

HERE WE ARE. WHERE DO WE GO?

By

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You are my fellow workers, and I have not come here to talk at you, or even to you, but rather to talk with you. In the very nature of the occasion - a happy one for me - this is, of course, a monologue, but I should be pleased if we all felt that it has the flavor of a symposium, or round table.

We are precisely at the month of September, 1968. Let's face it. This is certainly not one of the happiest moments of human history. Nature smiles upon us, as ever. But I do not hear much spontaneous laughter among people. There is doubt, fear, frustration and a disordered attempt to escape along avenues that prove to be dead-ends. Our merriment seems to be the canned sort. We think if we laugh in the mass at the bitter sort of repartee that passes for humor on the part of morose comedians of television, that we are burying our doubts and forebodings. Oh, no. Not at all. It won't work. From these flounderings of the spirit come most of the unlovely productions of modern art and literature. Over-emphasis on sex, on obscenity, on brutality, on making the trivial look like essence. I shall not enlarge further. You know these things. I merely sum up that it is a distracted world in which you and I still have a job to do.

How come? Who is the culprit? When an individual finds himself in a mess, if he happens to possess more anger than imagination, he looks around him and cries: "Who done this to me?"

The individual with better reasoning power, viewing his personal wreckage, is capable of some philosophy about it. He may say, "Maybe I did this to myself."

But there are individuals who will have even better philosophy. They will say, "I must have gone wrong, somehow. I have been indulging in a fallacy. Perhaps a number of illusions. I had better find out what they are."

The world, made up of these frustrated individuals, has been, obviously, misled by some fallacious opinions. Let me tell you, for what it is worth, what I think the major fallacy may be. It is one that has beguiled humans since their first thinking stages. It is this: that because a little of something is good, a great deal of the same thing is necessarily better. This results in the fatal conclusion that BIGNESS is desirable per se--for its own sake. No. Bigness, like any organism, carries the seeds of its own destruction. Empires have collapsed from bigness. The enemies ceased to be those of the frontier. They acted at home. Perhaps the Saurians of the Cretaceous disappeared because they had become structural impossibles.

One of the Seven Sages of Greece had for his particular aphorism "Nothing in excess." As a matter of fact, all seven probably said the same thing. Nothing in Excess. Aristotle's Golden Mean is just that. The concept is clearly derived from an observation of Nature. Nature aims to maintain a nice balance. It is, of course, a quivering balance. It never amounts to perfection, which could be stagnation.

There IS an escape route for the frustrated individual in his frustrated world. It will not be easy. You must not look for immediate results. But it is the primary way. It is to observe, to trust, to learn from and indeed to regard Nature again as a mother, as did primitive mankind, and to stop trying to treat her as a prostitute to be employed at our whim, discarded at our will. This remark is unscientific-but I like to retain a touch of sentiment. I don't want everything revealed to me. I might be uncomfortable.

Very early I knew that my interest--aside from a personal visual and spiritual delight in the parks, would be in Interpretation. The time came when a generous grant from a Mellon Fund enabled me to make a long study of Interpretation, from which arose a working definition (it is subject to improvement as we go)--of interpretation, and the enunciation of some principles (as I regard them) which should govern our activity, let the spot practices be what or where they are. I make to you this bold prediction: that our influence, as administrators and interpreters of parklands upon a world of troubled, puzzled and uncertain human beings will be an indispensable and maybe a decisive instrument. My book, "Interpreting Our Heritage" has had general acceptance. It is NOT the final word. Far from it. This is--I hope--an endless search for the flying perfect.

We bring people into our scenic areas, and our prehistoric and historic places, and they see and hear beauty, take zest from unpolluted air, get perhaps a taste of wilderness, risk small dangers, take refuge from the world of yawn-and-conform. All good. All excellent. If it were no more than that it would be a boon. But there is the more important more. Through Interpretation we have the medium to bring man into a clearer recognition of what he is; what his capacities are of fulfilling a royal role such as envisaged by men like Emerson. To know himself. To know himself, he must return to the forest, the sea, the hills, the rivers, and--to MUD. Clean, almost edible mud, not the mire of the streets. The mud of the clamflat has a tonic that rouses the spirit--and if you don't like the odor at first, you will as soon as you deserve to. We have become delicate, my friends. We strive to avoid stinks. But distinguish. There is the oil refinery. There is the sulfur spring. There are therapeutic stinks.

To understand himself, man must not merely enjoy the beauties of a holiday visit to the natural scene or to the shrines of our pioneer days. He must understand the greater beauty of the natural order and the occasional rare flashes of noble conduct.

I have many times stated, and I still believe, that Beauty of the visual, the sensuous aspect, needs no interpreters. That Beauty interprets itself.

Nay, I go farther. In the places of overpowering scenic natural beauty the interpreter should only be a guide to admirable stances. I would have him refrain even from using the word "beauty." The appreciation of visual grandeur is a precious personal possession. It is the individual's shock, his apprehension, his discovery, and what he discovers is more than what he sees. He has discovered something of his inner self, hitherto unrealized. We do not interpret that aspect of beauty.

But I have come to believe that our introduction to Beauty through the senses is only a prologue to the raising of the curtain which reveals greater beauties behind what one sees and hears. I am convinced that there is an Abstract Beauty in the Universe--the Cosmos--that we attempt to describe by our verbal abstractions like Order, Harmony,

Justice, Truth, Love. We are here in the realm of metaphysics. I am not expecting you will follow me implicitly. I expect you may find objections. Anyway, you will perceive that the idea is not original with me. Plato was proposing this hypothesis 2500 years ago. I am not enlarging upon it here. But if there be merit in the concept, the implication is that behind the Beauty that we sense there is also the Beauty of the Adventure of the Human Mind; the Beauty of the Artifact--man's attempt to create beautiful things; and the Beauty of Human Conduct--of behaviour, of which Man in his best moments has shown himself capable. And, if this be granted, here lies the real opportunity of the Interpreter.

You and I are concerned with what we custodians of Beautiful Places may contribute to the clearer thinking of a perplexed world of men, in which we have produced so much material comfort and welfare, at the expense of a moral and spiritual sag. Let me then discuss for a moment what I think makes up our Way of Life--the elements of which our Civilization is composed. There are, obviously, four distinct patterns. The pattern of Behaviour, of Emotion, of Belief, and of Technologies.

Technologies. We can do little about them. They are here, we make use of them, perhaps deplore some of them, but are quite helpless. The electric toothbrush is likely to survive you and me.

Belief. Insofar as patterns of belief have to do with religious dogmas, they are none of our professional business. There are people who are happy with the Book of Genesis. Science offers other explanations of the precise progression of creation. However, if a pattern of belief is based upon the "broad religious spirit", felt by practically all mankind, our efforts will be felt in that province.

Patterns of Behaviour we must also largely accept, though we can affect them. Smokey the Bear has had a great affect. Fewer people in the whole number, every year, scatter litter in public places. We affect, slowly, the behaviour toward wild creatures. Even that naughty mammal the Wolf gains a few friends every year.

But primarily, I believe, we work in the pattern of Emotion, and must always do so. The earliest thinking Man looked about him and had two basic emotions. He was awed by natural manifestations. And he was filled with wonder. We are still awed, even though we do not have a special god for Thunder and Lightning. And we still wonder, and the Interpreter provokes further wonder and is equipped to answer most of the questions.

We CAN introduce to our visitors new and good emotions. We can and do combat illusory emotional conclusions. There are millions of people--many of them adult, who believe that their drinking and tub water originates in a faucet. Or that their milk originates with a deliveryman. Or that their meat is a butcher's frozen secret. Or that if a crocodile ate a beautiful woman, he would be a criminal, whereas a beefsteak is a natural human right. In other words we teach that there is a food chain, with Man on the happy end of it because he is Man Thinking, not Man Natural. But perhaps the chief emotion we invoke is that Man divorced from Nature will wither away. His brain may prosper, but it will look queer when you see it detached. You smile. Yet you know that he is losing the use of his legs.

Alfred North Whitehead commented on "the faintness of GENERAL IDEAS" upon the human mind." True, but we work in the very places where we can promote general ideas,

even if we risk that bogeyman the scientist calls "over-simplification." I say we Interpreters do not need to know everything. You cannot teach what you do not Feel, but you do not need to know it all before you teach. You may learn in the process of teaching. The pupil will sometimes find a means to enlighten you. But he can't do this unless he knows you are in love with your subject.

We can and do teach respect for wild creatures. Until that respect is acknowledged, we can't deal properly with wild human beings.

I am an unblushing purist. I would preserve wilderness if no human foot ever entered it. In fact, my friend Gordon Fredine said to me the other day that he had begun to think that the only people allowed in wilderness should be those who go barefoot. Gordon was not wholly serious, of course, but there IS a point. I would preserve wilderness because it IS wilderness, and because it would be tragic for coming generations not to possess it, even if they never, as individuals, saw it. Wilderness is our alphabet. We spell all our Interpretive words from it. I would not say all this in general publication--at least not that way. It would be misconstrued. But to you I say that a counterpart of this preservation is the copy of the Gutenberg Bible in our Library of Congress. I myself happen to have seen it, and bowed in reverence before it. It really has not been seen by many: but it is there!

For the moment, wilderness is strong medicine for the average man. He has temporarily lost his right to be happy in it. It frightens him, because it finds him wanting. There are exceptions. They have somehow escaped the general imbecility--I'm using that word in original sense--weakness. But man can acquire the privilege to consult wilderness by serving a humble apprenticeship. First the tamed outskirts where he can be near a telephone, but see a lake and some trees and hear an owl hoot. Then the fringe, where he is a little more on his own, and has to go without television--in color! In color! Then, as my friend Gordon suggests, ---take off his shoes.

The Interpreter has his place here. Not explaining the processes of nature. No; explaining why we should have parks, preserve them with fierce jealousy. Explaining, endlessly telling, what they mean to genus homo: making them a part of his life and thought. We have it to do, my friends. From it will come mental health for the millions.