee. At the Highlander Research and Education Center in Knoxville, we lived for a brief time with a group of faculty members from the Friends World Institute on Long Island, who were studying regionalism and visiting the T.V.A. While with those people, each one quietly intent on discovering viable meanings and values in the midst of

discontinuity and flux, we met some of the young men and women working with the Appalachian Volunteers among the mountaineers. They were strangely gentle, unpretentious youth who had been working hard—trying, against every imaginable obstacle, to organize the mountain poor to help themselves. The coal interests, the old fashioned politicians, and particularly the strip miners were exerting every effort to stop them. The strip miners are the men who extract coal from the slopes of the hills surrounding the little hollows where the mountain people live. "Gouging has scarred the green land," wrote Joseph A. Loftus in the New York Times, on August 27th, "slides have damaged homes and property and roads, and polluted water supplies." (The hill people have at least one legitimate hero of their own already: Jink Ray, who stopped a stripper's bulldozer with his own body and forced withdrawal of a permit to mine near his property.) The young people who work with the hill dwellers are mainly natives of Kentucky or Tennessee; but there is something about them that is reminiscent of the college students who went to Mississippi for Freedom Summer in 1964. Seeing them, talking with them even for a short time, we found ourselves believing once again in young people's ability to learn how "to live and to live well."

We met 23-year-old Joe Mulloy, who had been charged with sedition for his work as a Volunteer (a charge absurd on the face of it and later thrown out by a Federal Court); and we met his gifted, pigtailed wife. We met Guy and Candie Carawan, with their five-year-old son who told us he thought every person "had a right to own some share of the earth." Guy Carawan is a musician and folk singer, on the field staff of Highlander, which supports his work among the mountain people. Not only does he organize concerts, folk sings, and dances; he collects some of the old hymns and ballads of Appalachia by tape recording the voices of men and women along the mountain creeks and in the hollows.

Between 1963 and 1965, the Carawans lived and worked on Johns Island, off the South Carolina coast. They have published a book about the people of that island called *Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?*

(Simon and Schuster, 1966). The Johns Islanders are rural people, mainly Negro, who have managed to preserve a remarkable and ancient folk tradition because of their isolation from the mainland. Their lives, however, have been desperately difficult; and the Carawans present them in the people's own words and songs. ("I apply for a job and you apply for a job," says Mr. William Saunders, "and Fm the better man, then I should get the job, not you because you're white. . . . To me I could have been somebody if I was born white. I felt before that I had the intelligence to be somebody . . . now I'm nothing." "There ain't but two race," says Mr. Joe Deas. "Two brother children. If you don't work with me I ain't work with you. You can't do without me and I can't do without you. You may don't want me to your table, but you can't do without me. Cain and Abel—you is Abel children and I'm a Cain.")

The Carawans then introduce Mr. Esau Jenkins, who believes in justice and is convinced he is his brother's keeper. Self-educated, he has worked for the education, particularly the citizenship education of his fellow islanders. They talk about him constantly at Highlander; he himself says "everybody is jubilant" because of the citizenship school Highlander started on the island. ("In 1954 in the county there were 'round about five or six thousand Negroes registered. In 1964 almost fourteen thousand. So everybody is jubilant for the Highlander Folk School, who have helped them to see the light.") He has worked for integration on the island; he founded a Progressive Club, later called the Sea Island Center, which originated in the Moving Star Hall.

The last song transcribed in the Carawans' book is one sung by the Moving Star Hall

congregation: "Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?" Even though we are fully aware that the values are simpler and the conflicts more clearly defined in Ap-palachia and on Johns Island than in the big, uneasy cities of the North, we nonetheless choose to find in the Moving Star Hall song—and what it represents—some aspects of the "deposit" Walter Lippmann seems to have had in mind.

This is because it is a song with long roots in the past of the people who sing it today. And it is because the song is being sung today in the midst of crisis, change, and novel self-creation. ("If we are going to be progressive on this island," says Mr. Jenkins, "we still have a lot to do.") Without the learning and the cooperative work which were taking place, the congregation might not have dared to sing the song. They might never, in fact, have conceived themselves to be dignified enough to respond to a leader singing "Hey, Lord . . ." with "Ain't you got a right to the tree of life?"

Our hopes for the future stem from the fact that more and more Americans are responding in such terms. Their demands for their rights will bring continuing conflict and uncertainty. But we are living in the midst of strong winds; and there is much that is ailing in the world. The fortunate educator is the one who can tolerate the winds. He is the one who knows that he cannot be expected "to hand down the knowledge one needs in order to live and to live well." He also knows that he will be nurturing the tree of life if he enables young people to "educate themselves to understand . . .," if he gives them some of the tools they need to become wise, to define themselves as decent, rational human beings—to make the kind of world they choose. MG