

if Grim

Life: The Grand Curriculum



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THIS year all of us have been going to school in the streets of our own cities—Memphis, Atlanta, Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York; and in the streets of cities around the world—Saigon, Peking, Paris, London, Prague.

All of us are learners. Life is the grand if grim curriculum.



The school as such abuts the streets. But how shaken we have been when the curriculum of the streets has spilled over through the sometimes locked doors of the school.

The learning has been taking place in the corridors, not in the classrooms.

The teachers have been non-certificated, as we would say; the learners, poorly organized for continuous progress.

What We Get Used To

“Both camps, East and West, have a sufficient number of bombs to destroy mutually all big cities and industrial centers by means of airplanes and guided and ballistic missiles,” Max Born, one of the founders of quantum mechanics and a Nobel prizewinner in physics (1954), reminds us.¹

Debate on the nuclear proliferation treaty has been postponed in the Senate.

Max Born again, on the required military service that interrupted his studies in the Germany of the earliest years of this century: “I remem-

¹ Max Born. *My Life and My Views*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968. p. 110.

ber correcting proofs of my prize dissertation during night watches in the stables, using the sleek back of my horse as a desk.”²

Getting a good job is only one among many defensible human goals. “I don’t want to work,” announces Gertrude Stein’s World War II GI prophetically. “I want to pioneer.”

Go home and learn to declare your difference, to articulate the differences I know to exist in the United States, counsels his mentor, who professed to have always thought of herself as a Civil War veteran, an heir to American revolution in behalf of purposes larger than merely making a living.³

Shall 30 million of us take our dinner again tonight on tray tables in front of TV? Switch on the set and we’ll witness today’s events in Dien Bien Phu, Biafra, and Chicago.

We can be sure that the sponsors will intervene now and then with wry reminders of where to find relief from headache or stomach distress.

The “happy consciousness” of our society seems impervious to any very acute awareness of its own ailments or of critical world problems, according to Marcuse.⁴

We have learned to accept practically anything as just part of the game.

Life and Death: A Matter of Definition

In West Virginia, a man has sued ten of his neighbors, charging them with circulating a rumor that he is a warlock, or male witch, guilty of casting spells over their womenfolk.

Recently the minister of the Port Hueneme, California, congregation of the Friendly Bible Apostolic Church headed a seven-car motorcade east to seek refuge in Tennessee from an earthquake due to destroy Southern California with its “hippies, homosexuals, and topless nightclubs.” Early in the summer a delegation of hippies fled from the San Francisco area to the mountains of Colorado in response to a rumor that California was likely to slip into the sea.

Amidst a set of drug-users, an unsuspecting musician halts his playing. The wild reaction of his audience is too much for him; he would calm them. But, as Baudelaire reports the incident in “The Poem of Hashish”

² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³ Drawn from: Gertrude Stein. *Brewsie and Willie*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1946.

⁴ Henry Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

(1858), who would "think of wishing to 'cure' a man sick with superabundance of life, a man sick with joy"? ⁵



In a statement issued for the guidance of surgeons faced with deciding when the donor for an organ transplant operation is really dead, the faculty of an eastern college of medicine identifies as one of the tests the absence of eyelid flicker when ice water is poured in the ear.

Can we define, with equal explicitness, what it means to be fully alive without "resort to pharmacy or witchcraft"? ⁶ Or to threats and fears of earthquake?

Lessons from Life: To Be Field-Tested

1 A Modern Incident

The skirmishes that for a thousand years
had kept their boundaries were out of date.
The old men's fevered omens came too late,
the boys afraid of manhood wasted their fears.
The tribe lies drowned in time's eternal tears,
shot down by the troops sent in by the state,
new to machine guns but very old to hate,
who heard what only a coastal tribesman hears.
Blood beats with old tides to be retrained:
though dead, the warriors were cut at both ends,
the women disemboweled, the children brained:
why take chances where spirits still abound?
The state decrees its citizens must be friends:
the enemy is not within—but all around!

2 Where Is Home?

Men who believe that no man can be free
while one is not must wonder where to fight:
nations around the world nurse the first light
of freedom against its local enemy
(the exiled tyrant, the outlawed party
with a foreign friend) who would quiet
freedom or fan it into flames. We might
a hundred help, though many seem to be
so far away from home. But where is home?
We are all neighbors on the ocean air,
witnessing one another's public acts
and dropping down for trade and politics.
Home no longer has a harbor all its own,
nor is the sailor homesick anywhere.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire. *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings*. Peter Quennell, editor. Norman Cameron, translator. New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1951. p. 89.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Overlooked Locked Doors

Let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend. During the mid 'fifties, using this imperative, the leaders of Red China relaxed in their mammoth program of transformation,⁷ as did post-Stalin Russia under Khrushchev, and Czechoslovakia just now. But total states (or their allies) have quick second thoughts about letting go. The "Hundred Flowers" era of relaxation in China was short-lived, as have been the others.

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An open society seeks actively to remove every impediment to multitudinousness; it welcomes the forcing of any overlooked locked door.

But who would have thought our old society had so many unopened doors in it?

And by what name shall we call these new flowers?

And for what ends do these new schools contend?

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"Man designs for himself a garden with a hundred kinds of trees, a thousand kinds of flowers, a hundred kinds of fruit and vegetables," as Hesse puts it. "Suppose, then, that the gardener of this garden knew no other distinction than between edible and inedible, nine-tenths of this garden would be useless to him."⁸

Unfinished Business

We still have work to do in assessing the product of the curriculum studies begun a decade ago.

How teachable is the new grammar?

Which of the 55 social studies projects promises the most help in reordering and recombining the six or seven companion disciplines of the field?

Has the time come to revise the new physics program?

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"Do I dare to eat a peach?"⁹

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⁷ Robert C. North. *Chinese Communism*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1966.

⁸ Hermann Hesse. *Steppenwolf*. Basil Creighton, translator. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1957. pp. 88-89.

⁹ T. S. Eliot. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, 1917.

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