Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 2

Block & Tackle Productions Press

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Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

To María Beatriz - always in all ways

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Introduction

These radio commentaries were done for WEVO, New Hampshire's first public radio station, during the 1980s, at its studio in Concord. I was lucky enough to have a station manager who liked what I wrote and offered me the opportunity to become a regular on-air commentator.

I enjoyed my occasional visits there: putting on the headphones, doing the sound check, e-nun-ci-a-ting, trying to hit the golden spot of doing it in one take. It was fun being in the broadcasting cockpit for a while, flying the airwaves out and around.

I have done nothing to upgrade or re-polish these pieces. What does strike me, in a woeful way, is the persistence of the issues I addressed. Decades later we are still arguing in the same ways about abortion or English-only or educational reform - not much progress seems to have been made.

Nibble at these as you will. May they nourish.

Michael Bettencourt, 2015

Reading as Radicalism

Dylan Thomas once said that "My education was the liberty I had to read indiscriminately and all the time, with my eyes hanging out." How many of the graduates of our would say that they had this kind of freedom to read, and got this kind of excitement? Not many. Reading in schools is a chore, and people carry that attitude along with them when they take off their graduation gowns and head out for the world.

This is disastrous not only because it wastes minds but also because it makes people politically passive. Reading is one of the most radical things we can do with our lives. But a certain kind of sensual and intellectual experience has been pretty much killed off for a lot of people by our school system and corporations, who don't mind diluting complexities to platitudes to reinforce our culture's message of acquisition and anxiety, uprootedness, and self-centering.

But a voraciousness for books and for the ideas in them, and the demand for time to read and digest, is a counter-friction to this message. Reading well takes time and self-discipline, and if one reads and gets pleasure from the unadorned engagement with the printed page, then there is little else one needs. As Erasmus pointed out in the sixteenth century, "When I get a little money, I buy books, and if any is left, I buy food and clothes."

A person who believes that books and reading are more essential to life than material necessities is dangerous: that person will not consume the coin of the realm for consumption's sake. Instead, he or she will ask only for the integrity of the mind, and thus place the mind in opposition to what is.

Readings as radicalism? Indeed. But our culture has gelded that notion rather cleanly. Today one does not read to link up with ideas and writers of the past; it is not an historical activity. It is instead self-massage, a search for thin buns and washboard stomachs and fictional characters who reflect our modern love of avoidance and safety.

Books today are sold as opiates, unregulated by an FDA of the mind. G.K. Chesterton once remarked that there is a great difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and a tired man who wants a book to read. We are, it seems, becoming very tired.

Spirits in The Material World

When I was a freshman in college I discovered Henry David Thoreau, the patron saint of simplicity. His cabin by the pond became my philosophical mecca. When I was a sophomore I experimented for a year; I owned nothing (beyond my books, my bicycle, a desk, and a chair) that I could not carry on my back. I wanted to see how I would change under the onslaught of simplicity.

At first I suffered from what can only be called "consumer pangs." I wanted to buy because I'd told myself I couldn't. But things changed quickly. I soon found an interesting peace inside me, like silence after a great static. I found it easier to judge what was of value in my life because I judged my life not by how many cravings I satisfied but by how much progress I made in the direction of my ideas. The only metaphor I had at the time to describe myself is from Walden: the pond's ice breaking up in the spring with great whoops of release. I ended my experiment well-tempered, and refurnished my room and all my cravings.

And yet... The other day I went to a stereo liquidation sale. I hadn't intended to buy anything except cassette tapes, yet I ended up paying out $600 for a stereo system worth $1000. I didn't need the stereo system since I already had one, but I wanted it and saw no reason not to give in to the impulse. Yet even while I was writing the check, a voice like a flute edging out over a late-evening pond sounded deep within me. Had I changed, it said, had I become of those captives Thoreau had fought against in his life? Even now, as I listen to the wonderfully full music coming out of the machine, the voice still nettles me.

This, then, is my apologia to Thoreau. Henry, you railed, and rightly so, against capitalism because you saw how it reduced the higher instincts to a cash nexus. Your definition of worth is just as valid today as then: the cost of anything is the amount of life it took to get it. Yet you always talked about the price of life; because you never owned much you could not understand the joy of owning. Listen to the music that comes rolling from these speakers. Can you listen to this Beethoven, something you never heard in your life, and tell me my money is ill-spent, that I wasted life to get this? I don't think so.

My materialism is not what you condemned because it's the continuation by other means of the search that began in scintillating naïveté that sophomore year. I buy books and music and the means to store and use them because I,

too, am looking for that simplicity which his synonymous with beauty which is synonymous with reality in all its fullness.

Thankfully, though, the voice is still there, a counter-ballast to the Vanity Fair around me, still forcing me to correct my course and justify my ways to myself. Because of him I'll always try to live out of my back pack, try to keep in view what is useful and meticulously real.

Winter

When Shakespeare began *Richard III* with "Now is the winter of our discontent," he began with the wrong season. Summer is the real season of discontent. Summer has all the disadvantages and none of the benefits of temptation, ratcheting the desires up tight with devilish enticement but never offering a spasm worth the twinge. Summer does have some virtues, like a boring man who dresses well. But summer is really cheap seats, soft ice-cream, crumbs in the bottom of the cold water bottle.

So what recommends the great and glorious winter, this season of content? Many people don't understand winter. They see winter as confinement and negation, the natural symbol of being sent to bed without supper. But the opposite is really true. Winter brings reality down to inescapable essentials: warmth, decent food, serviceable clothing, proportional thought, considered action. Winter helps us measure ourselves; it resists us and does not protect our cherished myths about superiority or talent. It is a harsh-lighted mirror that throws back at us what we are not and what we need to become. Where summer is sand that shifts, a smooth undulation, winter is crazed ice over purling water, one element in two versions, just as we in ourselves hold the ice of death and the free water of imagination.

The winter I think of most often is the first winter Thoreau must have spent at (and on) Walden Pond. His cabin was ten by fifteen, heated from a fireplace built with his own hands, his woodshed a few steps from his front door. The closest sign of life was the railroad a few rods from him; Concord was a mile and a half away. As the shingles of his cabin grew more weathered during his first winter there, so must have he. By investigating his world, he investigated himself. The depths of the pond he recorded so dutifully were his own depths, its length and breadth the geography of his own place in the world.

Thoreau could not have done what he did if he lived where it was always summer. He needed a world of contrasts in order to find comparisons. He needed a restricted world in order to find what was free and unlimited. He needed a world loosened from material desire, even from emotional desire, so that he could hear and distill the silence of a December night. Our modern world is in part filled with too much summer, too much that simply is without question or balancing contrast. A strong dose of Thoreauvian winter, both literal

and figurative, would remind us of essentials, and the coldness that surrounds us might be balanced by the warmth of discovery and explanation.

Ultimate Questions

I recently finished reading Hans Kung's *Does God Exist?* After 800 pages, Kung finally answers "yes" to the question.

Kung's title is perhaps the most insistent of what I call "ultimate questions," those queries which have troubled people all through time. Pursuing the answers has moved people to do incredible (and sometimes monstrous) things, so we usually conclude that these questions evoke what is noble in our character. We may be wrong about that.

I was, as a teenager, a serious Catholic boy contemplating a career with the Trappist monks. Ultimate questions were the meat-and-potatoes of my being. When the religious impulse died, I was taken over by the romantic impulse, becoming a sort of casual John Keats, a noble character who asked and faced the essential questions of life.

I searched various philosophies and religions for answers but came up dry, and this bothered me a great deal for a long time. Only much later did I realize that the problem was with the questions themselves. The form of a question is important because in large part it shapes the answer. Large amorphous questions can only generate large amorphous (and, in the end, unsatisfying) answers. This is the way ultimate questions work. In fact, ultimate questions don't really look for answers at all. They instead symbolize a romantic urge for order in a world that too often appears frenzied and aimless. I don't think people who seriously ask these questions really want answers, that is, closure. Asking "What is the meaning of life?", not finding the answer, is the meaning of life to those interested in ultimate questions.

To me, at least, a good question is one that constantly leads us back to actual life, to testing and verifying the surrounding world. Richard Feynman, the physicist, once suggested that we would all do better if we learned to live without the open-ended questions because physics, at least by what it shows now, indicates that they won't be answered. I agree fully. Far from crippling us, this uncertainty can revive us, provoke us to find out how things work in a way that is consistent, through science, and attached to the material universe in which we reside, the only home we can definitely say is ours.

In the BBC production of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the giant computer Deep Thought has come up with the answer to a question posed

earlier, namely, “What is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything?” Its answer is 42. When his listeners express dismay (they’ve waited 7 1/2 million years for this answer), Deep Thought gives them some good advice. It’s not the answer that’s at fault but that they didn’t know how to ask the question. Now that they have the answer, they need to go find the question.

Our physical universe is like 42; it is our answer. Our duty is to find questions that fit the answer. Ultimate questions don’t do this; science does. Let’s get down to the microscopes and computers.

Connections

When I teach poetry I eventually give my students an assignment called the "telescope poem." They have to take a simple object and flesh out all the connections the object has to the world. If it's a piece of paper, the list of connections could run back through the stationer to the mill worker to the logger to the tree in Oregon. I did this because I wanted them to learn that none of us is what we are without the help of hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of people we don't know and, oftentimes, could care less about. The assignment was really a sermon, an adjunct to John Donne's "No man is an island, entire of itself."

I'm reminded of this assignment as I prepare this talk. I'm consuming electricity generated by Public Service workers I don't know (and probably never will), which runs a computer with silicon chips made by California workers, which prints out a draft of this talk on paper milled somewhere from pulp tress felled somewhere else. Just a moment's thought brings out the wild, almost numbing array of threads that bind us all together. (And if, as Carl Sagan says, we are all made out of the leftover materials of exploded stars, then the connectedness goes out to the cosmos.) This is a wide-bottomed thought - the oneness of all - and it comforts us.

Yet it shouldn't, at least not entirely. We are not really one people on this planet, though we are all connected. We can perhaps talk about "oneness" only if we reduce all the fierce complexity of human life to vague, usually emotional or biological, correspondences, like Shylock's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*. This is not a oneness that stands strong since it's achieved as much my denying differences as recognizing similarities. We should not comfort ourselves by such denials.

John Donne, I think, had it wrong; we are all islands. Our lives on this planet are more like archipelagos than a multi- colored tapestry; living together is "connect the dots," not weaving. While humans may be social animals, they are not communal animals. They like the comfort of company, but they do not like subordinating their search for pleasure to a more common, and therefore less personal, purpose.

As Hobbes pointed out in *Leviathan*, humans seem to be engaged in a restless search for power over the world in which they live in order to secure for themselves those commodities that will lengthen their pleasure (and thus their lives). This "selfishness" is not bad, but it does make getting co-operation on

common interests tough. And sometimes the struggle is so taxing that we wish we could forget the "illusion" of our differences and get to the "real" common nature we somehow obstinately refuse to accept.

But the fact of the matter is, we are very and unalterably different from one another, and those differences are a source of the human race's vitality. Blend these differences down into a mush of idealistic oneness, and we will lose any possibility of connecting with, and therefore understanding, one another.

Those Who Are Still Among Us

A few years ago Anacin ran a series of intriguing commercials, vignettes of working people - a welder, coal miner, waitress, school teacher, truck driver - talking for 20 seconds on how they needed to get rid of their headaches to do their jobs well. A single face and voice speaking to the audience: it was quiet elegant and affecting.

Why? Vance Packard one said that commercials are our society's mini-myths. Commercials in this country generate at least two myths. One is that commodities can do what liberal democracy can't. Orientals, Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, women have all been mixed into the capacious world of advertising, implying that buying, selling, and hungering after material success have finally brought about equality.

The other myth asserts that the middle-class world created by this fraternity of products is the real and only world, a world towards which everyone aspires (if, of course, they are in their right minds).

But not everyone can be let into the club. Think about who is not included in this middle-class world of commodity democracy: no poor people, no homeless people, no homosexuals, most new immigrants: in short, no one who would offend. That's why the Anacin commercials were so important. How many times on TV have we seen and heard from simple people out of a Studs Terkel book? For a moment television opened a crack in the myths, and another world - reality - popped through.

And that world, for many, is a frightening one, not only for the marginal people in the Anacin commercials, but for the millions below them. The fact that poverty has increased in the last six years (along with its attendant hunger, disease, and humiliation), and that the present Attorney General once blithely said that there weren't any hungry people in this country should make us all pause in disgust and worry. That a good many aren't disgusted by such information is in part a testament to the power of the commercials' world on our imaginations: what we don't see does not exist.

But we compound this social and moral dishonor if we believe even for a second that people actively want the degradation and marginal survival that a life of poverty brings. A world of pain and starvation, just underneath the commercials' veneer, just outside the fake walnut cabinet of the TV set, walks

silently and angrily through our streets. It is a world to which we will have to pay attention, either by choice, and thus redeem our ethical selves, or by force of circumstance, when the comfortable life is bought at a price too dear for those who do not have.

Squirrel

Out in the yard, framed by the window next to my desk, is a three-pronged maple tree, a trident of wood about 50 to 60 years old and thirty feet tall. When I look at it I see at least a good full cord of wood that would thrill a stove, but right now the squirrels interest me most. Two squirrels use the tree regularly. They've been foraging steadily this last month, moving through the fallen leaves around the tree like electrons through a cloud chamber, leaving faint trails flagged by a twitching gray exclamatory tail. (More on the tail in a moment.) They've been meanderingly industrious, pausing often to play but never really abandoning their attack on the stinginess of the coming winter.

The tail. These two have plush tails, handsome tails, a spectrum of gray from dark gray shoots near the core of the tail to pearl gray tips, like a plume of woodsmoke on a cold October day. The tail seems to have life of its own, sometimes thoroughly erect like the flag on a mailbox, at other times whimsically undulating, like a feather-boa shaken out a window. It metronomes, points, see-saws, gavels, gesturing out whatever passes for a passing thought in a squirrel.

The other day they chased each other up and down the maple for at least ten minutes, the scratching scuttle of their claws mixed with their cheeps and chittering. They moved up and down the three main trunks, along the chainlink fence around the yard, over the garbage cans, through the dry brocade of dead leaves, back up the trunks - some squirrel version of "tag," though "it-ness" changed constantly, each squirrel taking turns being both pursued and pursuer.

During this frantic gamboling they paused occasionally to cart a seed or an acorn up to their nests in the branches, then fast-forwarded the Keystone chase as if all creation had been waiting for them. At times they moved so fast I couldn't see them, their gray pelts blending with the maple's gray bark, descending from the upper part of the tree in a scattering spiral that brought them into view, then out of view, like a coin in the hand of a good magician. Then back to foraging, their nose flickering like some Geiger counter attuned to the radiation of food.

It may not be the same two squirrels I see each time, but there are always two, and so I make them the same. I have written this gray tail of a talk much as they have worked, sometimes having the words just spiral down the trunk of my brain in a flashy descent, at other times picking through various dead leaves to find a husk redolent of food, stored away in some forgotten sentence. And as for winter: I am pulling my skin in around me just as tightly as they are, cheeping

and jabbering until the snow slows the blood, even then pushing out occasionally to taste the saved vittle and catch the cold that affirms the contained warmth under the skin, underlines the brain poking through waste to find what feeds.

Chainsaws

A chainsaw is not the first symbol people would use to describe the age-old turning of the seasons in New Hampshire, but it touches all the essential themes: transience and mortality, the struggle to find independence, the resurrection of spring. For those who might not have considered this, here are some seasoned thoughts on chainsaws.

Anyone who has handled, or been near, a chainsaw knows that it's alive. Like a shark or a bullet, a chainsaw's purpose in life is to eat. And it eats with streamlined efficiency. Its 9000 r.p.m. carbon-steel fangs will easily reduce a century's growth to one month's fodder for a stove. It's a fearsome reminder of how brutal transience can be, how the delicate concentricity of life can be cross-sectioned and stove-length'd without epitaph or compassion, in a blinding whirr that spits out dust.

But it is, after all, a machine, something made to be a servant, even if a dangerous one. Properly handled, it can make us feel, and actually give us, a Yankee independence. What lifts the spirit after a long day cutting is not just the scattered abundance of sixteen-inch logs or a certain chemical pleasure aroused by fatigue. It's what those logs and fatigue signify: a bounty earned, not simply received by accident or routine, something wrestled from the earth, molded to a purpose, and used to make life comfortable. Very little in our usual lives gives us this sense of arrival. But a palisade of cut, split, and stacked wood tells us that we have the power to protect ourselves, to keep warm what it is important to keep alive.

It may be, as e.e. cummings once said, that "progress is a comfortable disease," and that technology is the bane of humankind's existence. It may be, on the large scale at least. But when I think of the alternative to the chainsaw, this local instance of technology, then I have my doubts. To cut what I have cut in an afternoon would take men with axes and crosscut saws long numbing days.

And where I feel a comfortable burn in my muscles at night (and still have energy to read or write), they would feel bone-weary tiredness. This technology allows me to risk subsistence without destruction being the price of miscalculating. This may not be "true" or "appropriate" independence, but it's a compromise I can live with.

The dwindling woodpile is the hourglass of the season. As the final wood runs through the narrow waist of the woodstove, I take out my chainsaw which, along with planted peas and crocus, is a sure sign of spring. As I sharpen its teeth and set the timing, its very weight and readiness erases any winter lethargy, and I move out into the world again, ready to eat and calculate.

Where I Live

A few years back *Esquire* used to ask famous writers to offer a short piece on why they lived where they lived. Inevitably they all tried to define an ineffable "sense of place," something that helped make them fully three-dimensional people.

I live in Manchester. But I don't live in the Manchester that has just finished building fortresses called Numerica and Indian Head and The Center of New Hampshire. I don't live in the beltway I-293 Manchester that cleaves through the West Side. Nor do I live in the Manchester of a Route 3 that's bristling with the mushrooms of new condos. My Manchester is very different.

I live a few blocks west of Gill Stadium, near an Allegro's and an Amoskeag Bank and a Woolworth's (with a lunch counter) and a state liquor store and a twenty-four-hour laundromat. From my porch I can watch the sun set beyond Mt. Uncanoonic, watch it come up over the Felton Brush Company. At five thirty a.m. I hear the delivery trucks for Blake's and the supermarket, and at one-thirty on a Sunday morning I can hear the screech and growl of motorcycles as the local bar kicks everyone home. It is a neighborhood, a certain definable (if boundary-less) state, with character and texture and a spiky phizzog, as Carl Sandburg would say.

Why do I live here, in a three-room apartment on the second floor of a house owned by a barely English-fied French-Canadian widow? Because here it feels like home. And what is home? Home is not the patronizing boarding-house of Robert Frost, where they have to take you in. Home is not a place at all. Home is a way to describe a certain kind of centering and connectedness. Thoreau had it right when he wrote about where he lived: home is "a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake." A sense of home really means one thing: you are not at the mercy or in jeopardy. Home is knowing where the umbilicals attach.

Despite all the boosterism of Mayor Shaw and the *Union Leader*, and the efforts of developers to make Manchester look like Boston, Manchester's character rests on the fact that it is a city of neighborhoods, a city that still retains a human scale. Each time I do my shopping or deposit my money or watch the aged Salvation Army sergeant stand inside Allegro's angling for people's change, I know that I live in a world that can be known. Each time the woman with her

four children pushes her full shopping cart past my house I know I am safe, the squeaking of the overworked wheels an anthem for the place I live.

Santa Claus at The Mall

It's the day after Thanksgiving and here I sit, enthroned at the center of the Mall, prepared to confess (or prime) the greed of children. I'll do this for the next 30 days, in countdown ("only fifteen more shopping minutes until Christmas!"), under conditions only slightly less hectic than Beirut in a shoot-out, while a photographer in a green elf costume snaps over-priced picture for harried parents. I wear a red velveteen suit with white trim that has mange. The beard, luckily, hooks over my ears - no spirit gum - and the wig of white polyester sits on my head like a splattered meringue under a melted dunce cap. The children don't know that I'll probably lose their confidences as easily as I lose sleep at night, at a rate slightly above minimum wage. Ecce homo.

As I ready myself and watch the Mall fill up I wonder how many of the people have a sense of this movement of the seasons, the powerful coming-together of the death of nature and the birth of salvation? I know I don't; I'm too busy to acquire the habit of awe and reverence. I don't think they're much different.

In fact, I suspect that the anxious verve with which they prosecute Christmas is an attempt to recover a feeling of sacred witness to mysterious, even impossible, events, an attempt, in a hobbled sort of way, to make life special. People who moan about the commercialism of Christmas have it all wrong. The problem is not that we buy too much, or that we miss the true spirit of the time (whatever that is). The problem is that we don't know how to give well, how to present things, because we don't know one another very well. We try to overcome our ignorance with the ritual of given things, recover the mystery through formulas of generosity. We're inept at it, but we've always been inept at it, we creatures with egos as large as the universe. It's a wonder we pause at all in our individual daily races against death to give to someone else something we think they might need.

I ask the photographer if he's ready. He grins and uncaps his lens. I get out of my rickety gilt chair, turn on the tape of tinny Christmas music, and unhook the orange nylon rope that separates the magic kingdom of Santa from the milling millions. Even as my rear-end hits the chair I have a child in my lap, his as-yet-unladen parents in the background. While he chatters on about G.I. Joe and Thundercats, and the elf clicks away, I listen and smile. The beard won't show it, unattached as it is to my skin, but the smile is there nonetheless, and as I give

him his release, there is another child, and then another. So many children, so many chances. Grace will come from such multitudes.

In Praise of Weirdness

To a generation raised on barbershop trims and beauty salons (like my parents), punk hair is aberrant. It violates a universal law that only women have flamboyant hair, and only within certain limits, such as blond/black/brunette. It is, as my parents say, too "weird," as if that word explained everything about what was wrong with blue hair in a mohawk.

But it's weirdness, properly understood, that makes life worth living. Weirdness is the odd angle of vision, the exaggeration. Weirdness inhabits the limbo where the official and the moral meet but have nothing to say to one another. It's the taste of squeezed lime in the macho blandness of American beer. It's Talking Heads in the Muzak that coddles us everywhere. Weirdness is whatever people do to be eccentric, in the origins of that word: to be off the center.

What distinguishes weirdness from its estranged cousins - slash-and-burn punk, on the one hand, and controlled yuppie dissipation on the other - is its gentle self-parody. Weirdness can't take itself seriously because it knows that once it does, it becomes official. (For "official" read: trend, fad, doctoral dissertation, useless.) It keeps itself from sobriety by chuckling at itself, by getting other people to chuckle along with it, to shake their heads in calm dismay, admit that a little streak of orange there, a judiciously-torn sweat-shirt here doesn't mean the end of civilization. This is weird-ness' politics: If we can laugh at ourselves, we can sabotage any tyranny.

To be sure, this is scant protection against the great god Homogenize stalking through Reagan Country, and the Top-Gun-itis that muscle equals morality. But it would be wrong to underestimate the power of weirdness, at least in saving one's own spiritual arteries from the cholesterol of Republicanism and Pat Robertson. Let's bring it to a question: Why not a man or a woman wearing blue hair in a mohawk?

Think about the question for a moment; it's not as stupid as it appears. Any debate over the answer shows that what an individual thinks right and proper about the universe is a matter of considerable prejudice and blindness. If we can accept the notion that blue hair is possible, and maybe even desirable, then it's probably true that we are wrong about a great many things we think are right, and that the world has more possibilities than we allow. A certain kind of freedom can begin here.

One of the few things Robert Frost said that I agree with is this: “A civilized society is one which tolerates eccentricity to the point of doubtful sanity.” Be civilized and pepper your lives with weirdness; love the burn of it, search out the spice.

Suck

In George Orwell's essay "Such, Such Were The Joys...," he talks about having "suck" with the headmaster and his wife. "Suck" was pull, influence, an insider's hand that got the sucker sweets, attention, status. It was a smarmy business, reducing self-dignity to calculation. Orwell, through the lens of his gawky adolescence, focuses for us the dry rot of tyranny, the ossifying of the spirit that the pursuit of favor incurs.

But there are other kinds of suck as well, related more to hubris, or excessive pride, than the kowtowing Orwell talked about. I call one species "Ahab-ism": the chasing of the white whales of power. It's perfectly demonstrated by the Keystone comedy in Washington over Iran and the contras. Men with pretensions to having grand paragraphs written about themselves in future history books decided to circumvent the democracy they work for. "Rambo" Oliver North (in charge of the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors), "Bud" McFarlane, who hoped to be Kissinger #2; "Diamond Don" Regan, whose credential for foreign policy is a former job at the Treasury: these are men who believe that their own grand delusions and Swiss bank accounts will preserve freedom far better than the sloppy democratic process they are pledged to uphold.

There's also another kind of "suck" at work in this fiasco. It's interesting to watch how people are scurrying to "protect the President." Why? He's hardly a man worth protecting. He's silly, unthinking, uncaring, uncomprehending, a dolt with a nuclear cannon.

Yet there are those so enamored of the trappings and posturings of power that they would readily give up their common sense to ignore reality and keep intact the façade of potence. These monarchists will never mention the Emperor's nakedness, and will berate anyone who fails to see lace where there's just skin.

Toadying, arrogance, sycophancy: this is the spectacle we now see before us. Yet these devilish actions are as much failures of imagination as they are moral failures. They show that those people endowed with power have no vision of what the purposes of power are in a democracy. They show the poverty of Goldwater's statement that any vice in the pursuit of protecting freedom is a virtue. Freedom is not protected when laws are abridged or flouted, because it's not difficult to turn one's attention from getting those people over there at any cost to getting you at any cost. The liberty of none of us is safe while the wolves

in wolves' clothing prowl the democratic pastures. Let's start the impeachment proceedings now.

Christopher

In Terry Gilliam's movie *Brazil*, people give Christmas presents to one another all year long. There is even a group called "Consumers for Christ." The point is obvious: In an advanced industrialized capitalist economy, people must buy in order for the profit engine to run. What better way to do this than by uniting religion with consumption? (Which is not far from some of the practices used by churches today.)

But I think Gilliam has a fair subtler point to make. In the kind of society he portrayed (not one far from our own), consuming erases irrevocably the line between desire and addiction. Or, to put it more bluntly, people have to be made commodity junkies to keep the status quo intact. And I saw his thesis carried out in a very startling way in my nephew Christopher, age 6.

Christopher has an addiction to toys. The source of his addiction can be easily identified: grandparents (and a few other culpable adults). Christmas only worsens the addiction. For the month of splurging after Thanksgiving he has very little on his mind other than what people are going to get for him. At our Thanksgiving dinner he asked me at least three times whether I had done my Christmas shopping for him. Everyone at the table thought it cute; I was worried by his single-mindedness.

On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day itself he exhibited what I can only call symptoms of both overdose and withdrawal: the pure "need" for toys beyond any particular desire for any particular toy; his frantic bustling from gift to gift, never really seeing what he was getting; his inability to concentrate; his mourning that there was no more of the "substance"; his jitters and depression.

The "symptoms" wore off fairly rapidly; after all, it was toys, not cocaine. But I've seen this same intemperate activity every year. He seemed as interested in acquisition as what was being acquired, and he seemed incapable of satisfying himself with what he got. In fact, the only kind of satisfaction I could see him getting was the kind a glutton gets: from quantity, not essence. In other words, he doesn't know how to satisfy himself, only how to "ask for" and "get," which are not the same things at all. And because what he gets does not satisfy for very long, he must get more.

I feel sorry for Christopher because he's been set up. Everyone moans about how rude and antic he is, yet they're right there feeding him, making sure he will

never be as well-behaved as they think he should - a classic double-bind. The roots of various kinds of addictions and neuroses begin with such gift- giving, at least in our society. Gilliam is frighteningly close.

Anne and Leo

A few weeks ago I was watching the local 11 p.m. news when I heard about a fire in Sutton, a town where I used to live. The 200-year old house of Anne and Leo Austen had burned down. She escaped, but her husband died in the flames. She reportedly walked a mile barefoot through the snow to get help.

I knew Leo and Anne. Not well, but in a more or less neighborly fashion. I had just purchased a house a mile down the road from them, and I met them at a yard sale that Anne periodically put on during the summer. We came around to knowing each other in the way that most small-town newcomers and natives do: by talking about houses.

After she told me all she could remember about the house I'd bought, she then asked me in to see her house. Her husband, Leo, was inside. Retired, short and portly, with a large smile and thick hands, he cheerfully hello'd me while Anne gave him a summary of our conversation. They then took me on a tour of one of the most delightful houses I've ever been in. Like most old houses, especially one as old as the Austen's, it was a series of wings and ells tacked on to a small central core, which is what gave the house its charm. They had furnished it with a mélange of stuff, and if I had had the training of an archaeologist, I'm sure I could've traced the permutations of their lives through the strata of their knick-knacks and furnishings.

Now all of that is gone. Leo is gone. Tragedies usually occur on such a grand scale that while we can feel concern, we are usually touched only at the outer edges of our imagination. But I knew these people, and that made all the difference. I could feel in my own feet the cold that must have cut through Anne's, taste and smell the hot cinders of the burning house. For a brief moment that news report cut through the rigid defenses around my mortality and opened me out. Time seemed to stop; petty and routine things seemed to go back to their proper dimension. It was one of those moments when all the bullying and pushing that living entails was suddenly beside the point and all that existed was a needle of grief that threatened to pierce the heart like a loose-woven cloth.

Such sympathy did not, could not, last for long. The news report went on; I went on as well. Simply another death to carry, in a life where living on means losing. But such burdens are never easy, such griefs are never light; but then the weather must come on and the news must begin to accumulate again and the smell of dry ash and wet charcoal will disperse among the breezes of food and

talk, though it's never quite out of the nose or absent from the mind. That may be the hardest burden of all to carry.

Why I Want to Be a Poet

I've been writing a lot of poetry lately and have decided to start sending the stuff out. But there's a voice in my back mind which keeps droning "Why bother?," which is also saying "You won't make money at it" (true) and "What the world doesn't need is another book of poems" (true again). So why do it? The usual reasons of ego and hubris. But also something a bit more pure: a love and a thirst for language so expansive that it forces me to try to make some dent in the obdurate world I live in.

Richard Lederer, on this station, has been making a fine case for why language can provoke such fierce love. It is one of the most fascinating artifacts people have ever created (even better than sliced bread and snooze alarms). But language is not simply an artifact, multi-faceted like a diamond or sparkling like a Renoir. Without it we would be ignoble savages, unable to communicate with one another or hold counsel within our own selves; it is, in other words, the closest thing we have to a soul, to an essence, something without which we would not be who we are.

Poetry is that essence in its best voice. In the highly condensed and symbol-ridden effort that a poem is, all the clutter that characterizes most of our language interactions is cleared away so that the bones of an object or a feeling or an insight shine in all their calcium whiteness. Poetry is a sharpener of the senses, a pen-knife whittling off the woodenness that threatens so much of our daily living.

To me, the only sensible purpose in life is to live life; nothing higher than that is built into the universe. And for me "living life" means gluttonously seeing what there is to be seen. Poetry is my eyes. Writing a good poem forces me to manifest not only the atoms of the individual thing I'm seeing, but also the force-fields around it that mesh with all the other forces that make up all the other things in the world.

To write poetry I must be brutally sensitive to the web of things which catches me and defines me. To write poetry I must soak myself with the gasoline of words and then torch myself so that I can burn bright enough to see what's going on around me. Writing poetry, that act of language and fire and rope, makes me alive, makes me feel purpose in a universe that too often feels like a severe joke.

My poems won't change anything. But scribblers like me keep an edge alive against the threat of the official and the condoned. And occasionally we buzz out a phrase that sticks and brings out a smile or a thought that hadn't been there before. Not bad work for a day.

Rural

I recently finished teaching a literature class at our campus in Littleton, New Hampshire, a new class with a working title of "Rural Notions." The aim of the course was essentially to find out what the word "rural" meant in New Hampshire.

We came up with some interesting notions. (By the way, the insightfulness of these ideas is completely my students'; I'm just borrowing them for the time being.) We started out by debunking illusions, and the first to go was the usual split between "urban" and "rural." We are all urban creatures - "rural" simply describes a lesser degree of urbanization. In fact, much of what we would call "rural" in New Hampshire is possible only because there are large "urban" efforts to generate electricity, create transportation, and manufacture goods. We are all tied to the cities, even the ones we'll never visit.

Another myth that broke apart was the belief that the word "rural" actually describes any kind of specific reality. What "rural" means depends on where you are. The students came up with such splits as "comfortable rural" (living in downtown Littleton) versus "uncomfortable rural" (living in a trailer on a class 6 road); "college rural" (the move out to the land in the 60s) versus "native rural" (people born, and often stuck, there); "condo rural" versus "village rural." These dichotomies suggested other splits between different educations, family histories, economic expectations. "Rural" is not a neat word and is as sociologically tangled as a street corner in New York.

The final myth to go was the Robert Frost myth of plain sense and high living, the myth of simplicity, of honest contact with nature, of hard-nosed independence. One student, who works with rural clients, went so far as to say that "rural," for her, meant isolation and diminished self-awareness, that "rural" too often brutalized rather than uplifted. They decided that the myth of rural was a convenient smoke-screen for people with certain interests, like legislators and certain newspaper editorial writers.

They finished the course with a heightened sense of why they had made the choice to live where they are. We also learned another example of how reality always out-distances our conceptions of it, how we constantly need to be reminded that there is more for the eye to meet than our clichés and presumptions.

The North Country won't be the same for any of them again, and they won't be the same for it. They are mild conquerors in this regard, re-discoverers of the territory north of Plymouth, new settlers in old places who make the old new again.

Adult Illiteracy

What happened to the fight against adult illiteracy? People talked a lot about it last fall; now there are just a few public service announcements. Illiteracy still remains, of course, despite the lack of hoopla and federal reports. Jonathan Kozol, in *Illiterate America*, states that while the largest numbers of illiterate adults are white, native-born Americans, as a percent of population, the figures are higher for blacks and Hispanics: 44% of black and 56% of Hispanic adults are illiterate (as opposed to 16% for whites). 47% of black seventeen-year olds are illiterate.

These numbers have increased over the past two decades, and will probably increase until the end of this century. Why has this happened, and why will it continue to happen? People have authored reasons ranging from the permissiveness of the 60s to genetic inferiority, but none of these analyses approaches the real answer: Illiteracy is, for all intents and purposes, a "policy" of the capitalist society in which we live. In other words, the creation and maintenance of illiteracy in America is an intention, rather than a failure, of the capitalist system that shapes our lives.

At first this may sound crazy, a kind of Lyndon Laroucheian conspiracy. But one has to first understand the nature of the system that dominates our lives. Robert Heilbroner, in his book *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, states two characteristics that drive the capitalist system: its restless search for profit, and the powerful discipline and domination that that search for profit requires. Given that, what role would an educational system play in a capitalist society? To do as it has always done: make sure that the status quo - the search for profit - remains intact.

For at least a hundred years that status quo has required a large pool of subservient, punctual workers for marginal or dead-end jobs, a pool large enough to keep wages down. Who better than minorities to fill this bill? They are ready- made, power-less and usually despised by the rest of the society. The less time they stay in school, the more available they are to hang around and wait for whatever scraps come along. And they won't stay in school if the schools get them nowhere. Illiteracy was good for the economy.

That's all changing now, of course, in the "information age"; literacy will now be good for profit. But we mustn't forget that for a long time, and at great cost

to those who could least afford to pay, illiteracy was an intention of the system, not a failure. The usual school reforms won't work (as they haven't worked in the past) unless we take a harsh look at what our desire for profit does to certain people in this society.

The Official Language

Language always has its political dimension, as Orwell pointed out to us. Witness the New Hampshire House's recent debate on a resolution encouraging Congress to make English the official language. It brought out the usual crowd of know- nothingists, civil rights proponents, and illogical arguments, such as Rep. Ingram saying that immigrants who didn't learn English were lazy welfare cheats. This debate, to use that term loosely, has happened before in American history whenever the natives fear they're losing privileges to the "foreigners." I'm glad the resolution was later defeated in committee.

If I had my way I would draft a resolution stating that Americans should learn at least, say, three new languages during their lives, especially non-Western languages, such as Chinese and Navaho. I would do this not simply for the cultural diversity it would bring but also because of the very nature of language itself: knowing only a single language restricts us to a very narrow view of the world because, in a real sense, we can only know what that language allows us to know.

A generation ago two linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, theorized that language determined a people's culture, not the other way around. To them, people used language to divvy up the world into what the speakers of the language would then call "reality." Another way of saying this is that we can only know what we have words for, and that what we call "culture" or "reality" is a highly filtered version of the world. It is not the truth, only one possibility among many truths.

Thus English, because of how it's structured, in a sense "allows" only a certain kind of reality. For instance, because we must always have nouns activate verbs, we usually see things in terms of cause-and-effect (which is why science is so popular with Western culture). The Navaho and Hopi languages, however, are much more holistic, seeing the world as one large "verb" which is continually happening (which is why quantum physics would be better expressed in Hopi rather than English).

The upshot of all this is that the more languages we know fluently, the more we have available to us different ways of seeing the world. The more ways we see the world the less prone we might be to wanting to ravage it, or restrict it to certain select groups (such as English-speaking legislators from Acworth). Again, Orwell was right. The purpose of Newspeak, the language he created for *1984*,

was “to make all other modes of thought impossible.” With “official” English we will only be able to have “official” thoughts - that is not what liberty, and supposedly what the United States, is all about..

The Burden Of The Rich

Which class in society - upper, middle, lower, or under - does the following describe: an almost debilitating dependence on government hand-outs; an inability to defer gratification; a high incidence of family break-up; rampant addiction; high rates of crime; generation after generation locked into this cycle of disintegration and waste? All of you who answered, "Ah yes, he's describing the culture of poverty" have to stay after school. I'm talking instead about the "culture of richness," one of the most unheralded dangers we face today.

Oh, you didn't know that? A great deal of effort has been expended to keep the knowledge away from the public, but the facts are there for those willing to dig a little. Take, for instance, the inability to defer gratification. The poor are often chastised for being profligate, for buying televisions instead of suffering as they ought to for the sin of not having enough money.

But the rich far outdo the poor in this, prefer ring quarterly profits to long-term development, or speculating with amounts of money that would fund small countries for a decade. Or take family break-up. Can anything the poor offer in terms of family problems rival the 15-round bouts of the Gettys or the von Bulows or the Pulitzers (which have their witless counterparts in such drain-traps as *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*)? For promiscuity, a Kennedy or a Liz Taylor will do just fine. And in terms of gluttony the spectacle of the poor racing to get cheese and bologna may be unsettling, but not quite as much as $4,000 dinners or macadamia mousse in Ming dynasty bowls.

The time has come to face this problem squarely because it is a burden the rest of us can no longer afford. The problem is growing. *Fortune* recently reported that the number of billionaires doubled in one year. The richest 2% of American families now controls half of all personal wealth. And even as I speak the culture is being passed on from generation to generation through trust funds and annuities.

The rich will have to be weaned off the government's welfare system, such as tax breaks, subsidies, and military contracts. They will have to attend training and rehabilitation programs like "The 'Job': A Concept Whose Time Has Come." They will have to undergo extensive treatment for their addiction to waste and desire. But as we've been told again and again, problems cannot be solved simply by throwing money at them. So what we'll need to do is take their money.

We'll use it to lift those in poverty out of poverty and, at the same time, give the former rich back their souls as they learn to adjust to the bracing life of paycheck-to- paycheck.

Who will be the first to step forward and take the pledge?

English Revisited

One of my previous commentaries outlined why the movement to make English the official language of New Hampshire was misguided. My friend pointed out that I hadn't really addressed one of the main issues: why shouldn't it be the state language? That set me to thinking: what does it really mean to make a language "official"? Does anyone really know?

One test of an idea's coherence is to imagine what will happen when people act the idea out. If English were the state's official language, what would be some of the consequences? Perhaps a better way of stating this is, What would be permitted and not permitted? Would there be laws, for instance, banning signs in any language other than English? (Would St. Mary's Bank have to take down its French nameplate?) Would ethnic organizations be allowed, such as the French-Canadian association in Manchester? If they were, could they conduct their business in French? How would the teaching of foreign languages in school be affected? Foreign language publications? These questions can be multiplied almost infinitely.

The issue of permission also raises issues about monitoring. France has an Academy which aims to keep French pure. Would we have one, too, the APE (Academy for the Preservation of English), with possibly a "Language Police" having the power to give people "poetic licenses"? What, then, would be the penalties for not using English? In short, in what ways would people's constitutional rights be abridged by making English the official language? (For instance, would it be right to disenfranchise thousands of Hispanic voters who are also American citizens because ballots and voting instructions would not be printed in Spanish?)

But perhaps the question most difficult to answer is, Which English are we talking about? People who propose that English be made official presume that English can also be made standard. But people are not united on what constitutes a "standard" English.

An amazing mix of Englishes abound in our country, and what emanates from Washington and New York is only one, and usually the blandest, of many dialects. And language changes constantly; the "standard" English of today won't necessarily be the "standard" English tomorrow. Proponents of an official English have no clear idea of what language they want to enshrine.

The real question here should be what makes for literacy, not what makes for Americanness; action should be for education, not for the nativist conceit of an official language. What we need is more compassionate concern for the quality of life of all people in this country, not more lines which separate and deny; fewer references to bootstraps and more to collective successes.

Spring

Full spring will soon be here. The air will lose its sting and edge, soften into a gauzy flair that hangs, like Spanish moss, from branches, phone lines, the eaves of garages. Spring brings water to the dry sponges of our bodies, filling out what has been made arid during winter. This restorative tonic of spring is what poets celebrate when they write their paeans to the season, what Longfellow called the "wonder and expectation in all hearts."

But much of what we think as actual "spring" is really the end of spring, its final report, the crescendos of the fourth movement, not the delicate allegro of the first. By the time we notice spring's beauty and fizz it's over, and something we had hankered for since the thick storms of January has once again passed us by. Despite our good resolutions to pay attention, we stay so busy with the other matters of getting our living that spring sort of sifts in like a fine dust that accumulates quietly until with great surprise we suddenly find it thick enough to write our names in and wonder where it all came from.

George Santayana had, I think, a better notion. "To be interested in the changing seasons" he said "is...a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with Spring." Prior to what we think is spring are a few "sub-seasons" of spring, and to be interested in these is to learn how to appreciate the yeasty conclusion we rise to in April. e.e. cummings named one "just- spring," when the world was mudluscious and puddlewonderful. I like the small season right before "just-spring," when the world is melting and the air can still carry an electric charge of sharp chill.

I find this usually on my first bike ride. The scabrous snow, darkened and more salt than water, is running away through the culverts and down the cloughs. The vowels of loosened water mix with the hiss of the tires on the road, the slur of the chain over the sprockets. In the sunlight I can feel the advent of August, but in patches of shade lingers a cool vagrant who steals my sweat and makes my skin perk and dance. I like best this prickly interregnum between the harsh edge of March's ending and the opening sultry drawl of April's yawn.

There are other small seasons in spring if you think about them. It's important to notice them and not let them be swamped by the official induction ceremonies granted to March 21 and Hallmark cards. Too often we want to move quickly from what we don't like to something we think we want, and we wash over all the odd quirky bits of time and space that could give not only momentary

plea-sure but also a more lenient and durable fullness to our lives. There is a season, as the Preacher says, and it would be good to add as many seasons to his list as we can.

Just Say Yes

Just say no" seems to be the new "Thou shalt not," at least as it's applied to adolescents. I agree with its intention: to get adolescents not to choose things now which will prevent them from freely making choices later. But "just say no" has a severe handicap as moral advice because it can't provide a strong guide for the experimental curiosity that both afflicts and enriches adolescence. It can never answer the questions "Why?" and "Why not?" because, in the end, "Just say no" is simply a societal version of the parent's end-all, "Because I said so."

But simple obedience to an outside authority will never produce a moral life. To me it's truer to say that only by struggling with "why" can an individual earn the authority to make moral choices. Only a vigorous struggle with temptation and the world's imperfections can create the skill and self- discipline needed to produce the goodness we equate with a moral life.

Struggling with "why" means that at some point the individual, in one way or another, must give an individual assent, an individual "yes," to whatever code he or she will follow if that code is to exert personal force and depth. How to say that "yes" is what we should be teaching adolescents.

To say "yes," adolescents first need to love themselves, and they can do this only if they feel their lives have meaning in the larger scheme of things. There is so much in our culture that doesn't permit a strong, healthy self-love for adolescents. They have much to stimulate and push them around but very little in the larger society which asks them to risk themselves, which asks them to be trusted and responsible individuals. I'm not sure how that love can be nurtured. But I know that without it, saying "yes" (and therefore also being able to say "no") will be impossible because, unable to love themselves, they will be unable to love much of anything outside themselves.

What values prompt this love? I would recast the question: What process prompts this love? How do people learn to find value in anything (which is only another way of saying "to find love")? And the answer, to me at least, is self-evident: free and open argument about all values, even ones we find abhorrent. It's only in such give-and-take that adolescents will come to find that they have minds they can sharpen, something they will not find if they are cathechized. And in finding they have sharp minds that can make discriminations, they will begin to trust themselves more. And in that self-trust they will find those values which

will enhance their love for life and the lives of others, and make choices that will preserve rather than destroy.

Adolescents need more than "no." What kind of "Just say yes" campaign can we run?

In Praise of Pleasure

Pleasure has been bad-mouthed a lot lately, what with AIDS, drug-free Nancy Reagan, MADD and SADD, and the growing list of organizations ending in "Anonymous." I don't want to minimize the destruction caused by any addiction. But in the midst of all this sudden, and righteous, love for sobriety I would like to praise pleasure, lest we for-get, in our zeal for purity and safety, an important premise in the argument for being alive.

It may be difficult to accept this in 1987, but drugs and sex were once thought to be the agents of liberation, not repression. Pleasure was seen as a good rather than an evil because it allowed individuals to escape, if only momentarily, the sometimes repressive social morality around them. Pleasure and its pursuit, and the liberated mentality it encouraged, were often set in opposition to hypocrisy and conformity. In this sense, plea-sure nurtured freedom, not threatened it.

Why should pleasure now be thought dangerous, even evil? There are many tangled reasons for this, but one of them is an old one, going back all the way to the roots of our national history. Many people erroneously assume that diseases like AIDS and alcohol-ism, phenomena like teenage pregnancy and even obesity, are the results of a kind of unbridled lust that must be rooted out and, if not destroyed, taxed so heavily it won't ever dare reappear. The only proper response to extremes, people think, is rigorous abstinence, with-out understanding that the search for purity is itself an extreme that may be harmful because it breeds intolerance and self-righteousness.

But untrammeled indulgence is not the same as pleasure. While promiscuity may bring pleasurable feelings, it's lack of discrimination really tends more toward self-destruction than sublimity. Pleasure is not found in any particular action but in the attitude one has when doing that action, and that attitude, ultimately, has to enhance life's goodness rather than obscure or delete it. Real pleasure needs and uses self-discipline and moderation. But more importantly, real pleasure comes from an acceptance and love of those desires that all humans have for comfort, ease, escape, challenge, sex, good food, laughter, freedom. To deny these urges through ascetic extremism or government fiat is to purge humans of their humanness by making them good without making them thoughtful.

We need to remember an important distinction: not everyone who drinks is a drunk, not everyone who smokes marijuana is an addict, not everyone who

reads Hustler is a deviate. We need to spend less time purging and more time teaching ourselves how to make the choices that will enhance our pleasures and make them our servants. We need not be so afraid of ourselves.

What We Do To One Another

Life is a pain in the arrears" a friend of mind once punned, and I think of that line as I watch my fellow humans go about this debit-and-credit business called living. I can never quite figure out why we survive as a species. Everyone knows deep in their pith that life makes sense only because we have to be connected to one another. Yet we work like demented brick layers to wall off the milk of human kindness until it evaporates. I'm not speaking here about racism or religion or any large social or historical perversions. I'm thinking more about those small daily erosions we practice on one another, those little jibes and incisions that fracture our compassion, leave us in a sweat of meanness.

The other day I was hanging around the shopping plaza across the street from where I live. A family comes to shop there often, a mother with three children. The children are probably five, eight, and twelve. They are always in perpetual argument. I watch them come across the parking lot, the mother tugging one or the other child forward, the oldest tagging along just outside arm's reach. From a distance it's a mime of quarrel, everyone mouthing at one another. Within earshot their barbs and accusations rope them together like mountain climbers.

This seems to be their normal manner. But one day, as they were making their way home from Woolworth's, the eight-year old was bumping into the mother when, quite by accident, their feet tangled and the child fell down. The mother walked on, yelling over her shoulder for the child to hurry up. The child just laid on the asphalt and cried. The mother continued; the oldest child kept to herself; the youngest one dawdled on the edges.

The child finally picked herself up, but instead of walking along, she stood there and worked herself into an ictus of rage. I could see it clearly from where I stood: her shoulders tensed, her body contracted, and though I couldn't see her face I imagined it twisted and cannibalized, skewed by her vaulting anger. The mother ignored her, as did the other children; the child eventually gave up and followed.

We can be so mean, so careless with one another's lives. We can mortar-and-pestle love until it has no scent or taste or body. We can end up spending our lives in a vigor of revenge, putting one another into arrears because others in our lives have used our flesh for their own profit. We can also be kind; this butchery is not ordained. But most of the time, it seems, we want to squander one another, death by inches preferable to kinder, more patient lengths.

I see the quartet disappear down the block, knowing the child's ledger is already started, already full.

Smoking

The recent action by many New Hampshire businesses and agencies to limit where and when people may smoke angers many of my smoking friends. They feel discriminated against, that their "rights" as smokers have been denied. But is that true? Do smokers have rights? The more I think about it, the more I think they don't, at least in regard to smoking where non-smokers are.

Smokers have a "right" to smoke, in that no majority, even if it believes it has truth on its side, can take away their tobacco by statute. If some sort of Volstead Act were passed tomorrow, I would oppose its tyrannous intent, not out of love for smoking but out of a love for freedom, both the freedom to do what one desires and the freedom to be unharassed for doing it.

But this protection from majoritarian bullying is not the same thing as a carte blanche to smoke whenever and wherever one wants, for at least two reasons. First, tobacco is a dangerous substance, and our society has always found it necessary, and in keeping with democratic norms, to regulate threats to the public health. Enough research has been done by the Surgeon General's office and other independent agencies to confirm the damage caused by smoking to its users and to others in the smoker's presence. To regulate such a well-documented danger does not deny Constitutional rights, any more than inspecting beef abrogates a butcher's "right" to sell contaminated meat.

Second, while smokers, as citizens, enjoy the right not to have a majority view imposed on them, they do not have right to impose their habit on others. This is not to say that smokers must be treated like pariahs, shunted off to a closet somewhere in the bowels of the building. Smokers have the right to a clean well-lighted place for their smoking area, but it's also clear that they should have a smoking area off by themselves. Smoking may be a private act, but when there is a non-smoker in the area, it then becomes a public act and different rules come into play. We follow a similar tack in dealing with DWI: no government can tell an individual not to drink, but when the private act of drinking mixes with the public act of driving a car, then alcohol is no longer a private matter.

I wish people who smoked didn't. But they do. Given that, two sets of rights need to be satisfied: the smoker's right to smoke and the non-smoker's right to be free of the smoker's habit.

Designated smoking areas are the best solution, along with offers by the agency or company to help to break the habit. But there are places, like the Mall, which can't be policed so easily - here, politeness may have to hold sway instead of legislation. Can Americans be that polite and self-restrained? That's grist for another commentary.

Graduations

It is the season for graduations, and I have to admit that even I, the dedicated spoofer of traditions, get a bit touched by the pomp of circumstance in a graduation ceremony. But why are people are willing to dress up in funny robes and hats, sit in stuffy rooms, listen to mostly predictable speeches, endure agonizing hours of read-off names and shuffling movement, for that small moment when they walk alone across the stage to receive their diploma? What is at the heart of a graduation ceremony? What is it that tedium and bombast cannot kill off?

I once gave a speech at a high school commencement, and I admit to giving in to the temptation for sound and flurry. But I think I understand why I did that. Americans have few ceremonies in their lives. This is an historical choice we made as a democratic nation, but I think the nation sometimes regrets that necessity. We fill in wherever we can: the national anthem at baseball games, a gush over foreign royalty. And our graduations. At a graduation we can dress up in robes and hats that have an ancient lineage (even if we don't know what that lineage is), wear colors that signify status and place, hear formulaic phrases with their assured pentameter, be laved by music.

But it's more than just a hunger for ceremony in general. It's a hunger for ceremonies of transition, some demarcation between the dependence of yesterday and the independence of tomorrow. Graduations are the most public reminders we have that an important change has taken place, something significant that should be paid attention to. Graduations are the last refuge of a generational handing-on, a place where the elders can have the last word and the youngers can have their first. In many ways graduations are a stylized parenting, a formal presentation of how families ought to work.

But there's also a more radical element here, something I wish would get more play at graduations. The elders have moved on. It's time for the youngers to get done what the elders did not, to seize the world and try to rectify what the elders have done to it. Too often the "transition-into-adulthood" theme of graduations is limited to telling students that they should be like their elders. The opposite should be said: Don't be like your elders. Be different and proud of the difference. Push for more change, more justice. Don't get old and safe too quickly.

After all, if the students are simply being asked to be like their elders, then there's really no graduation at all, only a renewal of the current subscription. As Thoreau said in another context, "Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new."

That's my graduation speech; now on to the parties!!

A Quiet Of Breathing

I've been taking a class this summer at a local college. One day, when I arrived for class, I found it had been cancelled - and suddenly two hours were mine that I hadn't had before. I spent a little time at the library going through periodicals I never get a chance to see, and then walked over to the chapel.

Being a person of no religious faith never stops me from visiting churches. I like churches because they are one of the last places where a person can find quiet in unminted abundance. I sat myself in one of the pews - and just sat. I was the only person there. I didn't bother to think or muse, didn't bother to figure out or plan; I just sat in the comfortable silence resident in that vaulted and dusky space.

It's an odd experience to be quiet, to be just quiet and nothing else. Away from the thousand truces that give an edge to getting along I could hear myself breathe. Have you heard yourself breathe lately? Have you felt yourself breathe lately? A splendid soothing action, this gentle bellows, this lithe accordion. To hear the precise inhale, the languorous exhale, to feel the ribs pulse, the shoulders lift and fall, to know the jointed rhythm of a body breathing full and even - all this is to be suddenly conscious of what you take for granted, to know the ordinary by being forced out of the routine. The wonders of the world lie in such unplanned quiet eruptions of notice.

So I sat and breathed, inspired, for the moment in a delicate aside from time. Four nuns came in for prayer, three in white, one in black; two janitors came through kicking up the kneelers left down from that morning's mass. Occasionally there were creaks and crinches from the building itself - the expansion or contraction of a pane of glass, one brick settling against another, as if the building breathed as well, using air borrowed from whispered responses or susurrations of faith. But soon it was time to go, back to the indenture of the world, out to its dice and splendor.

Transcendental Meditation followers used to say that if you were too busy to meditate, you were too busy. Thoreau said the same thing in a different way: "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" I would like to think that such occasional silences might provide answers, that such respites could occasionally offer truths.

But I also suspect that there is just breathing, and that breathing may be the only truth we have because when it stops, truth stops as well. We can breathe full, we can breathe shallow, we can modulate it or ignore it - but we can't avoid it. We need to figure out what makes us breathe the best, and then breathe as if our lives depended on it.

Friendship

Soon a good friend of mine will be leaving. Supposedly Hallmark, or *Bartlett's Quotations*, has words for any occasion. But not really something for this, not anything that can grab the particulars of the loss and hope I have for him. This, then, is my clumsy attempt at a tribute, words not only to thank him but also to deal with the coming fact of his absence.

I don't want to put too much of a dark point on this. I will still be visiting him in Florida, speaking with him on the phone, writing him letters, using the means around me to keep meaning in our friendship. But a dailyness of contact will be missing. The most enjoyable part of my day was sitting and talking with him in the morning before we started work. We would range from his son's baseball game and observations about ambitious Little League parents to the latest work being done on neutrinos. We would share books and debate them, share gossip and add to it.

There was nothing large or grand in this; or, rather, any grandness came from an intimacy slowly built from casual increments, small bits of news from the provinces adding up to a textured dimensioned chronicle of knowing each other. I will miss these daily reports, miss binding them together.

I suppose I could go on in this fashion, listing the things I will miss. Yet there are lauds here to be given, and I will give them the best I can. He is a kind man, fiercely loyal to his friends. He is one of the few people I've met I would consider a thinker, one who synthesizes rather than simply rearranges data. He has a strong gift of integrity. He hates injustice and stupidity, hates the arrogant pettiness of certain kinds of authority; but he is also one of the most casual moralists I have ever met, willing to let people pursue their ambitions and live the lives they want to live.

He carries a fine insouciance with him, a joy of living that comes from a true belief that you can't take it with you. He provides well for his family, never scants their needs, but is self-indulgent without guilt, unburdened by the puritan ethic of saving-for-the-rainy- day-that-never-comes; to him, it rains quite often. He is a wonderful raconteur, brash and full-blown, and an excellent poet. He sports a sense of humor both wry and wicked, as easily displayed in a savage lampoon as in the casual dirty joke. He is, in short (for I could go on longer), one of the fullest human beings I have met, clearly alive to life and the world.

I will miss him, and it will hurt to miss him. There are no good quotes or cards to cover this occasion, partly because there is, really, no such thing as friendship in the abstract, only what occurs between people knowing each other. It has been good to know him.

Street People

Every day, as part of my job, I have to make a deposit at the bank. I walk from Lowell Street down to Hanover, duly give money to Amoskeag, and then walk back. Because I usually go around lunchtime, I begin to know the prandial routines of strangers: the same workers head for the hot-dog carts in front of Hampshire Plaza, the same entrepreneurs head for the Atrium, the same secretaries head for Friendly's.

But there's a substratum of people along this promenade between Lowell and Hanover who are not part of the well-dressed, middle- to lower-managerial cadre going out for lunch. They are just as regular as the rest of us, just as routinized about their time and place, but they're usually not very noticed, or, if they are, are usually dismissed quickly by the eye. Some of them are teenagers near the arcade, what we used to call "outies" in high school: longish hair, Ozzy Osborne tee-shirts, cigarettes, make- up that's too heavy. Some are elderly women, who all seem to have enormous purses and who pass from shop to shop making visits and sometimes purchases.

There are elderly men as well, but they are usually more sedentary, small pods of them circling a suite of benches under a tree, always talking. There are the street cleaners with their trashcans on wheels and dust pans with flipper mouths picking up the debris of everyone's passing.

And then there are the people who baffle me because I can't imagine what their lives are like. They inhabit nearly the same places every day, often along the ledge and bus stop outside the bank. Though they're frowzily dressed for the most part, rough- edged, they're not what most of us would think of as "street people." (Those are just waking up in the park near the library.) If there are classes of street people, they are a rung or two above where the ladder rests, not homeless, not destitute, marginal but not completely dissolved.

Certain boosters yearn for Manchester to become the northern anchor of the eastern seaboard banking industry. But the people who line my walk are a pulse of city life not included in the official tempo of revitalization. Yet they're important, not just because they're human beings, but because they prompt us to remember what we shouldn't forget to feel. They're hanging on in a city trying hard to change itself away from them, struggling to maintain balance in the pitch and yaw of development. They warn us away from the seductive unvital efficiency

that a city eager to be gentrified can come to, away from an architecture and mind set feudal in design and purpose.

Manchester shouldn't put too fine a face on itself too quickly, lest it erase character lines worth watching, wrinkles full of reminder and premise.

Commentaries

I've written and broadcast almost thirty commentaries so far, and I hope to keep doing them for a long time. Aside from my poetry, they've proven to be some of the toughest composing I've had to do. In fact, the commentary has, for me, become a kind of poem, a concentrated language in a small space.

The premiere requirement of a commentary is that the commentator have something to say. This may seem self-evident, but it's not always true that a commentator who speaks is a commentator who says something. I'm thinking especially of those hired commentators for the network news programs, or the self- appointed howlers on The McLaughlin Group. They appear to be saying something but what they're often really doing is posturing and harrumphing, soaking the air with bombast or annoyance.

But I commiserate with them a little; it's not easy to always say something. For me, having something to say means offering a thought that is, in some way, different than the received opinion floating in the air. If I write about spring, I want to avoid the usual Hallmark puffery about it. Instead I want to explore the various "springs" between March and May (and pun like mad on the word).

If I write about living in the country, I don't want to give the usual paean to the simple life; I want to concentrate on the costs of living away from the many amenities of civilization. In short, I look for a new way of seeing what is often taken for granted by our eyes and our minds.

But this "angle" is severely limited by one constraint: time. In two-and-a-half minutes I have to say something intelligent, and say it in a way that is clear and direct. Like any writer I love to gab, love the sound of my own voice making it-self. But in a commentary there's no room for meandering. I spend two to three hours composing a commentary, the bulk of that time deleting words so that it can make weight.

But for me a magical thing happens when I do such cut-throat editing: I find out what it is I really want to say, as opposed to what my voice thought it was saying as it went around posturing and harrumphing. I find that phrases, even whole paragraphs, I thought non-negotiable disappear as I refine away the fat hiding the lean thought. "Having something to say," then, does not always come at the beginning; it sometimes only appears after deliberation, struggle, waiting, decision.

I suppose after all is said that that is what I want people to get from my commentaries: a sense of someone thinking something out in a deliberate effort to see in a new, or at least different, light. Perhaps, then, what I write are not commentaries but "visionaries," propositions about seeing the world with fresh eyes. I like that better; after all, what other purpose in the world does a poet have?

Children

I've had the opportunity lately (some might say the misfortune) to spend time with two young children, ages 7 and 5. I've learned from these children, and I don't they're unrepresentative, that the world children inhabit is a strange one, not unfriendly or inaccessible, but limited and, in its own way, difficult.

I say this because many adults suffer from J.D. Salinger's near-deification of imagined childhood simplicity and truthfulness. A child's mind is not a perfect parabolic mirror focusing more clearly on essentials than our own adult fun-house mirrors. Their minds are as muddled as any adult's, in part because they lack a certain level of analytical distance from their own concerns. (So do many adults, but that's another story.) And they can deceive themselves with even more facility than adults because they're already enmeshed in a stream-of- consciousness that sometimes bears only a tangential connection to the material world around them. To be sure, children can often portray truths in an indirect or fabulisitic way. But this seems to me a hit-or-miss proposition a lot of times, and they can as easily imagine themselves into a false as a true perception.

Children are also not innocent, if by innocent we mean a certain unadulterated goodness, beauty, and truth. Children, at least these children, come nowhere near that standard. Instead of Rousseau's noble savages they more closely approximate Hobbes' state of nature. They fight and bicker almost constantly, usually about who gets what of something - candy, gum, the back seat of the car. The older child continually refines her despotical talents on the younger; the younger, in turn, sharpens her rebellious strategies. They often act like two harridans on a tear, as egomaniacal, greedy, and omnivorous as any Mussolini.

It's important to see that children are not proto-adults and not paragons of lost Edens. They're struggling toward a self- definition that goes beyond solipsism, and at the same time are struggling to hold on to the carelessness that is the right of childhood. And sometimes adults are irrelevant to this process, like the Greek deities, powerful annoyances that must be tolerated.

Children inhabit a world very much their own, a world plastic and obdurate at the same time, full of wants and battles most of us have forgotten about or resolved or given up on. As Emerson said, "children are aliens," and, as he advised, perhaps we would be better off treating them as such, with a patient

curiosity that would not tend to anger when we become confused or thwarted by their self-centered impulses. Perhaps then there would be fewer battered, and more better-understood, children.

Work

This past Labor Day I got to thinking about work. What is this thing we do most of the hours of our days, this activity that takes up more time than sleep, sex, eating, reading, or, for that matter, living? Thoreau thought it an infinite peonage, a pin in the balloon of the ideal that let fly the soul's best and only breath. I think I would have to agree with him. While some work can be pleasant, some of it liberating and creative, by and large the work that most of us have to do is simply cultivating another man's vineyard. This is at best an agreeable annoyance, at worst an unvalved siphon draining our best parts out for occasional profit.

Some distinctions, though. What I mean by "work" is wage employment, the category most of us find ourselves in. I draw a line between "work" in this sense and "labor," which I see in the way Marx saw it, as a generative transforming activity, turning the stuff of the earth into comforts and sustenance. Humans have always had to labor, but it's our particular capitalist-era legacy to have the privilege of working to make money for others.

True, the "wage" is supposedly our profit, our share of the pie we bake for the owner. But somehow the slices of pie most of us bring home have little filling and don't stretch between too many mouths. So we have to go bake some more so we can bring home less which forces us back out to bake some more so that we can bring home less, and so on like fleas upon fleas' backs.

This is not labor but work, a kind of slavery, as Marx saw it, and a slavery in which we are supposed to ground our dignity and by which we are supposed to measure our success. But slaves don't have dignity and slaves are never successful.

Are there different kinds of work than the ones we have to bear, different ways of distributing the benefits of labor? Of course there are. But such "re-workings" (pardon the pun) often fail because the protracted catechism we all absorb in school and home tells us we should obey the ethic of wages and perpetual indenture. And we do obey it, tailoring much of our self- congratulation and depth of purpose to how much our jobs allow us to be who we think we are. Service to this ethic freezes our sense of perspective, and we literally can't get out of our own way.

We all have hints of how minimizing and noose-like work is, and we want to break free of it. But we don't know how. Perhaps next Labor Day we should talk less about the "dignity" of work and more about how this "work" locks most of us down, keeping us too unsure to buck the tide and too tired to be well-informed. Now, to my mind, that would be work worth doing, labor-intensive, with clarity as profit and a wage of understanding.

Autumn

How quickly this time goes. Just beyond the edge of daily memos and the duress of circumstance, carbonating our routines, is this tonic air and pervious light of autumn. It burns off summer's humid residue from the blood, leavens the air with chilly jazz. The eyes become a smeared palette of primaries, thick impasto at the edges of sight, vision Monet-like in apprehension and dissolve. The bones ratchet with less grind, even hair loses its amnesia. The body for a moment bumps up against life and the two dance extravagant mazurkas, wicked tangos.

How quickly this time goes. John Gardner, in his book *October Light*, talks about "locking time," that slow deliquesce of heat from the earth that turns soil to iron, air to knives, sky to fist. One of the characters talks about how locking time is always a surprise. The prelude is full of light and zip: leaves drained down to reds and yellows, Macintosh apples ballooned with sweetness, the corn chopped down, the hay taxed into bales and collected.

Even veterans fool themselves into believing that this swell and tumble of abundance can survive the lapse of the earth around the sun. And then one morning frost rimes the window corners, thin ice bolts across shallow water. Locking time has started; before long the world will think in parsimony, everything, as the singer Lui Collins puts it, "hung in suspension awaiting the snow."

How quickly this time goes. Every year I promise myself to travel to every apple orchard, stand of raspberry canes, and corn-field I can to splurge in the ripe muchness that reports from the land. Every year I promise myself a pilgrim-age and every year I side-journey somewhere else, usually too busied with making a living to actually live.

And then I feel my own locking time, feel the mud of my guts turn to hardpan and the sap rescind its sweetness. And I know I've missed it again, failed to make my imagination press some quickening cider from the time, can some preserves against the January lees. Next year, I say, next year, knowing there are fewer years each year I can say that.

Perhaps this is too dour. There is spring in this fall as well. Autumn makes us slough off summer's Eden, reminds us that even locking time, even the cold rind of February, even this season of our own mortal thoughts can be a season for living. Autumn tells us that the thing is to live at all, to get some even as the

much slips away, and grasp that some as if all life, like the red wheelbarrow, depended on it.

This is an invigorating desperation, calling us to rise and leave Paradise. No Pascal's wager on this one; all we can do is breathe deep, look hard, and keep the furnaces stoked.

Work Revisited

I recently resigned my job in order to see what it was like not to work for a while. In my journal about this "experiment," I've repeatedly tripped across that venerable phrase, the "work ethic." I think I've discovered two ethics, one social, one part of our nature. And they are not necessarily the same thing.

The term "work ethic" originally had a religious source, coming out of the Protestants' belief that one could worship Mammon for the greater glory of God. When the religious aspect died out, people used the free market to justify laying up treasure, and accumulating wealth became supposedly the best protection democracy had. That democracy has been wealth's first victim is patently clear, but the work ethic is used to smooth this truth over, a kind of fraud built in to keep the masses making some people richer than they need to be while convincing them that such behavior is for their own good.

But such propaganda wouldn't keep people getting up in the morning if there wasn't something in people that really wants to work, something that wants to "make good." It's a work ethic that comes out of people's inner desires to express their creativity, an internal drive to accomplish something worthwhile.

Lately I've been reading a number of books about the alienation many workers feel about their jobs. Why should this be so? I think it's because of the incompatibility of the social work ethic and the individual work ethic. The social work ethic can only be effective if it makes people conform to the exploitative nature of the system.

This directly contravenes the individual work ethic. Where the social work ethic demands control, the individual work ethic demands liberty. But the individual work ethic simply doesn't have the power to displace the social work ethic, and workers must make do with whatever they can get. But imagine an economic system which made the elements of the individual work ethic, with its emphasis on creativity and judgment, the guide for the system. That would be good.

Is the work ethic in decline? Certainly in the social work ethic. If the social work ethic is weakening, its downslide is ironically caused by its successfully having convinced people to give over their best parts to the economic system. Some of these best parts no longer want to be given over; thus, we see a "decline"

in the ethic, which really is a loosening of its grip on our lives. And this, too, is good because such resistance might lead to more humanity in the system.

There's a bumper sticker which says "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go." Wouldn't it be better if we could say "I grow, I grow, it's off to work I go"?

Addiction

I recently finished an article for a local publication about chemical dependency among New Hampshire professionals. So I was more than mildly interested in the unseemly overheated reaction by politicians and the press to Douglas Ginsberg's admission to having taken a toke in his time. People spoke as if he belonged on the Group W bench in Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant*. I found this response at best amnesiac, at worst just plain hypocritical. Whatever damage has been caused by marijuana and cocaine is miniscule compared to the damage inflicted by alcohol and nicotine, two of our premiere addictive drugs. Alcohol is responsible for 100,000 deaths a year, nicotine for 300,000. In contrast, deaths related to cocaine in 1986 about equaled the number of people who died from appendicitis.

It's true that America has a drug problem: Americans consume 60% of the world's production of illegal drugs, and that can't happen without some adverse affects. But our reaction to the drug problem, as Abby Hoffman points out in his new book *Steal This Urine Test*, is worse than the problem itself because it leads to illusion and misinformation, as well as ineffectual law enforcement. If we're going to effectively deal with the abuse of drugs, then we need to see clearly the source of the demand. Only then will we have an enlightened attitude toward what many people obviously like to do with their bodies.

Drug addiction in our country is not caused primarily by moral failure or psychological breakdown, though these have their place in addiction's etiology. Instead, drug addiction is an outgrowth of the cultural, economic, and political system we've chosen for ourselves. Capitalist culture exists for one purpose: to foster addictions - to consumption, to debt, to expectation and fulfillment; in short, capitalist culture ceases to exist if it cannot create a slavishness to appetite. Drugs fit neatly into this imperative, appeasing not only the drive to consume and possess but also the alienation that comes when possessing falls short of satisfaction.

Interdicting drugs won't stop the demand for them, and "Just Say No" ignores the economic maxim to say Yes as often as possible. The drug problem can only begin to be solved when the capitalist problem begins to be solved. But every society has its sanctioned addictions. The high season for ours begins soon. Watch how the addiction machine gets up to speed between now and January 1st. It's a sobering spectacle, all those consumers compelled to buy,

walking around in a monetary daze, driven and half-mad; yet we celebrate this and call it productive. Somehow this is okay.

Somehow this is not okay.

Endings

I recently saw a dance choreographed to a piece of music by Philip Glass, a composer called "minimalist" for the scaled-down, narrow-toned, repetitive pattern of his work. The music got me to thinking because it presents a unique problem: how will it end? The music's obligation to a kind of free verse means that it can only build its coherence as it goes: the end is not in the beginning. It doesn't wrap any-thing up: it comes to a termination rather than a signature.

This can be disturbing, and a little frightening, because it violates our expectations about proper endings. We like endings that convince us that life can be tidied into a coherent, or at least consolidated, whole. We like fourth movements pitched to finality, like Beethoven's Ninth, where he makes a universe of our ears by braiding the music and chorus into an uprush of truth: we are lifted by the simple fact of our presence.

But Beethoven's way of ending should disturb us as much as Glass', though for different reasons. The uplift is not really "inside" life, moving in subterranean tempos, ready to be simply unearthed by the maker's genius. Beethoven distilled it from his brain as an act of will, of defiance. Life, being one damn thing after another, doesn't contain that levitated clarity, that sweet vision, that disarming promise that no thorns burden our eyes.

We become annoyed when our bluff is called, as it is with Glass' music, where the end never comes and we are refused our genteel affiliation. Glass' music reminds us, like a shard of ice in the ear, that living is really a series of endings lapsing one into the other, patterns finishing and blending into other patterns like the scales on the serpent that eats its own tail.

There's an enormous variety of endings in this music, some severe, some no more than a touch of dust on the eyelids. But they all have in common a straitened rhythm of dissolve that is like the jerky arabesques of a man falling off a cliff: at the cliff edge is exhilaration, on the rocks is abrupt anonymity, and in between is the ambivalent nourishment of air rushing away.

We always struggle for purpose in all this, but can never forget that purpose is the effort to do magic in front of stones. Endings are our guardian angels; they haunt us even as they define us, and they define us by haunting us. We carry our endings like an extra set of retinas, eyes behind eyes, interpretive optics that filter out the mirage of cause-and- effect, sharpen the focus of that initial

exhilaration, the mute rocks. As the poet Galway Kinnell says, we must always listen to the "finished music of our breath," chased into knowledge and darkness by the convention of endings that we are.

Christmas Passed Up

As soon as the carny barker's voice calls us all to ride the carousel of Christmas spending, I begin to hear on the radio and television how the "spirit of Christmas" is being debased, how much better it was when people didn't have credit cards. Well, I have a solution to the dilemma of the buyers in the Temple.

Imagine the havoc that would ensue if we really believed in the "spirit of Christmas." Let's say that in response to the Pavlovian bell-ringing of Christmas carols before Thanksgiving and circulars for midnight shopping at Zayre's, people decided to save their money and make their own gifts. "No," one mother says, "I refuse to buy the $100 doll with its $200 wardrobe. I am going to make soap and bread and jam and put up baskets for everyone."

Imagine the loud brittle clicking of thousands of knitting needles making sweaters.

Imagine the whine of table saws biting through pine boards for that doll house or cradle or knick-knack shelf.

Let's say in general that people took raw materials and transformed them instead of buying finished goods at the Mall. Let's go even further and say that people made their own cards and didn't bother with wrapping paper (they used the Sunday comics instead), and only made gifts for the immediate family, preferring instead to send some of those home-made cards to the peripheral members. What do you think would happen?

The wailing and gnashing of business people would fill the air waves. We would be exhorted to do our Christmas duty and buy, we'd be bombarded with patriotism, Santas wrapped in tri-color bunting. Our capitalist system would go awry, all because people decided several things: first, to save their money rather than dig a deeper debt for themselves; second, to give gifts that had something of themselves woven into them; third, to really believe that "giving" is not the same as "handing over."

I think that what people try to retrieve when they talk about the "spirit of Christmas" is something fine inside them-selves that they can spend without looking for profit. Most of the year we struggle in the jungle to strengthen the privateness of our property. That can be a minimizing ordeal, turning us into units, individuals without umbilicals. At least once a year we officially get to be

better than ourselves, to revive our communal natures, and people rush to do it. Unfortunately, commercial blather side-tracks people into thinking that buying gifts is the same as being better, and we end up with our usual green Christmas.

I agree, I think we should return to the spirit of Christmas. People, save your money as well as your peace of mind. Don't buy gifts, make them, and give yourselves a chance the feel the tug of your finer natures.

Miami

A good friend of mine has a hypothesis that climate is what causes people to be what they are. I recently visited him in Miami and had a chance to test his hypothesis against my own boosterism for the New England winter. Much to my surprise I found myself changed, less fond of winter, more drawn to the even luxury of a mild and seductive climate. For the short time I was there I lost the tension between opposites we call "virtue" in New England, and it felt good.

Miami has an ocean that is not a New Hampshire ocean at all. Rarely disturbed by waves because of its coral latticework of reefs, its pastel colors have a kind of lambency to them: the clear sandy bottoms glimmer up through an aquamarine as deft and bubbled as fine Venetian glass. This is an ocean that will not harm you; it will only give you soothe and calm. And people who live near it and on it pick up these qualities, easy-going and seemingly unflustered by the darker troublesome questions in life.

The ocean is full of food that can be brought up as easily as the desire to catch it, and a person can eat that night the sweet flesh that was swimming unhindered during the day. Such delicate immediacy, such soft-hearted disregard for the future. And the sun!! It rained for a few days while I was there, but when the sun came out it was like a kiss on a scraped knee. The sun was like a vitamin, soaking through the pores into blood, leaching out accumulated fatigue.

All of this threw me, the committed Thoreauvian, into confusion. Suddenly my body didn't believe in the supposedly clarifying rigors of snow and ice and chopped wood. It gave itself over easily to ocean and the sun. I began to take on some of that sliding ease, that casual indifference to the struggle to make meaning. I liked drifting through the currents, full of nothing more substantial than gesture and arabesque.

The success of my friend's hypothesis made me wonder where the roots of character really reside. But I know I have to go back to Miami in December, back to that lightened sense of living. I love the spare beauty of a New Hampshire winter as much as anyone, but we need relief from this long season of mortality, some salutary amnesia about that dark ocean breaking on the frozen beach.

We have to remember that there is no virtue in being cold. Miami's ocean in December is the pre-apple Eden; our ocean is post-nibble. I found in the easy

brilliance of that easy ocean a recall to health and optimism. But it's difficult to export that feeling back to this weather full of necessity and overcoats. My internal climate has changed, now full of mauve water and the lure of the Keys.

Sliding

I went sliding the other day for the first time this winter, over at the Derryfield Country Club. Putting on clothes for sliding is like putting on armor. We strap on a breast-plate of sweater, slip gauntlets of wool over our hands, push our feet into heavy sollerets of insulated leather, crown our head with a heaume of fur, and thus accoutered, stride forthrightly (if waddlingly) into the teeth of the downhill, dragging behind us the frail Rocinante of a toboggan or sled or a Johnny Zyla's plastic orange flyer with yellow nylon rope handles.

The sole purpose of sliding is to get to the bottom of the hill as quickly as possible, riding some edge of permissible, but not too dangerous, risk. True, some people don't like to go too fast, preferring a gentle slalom to a headlong careen, and some don't even want to go down at all, standing at the top of the run shouting encouragement in cheerleader decibels.

But I like to go as fast as I can. I imagine I am part of a champion bobsled team, or the lone man on a luge, balancing on edges through the perilous sine waves of an ice-hardened decline. I can't go as fast as they can, but just like them I want to experience that point at which control and giving-in to gravity are balanced; I want to feel the pin-sharp attention of my senses as the world slashes by. It's that focus at the moment of risk that makes a good slide good.

Yes, a safe arrival at the bottom has its own charm, relief its own high; but between the ordinariness of standing at the top and the ordinariness of arriving at the bottom is all of life's danger packed into a pitched compass made of wood, muscle, scream, ice, consciousness.

For a brief moment we are no longer at the mercy; we are not watching time's sand run through the hourglass, we are the sand rushing through the pinch of glass between the weight above and the pile below. We are not Sisyphus doomed to endless labor; we are Sisyphus' rock as it tumbles downhill in its lithic release.

But the headlong rush is only half. As people speed down the hill I imagine blooming behind each of them one of those multi-colored parachutes drag racers use. These enlarge as the velocity increases until the people are gently deposited at the bottom of the hill. These drogue chutes go by many names - some are affection, love, the friction of good friendship; I'm sure you can think of others. These things keep the iced edge just inside the danger.

A full run needs both chute and shoosh, the exhilaration experienced in sense and space, the exhilaration cooled into narrative. In the acceleration we prepare for memory; in the recall we prepare for excitement. This keeps us from abandon, allows us to take another run, and then another.

Getting Angry

There are plenty of things to get angry about. One of the things I get angry about is the threats we all face, whether we know about them or not, to our freedom. Our liberty is not really threatened by the Sandinistas or brown-skinned people coming over the border; those are just diversions thought up by the ruling class. It's threatened by zealous colonels, incompetent businesses, neutered media, and citizens unwilling to be eternally vigilant. We could all do with more pith and vinegar.

Here is my list of some things we should be angry about in these troubling days of the American empire:

1) PBS recently repeated the Bill Moyers program on the secret government in America (known euphemistically as the "intelligence community"). He clearly showed a long history of presidential deception, culminating in the Iranamok mess. Why aren't people angry about how Reagan and his cabal subverted the Constitution to achieve their illegitimate ends? Why haven't they called for the impeachment of this silly man? Iranamok was more of a threat to freedom than any regime in Nicaragua.

2) Michael Douglas, in the movie *Wall Street*, boasts that 1% of American families hold 50% of American wealth - $5 trillion dollars. I've heard similar figures from other sources. Such economic concentration subverts political liberty and equality. If it's true that he who has the gold makes the rules, then it stands to reason that in a democracy more people, not fewer, should have that gold. We should trash the myth of the free market and redistribute the wealth, wealth that was generated by every worker in this country.

3) If we expand our education system to include not just schools but also the media, then we should be angry about how much we have been kept in the dark. It's hard not to believe that there's been a conspiracy to create a pliant citizenry by not giving them the intellectual tools to make reasoned choices. As the two Thomases, Jefferson and Paine, pointed out, uninformed citizens are clay for despots; in our time, clay for Republicans.

Anger can be destructive if it turns to rage. Rage is a kind of giving-up: of perspective, of humor, of love; it takes its final form in a stiff allegiance to principle or ideology. The anger I'm speaking about is closer to indignation and

a vigorous skepticism, indignation about injustice, skepticism about the official explanation.

Voting is the lowest form of this anger; committed participation is the highest. And we must remember that the touchstone for this anger is the Constitution, its enumerated liberties, its energy for equality. If we forget that, we subvert our own reason for being.

Education And Morals

In the January 7 issue of the *Union Leader*, Pat Buchanan intones a favorite conservative mantra: American public education should "transmit to the next generation a moral code"; schools should be in the business of "molding...good men and women."

What does it mean when conservatives talk like this? Buchanan mentions a "moral illiteracy" engendered by the schools, and I assume he means by this an ignorance in students about the tenets of the Golden Rule: a hatred of murder, a disavowal of personal violence, kindness, love, self-discipline, a thirst for learning, the practice of decency.

If this is what Buchanan means by "moral code," then I have no disagreement with him. What we disagree on is how this code is going to be made part of the character of human beings. The conservatives' moral "mold" for young people is based in a vast distrust of modernity and democracy, a distrust so strong that it drives them to yearn for, and work towards, a world purged of ambiguity and quirkiness.

Conservatives equate morality with obedience to authority. They like things neat, and to obtain such neatness, they want the power to control people. Why else would fundamentalist Christians embrace Caesar and Mammon except to mold the world into their own image, into a world they can control? Conservatives don't like all that messy individualism. Better to have people submit to a hierarchy of authorities in ways that are predict-able, following jurisdictions set up by custom or prohibition, than to let them sail away to the horizons of their own reason.

Are the conservatives confused? I think so. And they're confused because they ground their moral thinking in a corrupt source - the Bible and the Judeo-Christian myth. Is there a better source? Yes, I believe there is - secular humanism, the devil Buchanan indicts.

The Golden Rule, if anyone thinks about it for a second, is simply another name for secular humanism (or just plain humanism), the belief that people, not obscure divinities, shape the ends of human life. The decency between human beings suggested in the Golden Rule needs latitude and tolerance to work; in short, it needs the democratic touch, exactly the kind of touch the conservatives' would disallow.

I disagree with Buchanan - there hasn't been enough of the proper humanism in our schools, which is why schools have failed to work well. And if the conservatives take over the school districts and school boards, then there will be even less moral instruction in the schools than there is now, though there will be plenty of talk about obedience and divine plans. This is not the way things should go.

Be All That You Can Be

In January the superintendent of the Manchester schools, Dr. Eugene Ross, had pulled from the guidance offices at Central and West High Schools a pamphlet about Selective Service and the draft. The pamphlet had been put there by a group of teachers called the Manchester Educators Peace Project, after gaining School Board approval in August 1987. But the principal of West High School, Robert Baines, felt that the pamphlet was inappropriate for students and asked that it be removed. As of right now, the pamphlet is not available to students.

However, the military has no problem getting to students. It visits the schools at least once a week, advertises in their papers, runs aptitude tests during class time, offers free book covers, buys mailing lists from the schools, and is even part of the official curriculum, as with the Naval Jr. ROTC pro-gram at West High School. In 1985, the Army was the 80th largest advertiser in the country, ranking between Mazda and Stroh's beer.

Of course, military people will say that they're just carrying out their mandate to build the best armed services available, and that's true. The problem is that they have such unopposed power in doing that. The pamphlet offered by the Peace Project was an attempt to give students some counter-balancing information, to tell them that the military is not a company like Nabisco but an organization designed to kill other human beings.

The controversy around it demonstrates how much the schools support the military ethic and how much those same schools are not interested in fostering true independent thought in their students.

The unholy alliance between the high schools and the military highlights the larger belief that young people don't need, don't deserve, or aren't ready for information to run their lives and make decisions for themselves. Schools, parents, and politicians say they truly believe in freedom of thought and speech for young adults, but their actions belie their words.

The Supreme Court just decided that student newspapers could be subject to prior restraint. It's incredibly difficult for young adults to get accurate and unbiased information about sex and their bodies. Students are monitored as closely as inmates in some schools, and don't enjoy Fourth Amendment protection when school officials decide to search lockers. Young adults in this

society, in terms of clear, unambiguous information with which to make decisions for themselves, are malnourished, if not starved.

This may make students more docile, but it doesn't make them very good citizens. This incident with the pamphlet points out that free speech must be really free, or else it's just ventriloquism, with all of us as dummies.

Late Night Musings In The Emergency Room

2 a.m. The emergency room. A late movie with Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. Few of us here - an older man, unshaved. A young boy, maybe eleven or twelve. Me. A woman with her arm in a cast. A stout blond secretary, with lank hair to her shoulder blades, takes my information - pleasant, indifferent. Puts a plastic band around my right wrist. 2:10 a.m.

This cough. It's been mine for a week. Actually, it's not really true to say I have this cough; the cough really has me. When my throat in mid-word goes dry and I start getting the spasms, it's as if there's a pair of vice grips on my larynx, as if there was electricity in my throat.

A nurse comes to get me, makes me wear a backless smock. Takes the ticking of my pulse, the double bump of my blood pressure, my deposition of illness. Then she leaves me alone. I'm in a slight fog mixed from fever, cough suppressant, and sleeplessness. I have visions of the other people in other rooms down the hall waiting for the ministrations of the doctor; all of us have been edged out of our usual routines by sickness, brought to this bright, clean place to find help we cannot give ourselves. We are weak, and maybe a bit afraid, and we just want to go home.

The doctor is young, friendly, speaking with a slight Southern drawl which is oddly comforting at 3 a.m. He places the cold ear of the stethoscope against my skin, has me lie down and thumps my stomach as if it were a ripe watermelon. As I put my shirt on, his professional jury tone tells me I have a slight touch of bronchitis; he gives me prescriptions and a starter dose of the medicine.

Driving home through the thin pre-matinal darkness, back to the bed I'd left two hours ago, now having a name for the enemy and some tactics of medication, I think: Two generations ago I could have died from what I now will trounce in ten days. Through the luck of the genetic draw, through no particular effort of my own, I'm in a time and place that has amoxicillin. I am as glad for that fact as I am mystified by it.

Standing on the porch of my house, knowing that in a few moments I'll be cocooned and warm, still in that fog of drugs and fatigue, I believe I can hear the stertorous, hesitant, placid, staccato breathing of thousands of people in their dense sleeps, wearing out the hours until they have to rise and breathe in their routines, inhaling their days until they sleep again and breathe themselves

again into light. If life is anything, it's this constant oscillation between light and dark, between lightness and gravity. Amoxicillin is a form of light, a breath to get me to dawn. I open my door and deliver myself to bed.

Freelancing

I've been trying to freelance-write my way to fame and fortune for the last year or so. If free-lancing had a rank system like the military's, I'd still be a private. (Actually, a private would make more than I: in 1986 the median income for free-lancers was $7900.) It's hard to make editors buried in reams of script from other people trying to make their way as freelance writers rise to, exalt over, and recommend without stint for publication my particular offering to the magazine world.

Freelance writing is like living in Kafka's castle. Stamps, paper, and thoughts travel to the shadowy Oz-like sanctum of the editor, and there occasionally returns from the dark of the alien beyond a message that they have been seen - usually rejected, accepted just often enough to keep the writer going.

Sometimes, in my gloomier moments, I think that editors and restaurant owners are in collusion. The editors keep me impoverished and hopeful so that they can continue to get loads of free ideas, and restaurants can get cheap help from hungry free-lancers working to maintain their writing habit. In my happier moments, say, after a small journal accepts a poem and asks me to pay $2.50 for the copy it will appear in, I imagine that I'm in the venerable, if creaky, tradition of Horatio Alger.

I'm hungry, I'm sniffing the markets for profitable ideas, I'm on the hustings hustling - above all, I'm not accepting the strings-attached guarantee of a 9-to-5 job, I'm my own man, I'm out there on the edge. Then, of course, the bills come in, like arrows for the bullseye, I start to sound like Willy Loman, and occasion-ally I'd like something other than macaroni and cheese.

But all in all, it's not a bad way to try to make a living. I've started a business for myself. Me, in business? It's true. I've even joined the Chamber of Commerce - something that wouldn't have occurred to me a year ago as being part of the moral universe. I like my boss, I don't have to put up with office politics, and my hours are my own.

Of course, since the diet is a little thin at this point I have to supplement things with teaching - but again, not a bad way to make some money, touching minds instead of trying to put the touch on their wallets. And I'm writing, pushing myself, stretching my skills.

A free-lance in the Middle Ages was a mercenary, a man whose “lance” was “free,” or available for hire. If his lance was good, he could gain respect and, if lucky, a touch of notoriety (and maybe some riches). Sometimes I think that’s all people want - some notice, some respect, and then life is worthwhile. Now there’s a good topic; where can I send the manuscript?

The Nature Of Human Nature

I'm teaching an American Literature survey course this semester, something I haven't done in a while. I last taught such a course to high school juniors; now I'm teaching it to adults. I prefer the adults - they have some understanding about human nature, their own as well as others, and our discussions about the Puritans or Emerson or Whitman are sharpened by their assumptions about what their fellow humans are.

The class, some thirty strong, have resolved themselves into informal "camps," based on their beliefs about human nature. There are "Puritans," who believe in the innate corruption of people. They don't necessarily buy the Adam-and-Eve story, but they understand clearly its message: disobedience against rules corrupts the human soul (and human society).

The Deists are a bit more relaxed, Unitarian in their outlook. They acknowledge a decline in society, but attribute it, not to the innate badness of people, but to an ignorance imposed by overbearing institutions: people have been diverted from their natural urge for harmony. This is admittedly a loose camp, but not without moral integrity. They act upon the belief that gray is the normal color of most human relationships.

I don't have any anarchists, but there are a few who give Tom Paine a good hearing, and several who are a bit introspective, shadows of Dickinson, or Whitman in his more melancholic moods. (Luckily, no one much cares for the moodiness of Poe.) By discussing literature as if were a read-out on the nature of being human, we can't help but begin to see that we really can't define what human nature is, capture its essence in a pithy memorandum. Are humans naturally corrupt? Perhaps, but then someone acts with Kant's good will, and the corruption, if it's there, is overturned. Or someone behaves according to Kant's categorical imperative, but then gives in to the crude aloofness of Nietzsche's Over-man.

If there is a human nature, it lies in the tendency for humans to assume any moral shape they wish, to be plastic in the face of the historical, natural, social, economic, and political forces in their lives. As biologists are discovering, more of that plasticity is limited by genetics than previously believed, but human nature seems more like Proteus, the sea god who could change shapes, than the bed of Procrustes, on which everything must be stretched to fit.

We've also concluded that it's the nature of humans to differ about what makes humans what they are. That is the real gift of this class: a reaffirmation of the beauty and bounty of good talk among people learning together, the suspension of mistrust while we examine our spirits.

Koppelization

I recently stayed up to watch ABC's *Nightline* with Ted Koppel. I'm normally not a fan of his, but the topic interested me and I wanted to listen to one of his guests, Jesse Jackson.

Well, it didn't take Ted long to don his badger suit, treating his guests as if they were recalcitrant schoolboys, cutting them off so commercials about pain relievers could have equal time. At times his peremptory schoolmarmish snotty manner so turned me off that I almost turned the show off. As the final credits rolled, a name occurred to me for what had happened: Koppelization.

It's actually an old threat, and I'm certainly not the first to talk about it. Koppelization is the tendency of the media, most notably television, to decide for us what is important, what passes muster as information we need and should have. It's an imperious stance, First World news producers half-feeding an audience it considers an underdeveloped Third World.

But what made this especially offensive was the way Koppel not only interrupted these people but said, by his actions and commentary, that his, Koppel's, agenda of questions was more important than any statements to be made by is Jackson - as if we'd tuned in to drink at Koppel's well and not to eat with his guests.

We've seen throughout the heavy bumper-car ride of the primaries the kinds of problems television causes. Its presence demands that the candidates play to it, the candidates feel they need it, and television's taste for profits demands that the candidates play to it in ways that television can sell. This is what Koppelization does: it interposes the medium between the candidates and the voters, making the medium more important than either. Because this happens we get "sound bites," photo opportunities, news briefs, and a Suffolk Downs approach to politics - but nothing as substantial as knowledge, insight, or explanation.

This is not an indictment of all television news people - there are some paladins out there: Sam Donaldson, McNeil/Lehrer, Peter Jennings (when he's not doing work for ABC).

But despite the presence of solid people, Koppelization has to be stopped. How? At least in terms of the primaries, there's a very easy way to do it. Restrict the elections to eight weeks and make television give free air time to all

candidates. Candidates, released from having to raise money for costly television campaigns, can focus on meeting people, and this will help remove some of the monetary corruption of our political process. And we won't bombarded for years with the wooly maunderings of media pundits about who has what advantage over whom. Without Ted Koppel, we may be able to figure out what's going on.

Sex Education

The *Union Leader* has made a cause célèbre out of the sex education manual, "Mutual Caring, Mutual Sharing," distributed by the family planning clinic in Dover. The clinic's sin is that it spoke positively about homosexuality and lesbianism in a curriculum about sexuality. The *Union Leader*, in the words of editor Joseph McQuade, has called the manual "pro-homosexual propaganda," "moral rot," "warped thinking," and "garbage," because it doesn't conform to, in Jim Finnegan's words, "certain immutable moral standards."

The *Union Leader* usually enjoys trashing people who hold views different than their own. When it does this it likes to believe it's protecting sacred honor. But the *Union Leader*'s vision of the world, like the vision of many conservatives, is rooted in fear and contempt, in a loathing for tolerance and change.

Because Finnegan, McQuade, and company can't bring themselves to enlarge their own sympathies, they turn their bigotries into principle and believe that name-calling is the same thing as reasoned analysis. This only shows that they're really not interested in protecting freedom and morality, only in quashing the freedom and moral beliefs of people with whom they disagree.

And, as usual, the *Union Leader* has missed the point. What is most important is not what people choose to be sexually but whether or not such sexual choices allow people to lead lives capable of affection, understanding, and growth. If a person chooses to love another human being, be it a man or a woman, the salient point is that the person can love, not the gender of the partner.

We should be doing everything to promote such affection between human beings, including talking about the fact, as the clinic's manual does, that some people wish to love in a way different from the way Jim Finnegan wishes to love.

In the end, it's really a lack of love that prompts the *Union Leader* and those who agree with it to be as crass and frigid as they are. And this, in turn, can only lead to oppression and intolerance, as it has already in the office of the governor. John Sununu, because he thinks the manual was "inappropriate," wants to pursue legal action against the clinic, even though they've committed no crime and had the right to create the manual they did - in other words, to use the state's power to shut the clinic up.

Normally, Finnegan would be riding the First Amendment hard, as he did on behalf of the students at the *Dartmouth Review*. But here he doesn't, agreeing editorially with Sununu, and thus revealing that for Finnegan, the First Amendment protects his "immutable standards" but not those of any who disagree with him. This mean-spirited and ignorant abuse has to stop - right now, right here.

Voices From The Street

We just moved into a new apartment in a neighborhood that's flush with kids, and every afternoon, barring rain, blizzard, or everyone being grounded, the streets and alleyways thicken with the voices of children playing. Since we live on the second floor the voices rise like a flock of starlings and settle on the windowsills, a chirping chattering mass of partly-clear vowels and slurred yelling that in its own raucous way soothes and cheers.

What do these voices say? Everything and nothing, really. There are the usual territorial yells or blowing off steam. There's laughter, sometimes a cry of pain or outrage. There are the loud counting-off of hide-and-seek, the breathy chant of a cadenced jump-roping song, ratta-tat-tats of boys playing war.

Mostly it's just schmoozing, small talk of no particular weight that glues the kids together in a casual yet solid way, the kind of talk full of the normal that makes ordinary life safe if not memorable.

Of course, it can be annoying, too, but mostly it's a comforting sound, the sound of children racked and buoyed by their own growing, their own mixing and matching of boundaries and codes. The best talk to listen to is when the kids don't know they're being eavesdropped. We have a porch just off the kitchen, and with the kitchen window open, we can hear all their secret conferences and plots. It's in this talking that the kids begin the dance of diplomacy, a respect for and irritation with rules, a patient exasperation with the gnarly briar of human personalities.

In this talk they work out the multitude of etiquettes that allow them to get along. Here they deal with knotty issues: Should I leave my sister behind if my friend wants to play only with me? So-and-so says I'm a baby: what should I do? I have two dollars to spend at the store and my mother says I can't spend it all on candy: What's the limit before she gets angry? All of this has to be sorted out and assigned some understanding, and they talk it through and talk it through until it holds a shape.

At night, before they go to sleep, our two girls talk to each other. Most of the time we tell them to just get to sleep, eager to have some peace for ourselves. But they murmur on anyway, determined to have the last word.

And even that, at the end of a long day, is not an unpleasant sound, the soft vowels and consonants of their talk and laughter floating up like cartoon

balloons, dirigibles full of the ordinary navigating the darkness. There'll be more talk tomorrow, so many more words.

Bathing

There is a man who sunbathes in the yard next to the building where I do my part-time job. When I walk in at 1 p.m., he's out there, slightly oiled, arms behind his head, face tilted sunward like a satellite dish. I envy the recline of his indolence because I have to go sit at a desk and be bathed by cathode rays from the computer screen and dead-white fluorescent lights.

At five, when I leave, slightly perspired and hungry, he's gone in; I imagine his body giving off a fragrant sachet of oil and the sweet dry buoyancy of the sun.

The contrast between his indulgence and my necessity made me think about how often in our modern lives we are bathed by things we haven't chosen, things that are designed to lull us into an easy submission, and how rare it is to have enough freedom to conspire with the sun. Take advertising, for one obvious example. How many ads, of any kind, are we laved with in one day? We might guess a few hundred, but several studies have shown the answer to be thousands. We are washed in the flood of the Word and expected to pay accordingly without question.

We daily battle floods more virulent than Noah's: food additives, pollution, lawyers, television, presidential primaries, Muzak, the CIA and FBI. By necessity we have to shut ourselves off to some degree or our organisms would overload.

But our society has exploited this necessary biological amnesia into a policy of narcosis - we are doped by the news, by our schools, by our corporations so that we'll genuflect without murmur before the necessities of the powers that be.

There are ways to fight this sleeping sickness, small things in the daily round. I've been concentrating on my breathing, changing it slightly so that I'm breathing from my abdomen and not my chest. It's amazing what a few more pints of oxygen to the brain can do. Kids hand out a lot of hints as well.

One of the ways they clearly delight themselves is to give their bodies over to gravity. Adults don't trust gravity. We try to stay either horizontal or vertical, keep a fixed axis. So I tried walking upstairs while turning in a circle, something I'd seen the boy downstairs try. It was marvelous. My stodgy balance mechanisms had to dust off gravity vectors it hadn't used in years. Suddenly, stairs were a means to delight rather than a bit of carborundum in the daily grind.

Small things, yes - but they break the wave, become a small reef of awareness that cuts the conservative swell of the ocean. We needn't be so washed-up, so to

speak. If in small ways we can draft our imagination into the service of delight, we can educate it for the larger orbits, the things that really threaten to make us bland and pliable sponges for the masters.

What We Need

Beginning in 1974, Ruth Sivard and World Priorities Incorporated have published a booklet titled "World Military and Social Expenditures." In this book Sivard explains how much the world spends on armaments and then translates these figures into terms of daily living.

For instance, the United States and the Soviet Union spent together about $1.5 billion a day on military defense. But the United States ranks eighteenth among all nations in infant mortality; the Soviet Union, forty-sixth. The fuel consumed by the Pentagon in a single year would run the entire U.S. public transit system for 22 years. To protect Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf costs the U.S. Navy an extra $365 million a year above normal operating costs, about three times as much as the U.S. budget for research on energy conservation. The absurdities go on.

The point is obvious: a bloated military budget and a commitment to excessive military strength corrupts the very society the military is supposed to serve and protect. (Witness the defense contract scandal brewing in Washington.) Of course, the corruption caused by a military budget out of control needs to be stopped. But the problems are symptomatic of our capitalist system as a whole. More often than not, money goes to activities that contribute little or nothing to sustaining our society in the things most of us would consider important: health, food, clean air and water, affordable housing, and so on.

There are solutions, but you won't hear them on *Nightline*. Mark Satin, editor of *New Options*, asked twenty non-mainstream economists and thinkers what they would do to cut the $220 billion deficit estimated for the early 1990s. Some of their suggestions: a tax on mergers and elimination of the deductions companies get for merging; a tax on the transfer of stocks; paying people to stay healthy (including high taxes on alcohol and cigarettes); increasing energy conservation; encouraging more ownership of companies by employees. Satin believes that $250 billion could be cut by 1993 and that we could have a system that encourages health, productive work, and satisfaction.

The real point of Satin's review is not the money we could save but the different vision we need of what our society is all about. We need to think in terms of a "sustainable society," one that sustains itself by sustaining its members, not a society where the market declares its fiats ignorant of the future or of people's values.

But as Sivard's analysis shows, we and most other countries in the world have militarized societies that seem to disdain their members by putting them in constant jeopardy. We could all use a little less jeopardy and a lot more health.

Men And Women

Call me irresponsible, but I wonder if there are any real differences between men and women. Well, yes, there are some obvious differences, but I wonder if there are any differences so bred in the bone that social roles must belong to one sex or another, like "Only men can kill spiders" or "Only women can sell Tupperware."

The question was prompted by my having to explain to women secretaries the pun in my business' name, Full Court Press. Almost all of them didn't know what it was, and almost all of them didn't really get the pun when I explained it. Now, I could attribute this lack of cultural knowledge to one of two things. On the one hand, women are inherently incapable of understanding sports. (I would have to explain why there are women basketball teams, but let's put that to one side for right now.) Or, on the other hand, they lack access to knowledge and experience usually made available to the more hairy members of the species.

Another, more academic, way to put this is, Are differences in the behavior of the sexes a matter of DNA or cultural conditioning? Now, all of us know people who will advocate the first point, that somehow who sweeps the floor and changes the oil was ordained in the ancient amoebas.

Others will soften this cruel determinism by saying it's a subtle blend of nature and nurture (which shows that they cracked open their Intro to Psych text books), but imply that the "nature" part still means that women can never know what lug nuts are. (Many men don't know what lug nuts are either, but that's another one to put to the side.)

But even a momentary sip at the water cooler of common sense would show that beyond a few biological novelties caused by hormones, and the unique ability of women to give birth (which may be outflanked by in vitro fertilization), all sex roles are behavioral outcomes of cultural lesson plans. Change the lesson plans, and you change outcomes.

Does this mean, some frightened members of society might ask, that men are going to have wear skirts and blouses? No. In a society that concentrated on differences between people and not job descriptions for the sexes, we would increase our wardrobe as we chose, which means I could wear the bright tartan wrap-around one day and my blue pin- stripe power suit with the yellow tie the next.

We've all been raised to be men and women, and it's been a troublesome, if intriguing, baggage to carry. But it's out of date; we need to raise different sorts of people now. Maybe we could replace "Make sure men can't cry" in today's cultural lesson plan with "Sports conditioning for all." At least then everyone would chuckle at my business' name.

Tenderness

Has someone ever touched your face unexpectedly, a soft touch that barely brushes the cheek? Or held the flat of their hand against the small of your back as you walked through a door? Or given you a gift - a card, a single rose, cookies - that was not expected or demanded? We've all had these things happen to us, and we know these tender actions feel good because they help us blunt the daily grind and keep us from becoming too realistic.

I'm often struck by how untender our lives can get. Life seems to drift toward necessity and schedule so easily, and inevitably we have to drift with it, making our accommodations in order to get through the day or the week. I sometimes imagine that our lives are like those seeds in the desert that wait for years in the dust for the brief rainstorm that will break their husks and allow them to flower. We make it through the oven heat and cracking cold by a kind of obstinacy which matures us by hardening us. We call this sclerosis "good character," and the desert's necessity "reality."

But what we really live for, what our hearts really rise to, is the rain, the tender actions that will soften necessity and free us momentarily from the grimness of "good character." When we act tenderly, we do three things. First, we are active in our daily and local precincts. The small circle of family and friends is really the only world we have, and tenderness recognizes how important they are.

Second, we dampen our own individuality enough to see the complexity and texture of other people, and can, in a healthy way, be "beside ourselves." Third, acting tenderly can make us each feel less isolated and can validate those charitable impulses that, in our competitive society, often get ridiculed as weaknesses.

Tenderness is, in great part, demonstrated by physical contact: a light resting of a hand on a shoulder, a quick tousle of the hair. This is not an invitational kind of touch, but a touch of reassurance: I am here, you are there, we are connected.

Tenderness is also shown through attitude, through patience and trust in good will. Of course people do things to abuse our patience and goodwill. But short of such betrayal tenderness is a way of saying that you trust before you distrust, believe before you disbelieve.

It takes an effort to be tender, and can be quite exhausting, and it won't win elections. But without it life can be full of suspicion and avoidance, full of grit

and bones and the tart bruised smell of loneliness. When we act tenderly, or have tenderness given to us, we percolate with the deep irrigation of our spirits, and what flowers we are breach and thicken the air.

Core Curriculum

A lot of column inches have been written about colleges instituting a "core curriculum" of the classic literature and values of Western civilization. I wish there could be as much dramatic attention paid to a much more important core curriculum played out almost every day in the streets and backyards of our neighborhood, a hotbed of moral education and struggle that makes the senior seminar on Dante look pale and anemic.

We live with our two girls in a good neighborhood, and enjoy all the privileges of a good neighborhood: reliable neighbors, lack of fear, unlocked doors. But the neighborhood is also a fishbowl where the usual stresses of living can easily inflate into a fearsome Cold War.

Right now there is tactical maneuvering between our two girls and the girl across the street over who will be the leader in the neighborhood tribe. Several other friends goad this process along because while they have a vested interest in being friends with all three girls, they also want the wiggle-room to move to the more advantageous side as the tension heats up.

There are other campaigns as well concerning who will sleep over whose house and what kinds of games they'll play and how to petition the powers that be for a special treat.

This is the crucible in which these children learn to struggle with moral decisions about personality, compromise, integrity, honor, truth, justice - in short, the struggles we attach to becoming "civilized." It's a knowledge that comes straight from their skin, from the flash of anger in blue eyes and the modulated tones of apology. Inevitably we're drawn into these arrangements (which, in their complexity, rival Europe in 1914) to negotiate terms or assess triage.

We try, as good mentors, to help them acquire the habit of thinking about themselves, so that they can form the raw stuff of their feelings into insights and etiquettes, into a footer upon which the walls of their life's house can sit securely.

No core curriculum can substitute for this daily accumulation of truth winnowed from the irascibility of neighborhood skirmishes, the truces that allow for sincerity, solutions to the fair distribution of candy. In fact, colleges might be better off if they crafted their core education along the lines of our back-yard. At least then the curriculum wouldn't be ceremonial and dry, an acquired taste that

came from exams rather than from hair and breath, from the snap of anger or the gift of compliment. We see the core curriculum made flesh every day.

If we've done our jobs well, then when the children read Plato for the first time, it will really be, for them, a re- reading. The words will be different, but the passions will be familiar.

What's Love Got To Do With It?

What is love, this thing which we spend most of our lives pursuing? Some of us might quickly run for the quote books, some snicker, some just sit quietly and muse - but none of us would find the question meaningless, and all of us wants an answer.

Well, what is it, then? It's been described as a rose, a summer's day, an oil slick by the curb, cold plums in the icebox - but sometimes metaphor just can't grab the isness of the thing. It's been likened to something that grips the gut (in medieval times it was the liver) - but that makes it sound too much like dyspepsia. Sometimes people mention negatives - it's not hatred, it's not anger - as if somehow these can be developed into the proper pictures. All the card shops, the stenciled hearts on millions of bumper stickers, the endless complications of soap operas - none of these yield an "is" that can be fully grasped.

The better question, I think, is not What is love?, but What does love do? What is love? is gluttonous, impatient with ambiguity. It wants the orange's pip without stopping to smell the delicious scent of the oil in the slowly unwrapping peel. What does love do? helps us flesh out more clearly those bones which keep us connected and intact, the "loves" of our lives.

These loves most closely resemble the gravity that moves the pendulum in the great foyer of Boston's Museum of Science. We are gently moved around an anchor through all the curves in our lives, some larger and more expansive than others, but all making a pattern we recognize as our own face, our own spirit.

What do these loves do? They make paradox. The more they get used up, the more they grow; the more they grow, the more they get used up. Loves, like plants, work best with water, light, an occasional pruning, a strong manure made of friction, and a proper culling. Loves make a web of connection out of us, bring the grail of purpose to the breakfast table.

When we love - when we truly love and are not simply looking for a mirror or an umbilical cord - we act out our own best impulses to tie together, to nurture, to soothe and revive. In loving, on whatever level, we come closest to making "human" a transitive verb.

All sweetness and light? Hardly. Good loves never happen without some fights, some sparked tinder, some bit of wickedness, some doubt and self-pity. Yet given all the toxic waste that comes from loving, loving is still the reason

for living - not money, not power - because it's the only thing that can mend life when the money runs out and the power dries up. It's not easy, and most of the time it's not clear, but the gentle pitch and yaw of the pendulum inside us is the compass we all follow, a slow rotation that forms in us all of what we consider precious and whole, what we consider worth living for.

Photography

As a freelance writer I can make more money on my articles if I also take pictures, so I'm taking a black-and-white photography class at the Manchester Institute of Arts and Sciences.

What I've discovered in the few weeks I've been taking the course is a kind of scientific magic, a combination of chemicals, learning, and luck that make visions appear where before there was only scattering light and routine eyes. I have begun to learn about new transformations, and not just learn about them but actually cause them to happen. That is photography's power: to assemble all the elements that usually flow by us unnoticed into something that can breach our apathy and make our brains tingle with assaults of recognition.

There's an embarrassing element to this as well, at least for I hang around with. With a camera in my hand I'm not shy about pointing it at anything that grabs my interest. With a camera in my hand the whole world suddenly becomes grist, and etiquette falls a little bit to the wayside. I'll stalk young children at the beach, waiting to catch them in that off moment that reveals them. I'll plant myself on my back on Elm Street to get that great angle shot of the Public Service building shooting off into the blue.

I'll go through thirty-six exposures in as many seconds, taking fourteen pictures of the same object but at different shutter speeds and aperture settings to see what the camera and film will do. With a camera in hand I feel like I have access to an energy that counteracts stagnancy and cholesterol and drought.

This slight change of allegiance isn't easy for a wordsmith to make. My life is invested with the belief that words make the world, that language is the only sieve that meaning can sift through. Now I have this rival on my hands, a rival immediate and capricious, whose claim is that it can substitute one of its images for a thousand of my precious words.

I suppose I could fend it off by saying that we simply have different, but equal, ways of seeing. But it's not so. Something about the way the image floats to the surface of sight in its developer bath has no parallel in language, that magical appearance of coherence from the entropy of photons and silver.

I'm not going to give up writing. But I think my writing will change because the eyes through which I see the world are changing, into shutters and lenses and apertures, where the brain will become film developed by delight. And

the means for this fits in the palm of my hand. How often can we have such translations available so locally? Snap. Whirr. Vision.

Liberal

The way the word "liberal" has been used in this campaign, you'd think it was on George Carlin's list of dirty words. When George Bush labels Dukakis a "card-carrying member of the ACLU" (but never mentions his own carried card for the NRA), one can hear the spittle and venom in the syllables.

Does the word mean something so horrible that children shouldn't hear it and have their mouths washed out if they say it?

What's so bad about being a liberal? During the first debate I wish Dukakis had turned to Bush whenever Bush spouted his nonsense about the ACLU and liberalism and said, "What's wrong with being liberal? If my positions mean I'm liberal, then I'm glad I've got the label. Universal health care: if that's a liberal position, then I can assume that the conservative position is that everyone gets the health care they can pay for - if they happen to have insurance or a VISA card.

"Housing: if more accessible housing is a liberal idea, then I can assume that the conservative position is that everyone gets the housing they can afford, if they can afford any at all. Defense: if a non-corrupt streamlined military, backed by an increased use of diplomacy, is a liberal position, then I can assume that warmongering and shooting before asking questions is a conservative position."

Put like this, people would clearly prefer being "liberal"; it would put them in touch with their better impulses and re-connect them with their political heritage of freedom and equality (or, in the garbled Pledge of Allegiance recited by George Bush, "with freedom and justice for all").

Jesse Jackson is probably the loudest liberal voice in established politics today. The reason Jesse Jackson scared some people was not because he was black or radical but because he made sense. The American people, having been fed over the years a steady diet of smoke, mirrors, shadows, and chicanery (under the guise of "the electoral process") were suddenly confronted with someone who respected them enough to shake them out of their induced hypnosis.

Dukakis should learn from this, that people do really want to hear the truth, and that that truth is a "liberal" truth, one that respects individuality, sees government as a necessary player in the game, and wishes to revive people rather than protect the perquisites of business and the military.

I suppose it's a left-handed compliment from Bush to be called a liberal. After all, if anyone ever accused someone of being a "card-carrying member of

the Republican party," they'd be laughed out of the hall. Being a liberal still has the power to make people take notice, stir up the juices, even if in ridicule. It is certainly something to be proud of.

Just Say No To This Drug Bill

Many of you may have been following the torturous journey of the Omnibus Drug Act as it winds its way through both houses of Congress and into a conference committee. If it can be amended in conference, it's almost certain that the Act will pass. If it does, we will all be in trouble. The Omnibus Drug Act, despite its billing as an assault on the scourge of drugs in America, is in reality an assault on the Constitution.

One of its major provisions, the death penalty for "drug kingpins," has been widely advertised. But other items in the Act have been less publicized:

* The Attorney General can impose a fine on anyone of up to $10,000 if convicted of any drug offense, regardless of the substance or local penalties.

* States can lose highway funds unless they institute random testing of applicants for driver's licenses and agree to suspend the license of anyone convicted of a drug offense.

* A person's passport could be revoked and returned with a permanent stamp indicating that the bearer is a drug offender.

* Companies could practice job discrimination against users.

* Employers can be coerced into mandatory testing (even physical searches) of workers, and all collective bargaining agreements that restrict such testing could be suspended.

* The exclusionary rule, which forbids using illegally obtained evidence, would be weakened.

* OSHA inspectors would be used to monitor drug use on the job, and bosses could be fined for any violations they find.

* Federal funds could be denied to universities administrators who fail to monitor workers and students.

Here is a possible scenario if this Act passes. A driver, stopped by the police, is ordered to take a urine test. The test won't tell if he's under the influence, only if he's recently used drugs. If the driver had smoked a joint a week ago, he faces an enormous fine for his act, he would lose access to any federal benefits (except for Social Security), and he could lose his job and his right to travel abroad, all for an offense which, in New York State and other states, is the legal equivalent of a parking violation.

This Act won't stop the movement of drugs into the country; it will only ease the movement of legislators back to Washington in an election year. But this Act puts the Constitution up for grabs, and it shouldn't be. Whatever the drug crisis is about, it doesn't require devouring our own liberties, and the destruction is more disheartening when our elected representatives participate in the feeding frenzy. Just say no to this drug bill.

Hibernation

It's too bad humans gave up hibernation. I read an interesting book review the other day about how our bodies still pre-pare for winter, taking on extra weight, lengthening sleep pat-terns, changing metabolic rates.

The author went on to say that much of the stress we feel during the winter months comes from the disjunction of what our bodies are prepared to do and what we, in our modern rush, push them to do. Natural law again loses out to cultural law: Slow Down loses out to Make A Buck.

But imagine the benefits if humans restored their ability to hibernate. Think of the simple physical blessings. First, we'd be choreographed into nature's own cycle of recuperation. We wouldn't be stressed by imposed chronologies, such as eastern standard time. Our bodies would move to their own rhythms and there would be a comfortable buffer between the necessities of the outside world and our own universe of heartbeat and breathing. We would become full of health.

There would be social advantages as well. We could avoid the strain of the holidays, celebrating thanks and gifts in the spring when the world alarms us to become fully alive once more. We would be able to take a time-out from each other. We could indulge a required truce and get away for a while from the narrow view we have of each other's faults and insufficiencies. We could build some tolerance for the inevitable disappointments our imperfect natures seem to promise.

A lengthy absence from social tangling might go a long way toward making us all less defensive, less afraid, more forgiving.

There might be economic dislocations, of course, when most of the world in the far northern and southern latitudes decide to sleep for six months or so, but they could be adjusted for.

Or we could simple say that those who wish to work can, and those who wish to hibernate can hibernate, gradually hoping to convince the Type A's that hibernation is not a personal insult to their vision of the future. Politically, a long lull in international tensions would only be to the good.

Think how this hibernation would feel, this movement of the individual body towards its own North Star, towards its own center from which the rest of the world radiates. Having reached that center the self can begin to build its own peace, sleeping hour by sleeping hour, not only refreshing the machinery but

also giving pause to the army of fears and wounds that too often threaten to overawe all of who we are. Shakespeare said that sleep was a rehearsal for death. Not so here - hibernation would be a dress run for living again.

Thanksgiving

I've always found Thanksgiving a strange holiday. What, exactly, are we giving thanks for? There's the usual party line, that we're re-creating the original Thanksgiving Day meal of the Pilgrims and giving thanks to some Creator for the privilege of life.

But we don't really eat what they ate - turkey was not on the table, for one thing, and the fare, while abundant, was fairly simple. And we certainly don't eat the meal with the same sense of blessed relief the Pilgrims did, having suffered tortuous weather, disease, and failure from almost the moment they set foot on shore. We usually try to see if we can cram in that last soupcon of potato or pie, and then take a nap.

And thanking the Creator - think about that for a moment. When we thank someone, we thank them for something, a gift of some sort, and a gift that acknowledges the essence of who we are. What sorts of gifts has the Creator given us? Disease, tornadoes, mosquitoes, parasites, not to mention the ills created by our active imaginations, like soft ice cream and television.

These aren't gifts. Far too often they become penances, and if a gift reveals the intentions of the giftgiver, then our Creator has a rather low opinion of his creation. It's meaningless to give thanks to a Creator who never consulted with us about how we wanted to be created, or whether we wanted to be created at all.

What is it, then, that we should be giving thanks to? In 1938, Wilbur Cross, governor of Connecticut, wrote a tribute to Thanksgiving in the New York Times. In a somewhat gushing style, he wrote that we should give thanks for "the harvest of earth, the yield of patient mind and faithful hand, that have kept us fed and clothed and have made for us a shelter even against the storm."

I like these words because they implicitly tell us that we should be giving thanks to everyone and every-thing who has made it possible to render our lives on this earth. To be sure, there is enough hatred, disappointment, and anger to go around for what parents didn't do and what lovers didn't do and what life itself has failed to deliver, enough sometimes to make us believe that being thankful is a fool's errand.

But all that "realism" is usually the work of 364 days of the year. On this day it would be worth it to give time to remembering what and who has made things

possible rather than impossible, passable rather than impassable. Look at the faces of the family around the table or listen closely to the voice on the phone or even give a moment to the car that ferries you around, usually with only minimal maintenance, and find that point of light that is the gift from that source. Then give thanks, and that will keep us clothed and fed for another year, keep the storm from our houses.

Guns

A recent full-page ad in the *Christian Science Monitor* put out by a group called Handgun Control, Inc. featured a pistol with stars painted on its handle and stripes across the chamber and barrel; above the gun was a list of statistics: "In 1985, handguns killed 46 people in Japan, 8 in Great Britain, 31 in Switzerland, 5 in Canada, 18 in Israel, 5 in Australia and 8,092 in the United States. God Bless America."

In the same issue, on page 7, the *Monitor* reported a move by California to ban military assault weapons like the AK-47 used by a drifter to gun down schoolchildren in Stockton, California. The writer says that more than 30 million semi-automatic weapons are estimated to exist in the U.S., a growing portion of which are such weapons as the Uzi, MAC-10, and AR-15 (a version of the M-16).

The Second Amendment reads, "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." But people hoarding millions of semi-automatic rifles and thousands of handguns do not constitute a "well-regulated militia," and their "right to bear arms" needs to be infringed. We need to regulate heavily, if not ban outright, certain weapons whose only purpose is to kill people.

But the real point of this commentary is not an argument for gun control but a more severe question: What do so many guns tell us about the people who have them? The answer is brutally clear: the guns signal that people in a land overflowing with wealth are feeling scared, distrustful, powerless, and vindictive. Why are they feeling this way? What went wrong?

The short-term, corporate, capitalist mentality that so brilliantly lit up the world at the end of the 19th-century can no longer provide answers because it is at the root of the problem. We need a new ethic of what it means to be successful, an ethic that integrates rather than disintegrates, that defines profit in terms other than money.

To oversimplify, it means holding a spiritual appreciation for the oneness of life on earth coupled with a weekly effort to separate the glass from the paper for the recycling center and grassroots political organizing for social justice. The Green party in West Germany is a political example of such an ethic; a new book edited by David Griffin called *Spirituality and Society* offers a pungent array of views about how to "unnarrow" our minds. Good suggestions are out there about

how to unite the separated parts of ourselves so that we aren't so frightened by the modern society we have wrought. If we give flesh to these ideas and make ourselves less frightening to one another, we won't need guns; we will simply need each other.

February

February 2, Groundhog's Day, is also the feast of Candlemas, celebrating the purification of the Virgin Mary when Christ was presented to her in the Temple. The Catholic Church once had a procession to consecrate all the candles to be used in the church during the coming year; the candles symbolized Jesus Christ, called "the light of the world" and a "light to lighten the Gentiles."

The Catholic ritual came from an ancient Roman custom. For the Romans, February was their twelfth month, and they prepared themselves for the new year with some bizarre rituals involving young men dressed in loincloths, with their foreheads ribboned in dog's blood and their bodies smeared with milk, running through the streets striking women with strips of goatskin to insure the women's fertility. The church obviously sanitized the performances while importing the message of purification into their own notion of salvation.

I'm not sure how we got from lightening our spiritual condition to Pauxatawney Phil emerging into a world of klieg lights, but most of us, in New England at least, don't feel very much purified by the month of February. By February we tend to focus more on the shadow cast by the groundhog than the light that makes the shadow jump out of its body. By February most of us have run out of ways to purify ourselves; we're white as a radish and feel about as physically attractive, and are troubled in our sleep by visions of Miami.

Well, there is some salvation lurking around out there to counter some of this groundhogwash, if not in its original religious format, then down more pedestrian avenues. In fact, walking is a great way to spend part of February. Some February days, with the right combination of sun, slight wind, and clean air, invigorate every cell of the body, and being outside can help us to get outside the cabin fever of ourselves.

Baking and other kinds of cooking are another antidote, a way to literally fill up the world: our homes, with wonderfully rich aromas; our mouths, with delicious indulgence; our bodies, with the comfort able fatigue of creating. February is a good time to really listen to music, making it potent in the fore-ground rather than a background ear massage. Extend the music: put it on loud and dance to it. Buy a Hawaiian shirt and wear it around the house. Watch the Steve Wright HBO videotape and laugh until your eyes crinkle shut. Do whatever you can to bring lightness and color into the landscape.

While it may not be the old-time cleansing the church used to dispense, it'll lift the spirits and breach the contract a New England February seems to have made with shades of grey and clocks that run too slow.

English Revisited

I recently attended a hearing on House Bill 48, a move by Representatives Raynowska and Roulston to make English the official language of New Hampshire. It felt like déja vu all over again, a bill similar to this having been defeated only a short while ago. As part of that déja vu I'd like to offer the commentary I gave at the time of that previous bill because the arguments against an official language haven't really changed.

What does it really mean to make a language "official"? Does anyone really know?

One test of an idea's coherence is to imagine what will happen when people act the idea out. If English were the state's official language, what would be some of the consequences? Perhaps a better way of stating this is, What would be permitted and not permitted?

Would there be laws, for instance, banning signs in any language other than English? (Would St. Mary's Bank have to take down its French nameplate?) Would ethnic organizations be allowed, such as the French-Canadian association in Manchester? If they were, could they conduct their business in French? How would the teaching of foreign languages in school be affected? Foreign language publications? These questions can be multi-plied almost infinitely.

The issue of permission also raises issues about monitoring. France has an Academy which aims to keep French pure. Would we have one, too, the APE (Academy for the Preservation of English), with possibly a "Language Police" having the power to give people "poetic licenses"? What, then, would be the penalties for not using English?

In short, in what ways would people's constitutional rights be abridged by making English the official language? (For instance, would it be right to disenfranchise thou-sands of Hispanic voters who are also American citizens because ballots and voting instructions would not be printed in Spanish?)

But perhaps the question most difficult to answer is, Which English are we talking about? People who propose that English be made official presume that English can also be made standard.

But people are not united on what constitutes a "standard" English. An amazing mix of Englishes abound in our country, and what emanates from Washington and New York is only one, and usually the blandest, of many

dialects. And language changes constantly; the "standard" English of today won't necessarily be the "standard" English tomorrow. Proponents of an official English have no clear idea of what language they want to enshrine.

The real question here should be what makes for literacy, not what makes for Americanness; action should be for education, not for the nativist conceit of an official language. What we need is more compassionate concern for the quality of life of all people in this country, not more lines which separate and deny; fewer references to bootstraps and more to collective successes.

Personal Responsibility

The recent outraged response over the plea bargain for two boys who killed a Dover store owner raises one of the most vexing questions humans face: At what point, and with what penalty, are we fully responsible for our actions?

"Full responsibility" frightens most human beings. It means, simply, no excuses. Very few people want such an unforgiving shed light on them, and will look for ways to soften and share the blame. This is the nub of the argument between the judge and the defendants' attorneys. The judge says they're fully culpable; the attorneys say that a bad home life, an unloving mother, a generally uncaring universe means that the boys don't fully own their behavior or their moral deficits.

The judge is more right than the attorneys. These boys did it, they reveled in it, they even paid their rent with blood stained money. In other words, they knew what they had done and they should face that knowledge for the rest of their lives.

But in the less extreme realms where most of us live, what "full responsibility" means is not so clear. Most of the time we don't have access to complete information about the state of our mortal beings. Yet we're expected to have full knowledge of and control over all our actions and their consequences, even if we're not aware of what all our actions do. This is a harsh ideal. There is a way to humanize it without taking away its moral importance.

Full responsibility is "fuller" the closer it is to your personal life because you have more power to determine whether you will hurt or help someone. If you lie to a loved one, and the lie is found out, then you are fully responsible for all of the distrust that follows. You used your power to break the trust, and you own the entourage of guilt that goes with it.

If you eat tuna fish caught by fishermen who kill porpoises in their nets, you are only indirectly responsible for their deaths because your power to change the situation is limited (though not completely absent).

In short, the more able we are to help or hurt someone, the more responsibility we have to accept for our actions or inactions. The boys are completely responsible for their crime because they had it within their power not to kill the woman, and they chose to kill her.

We have more much power over the lives we lead than we think we do. Accepting full responsibility for our lives does not only mean accepting guilt or blame. It also means that we must, as often as we can, choose to create light rather than darkness in the circles where we live. Choosing light is a disciplined act; it's a decision not to give in to entropy. We must treat each other well, or we will certainly treat each other badly.

Abortion

Overturning the 1848 law requiring criminal penalties for abortion is a good act. Not only was it unconstitutional, it criminalized what is a non-criminal activity: a woman choosing to have an abortion.

The debate over abortion has been so mucked up by invective and fantasy that pro-life and pro-choice people will never agree on anything. The pro-life group sees itself as the equivalent of the abolitionists, with the fetus as the enslaved being; the pro-choice people are constitutionalists, defending the right of the mother's choice.

There is no common ground in this fight because the two groups argue from completely different principles: one side focuses on the rights of the fetus (considering it a full person), one side focuses on the rights of the mother.

The abortion debate is not only about abortion: it's about the value of motherhood, the role of women, the need for control. But as far as I can see from the reading and talking I've done, the pro-choice people have a better argument. The fetus is not a full human being deserving of full constitutional rights. To say that it is to simply assert an opinion as fact. There's no way to definitively prove that a fetus is a human being except through Humpty Dumpty's logic: it's true because I say it is. To then argue that abortion is murder only compounds the fallacy.

Second, pro-life people wish to use the power of the state to interfere in a woman's life. The irony here is that this is the same power they say has no business telling people to buckle up, deposit their bottles and cans, or run their families. To use state power to force a woman to complete a pregnancy is to compel a woman to be a mother. We don't tolerate this kind of compulsion in other areas of American life; why should be it acceptable when applied to women?

The access to free and safe abortions recognizes the unique biological role of women. Until men can conceive, or babies are born outside the womb, women will have to have the babies. This fact has been used in countless ways to make sure that women are not free in the way men are free to achieve what they want in this society.

If a woman does not want to have a child, then she should not be compelled to have one. This doesn't undermine the seriousness of the decision to seek

an abortion, nor does it mean that we shouldn't continue to talk about self-responsibility, birth control, and sexual identities. It simply means that women must have a full complement of choices if they are to lead satisfying lives, just as men do, and the state should not interfere with those choices. Anything less than this is compulsion and a betrayal of our social and political values.

Miami Revisited

In February I spent two weeks in Miami, two weeks of 85-degree weather and soothing doses of sunlight and seafood. It was hard sliding back into Logan Airport at 24 degrees and giving up my Cuban shirt for a wool coat. What made it hard was not only going from warm air to freezer blasts, but also the change of place, coming from a city that faces Central and South America back to a city that faces Boston and New York and Washington - in other words, only other American cities.

Flying into Miami is, in Joan Didion's words, like leaving "the developed world for a more fluid atmosphere." What Miami, like Los Angeles, faces is the rest of the world that is not the United States, a world often revolutionary in its practice, sometimes culturally opposed to notions of progress and civil rights, and almost overwhelmingly poor, hungry, and desperate.

In many ways Miami is a prevision of what America is going to cope with in the next half-century. It's not just the narrow issue of immigration. It's about learning that the rest of the world is not just potential markets or foreign policy headaches for the State Department but is filled with people who have ideas of their own about what should and should not be done.

"Miami" is really several Miami's. Downtown, with its elegant Bayside shopping mall and cathedrals to money, is the yuppie, capitalist Miami, the glitz of high-rise condos along Brickell Street. Going north up to Eighth Street the traveler comes to Little Havana (or, as the Cubans call it, "Calle Ocho"), and here one arrives at another world, Latin in pulse and shape, from the old men playing dominos to the various memorials for the Bay of Pigs brigade.

Continuing north the traveler comes to Little Haiti, an area just beginning to thrive but which is still umbilically attached to the home country, so much so that speculating if someone standing on the corner is a Ton Ton Macoute is ordinary conversation on the street. Around the new Miami Arena, the beautiful home of the hapless Miami Heat, spreads Overtown and Liberty City, where blacks struggle in obscurity until Miami does something to make them riot.

The anglos, blacks, and hispanics are in a tense ballet, each struggling to make and re-make Miami into its own image, each group bringing to the choreography cultural baggage that does not, and may never, have anything in common.

There is undeniable tragedy and venality in Miami, but also undeniable excitement as the rest of the world slips over America's threshold and brings with it new eyes and new visions. New Hampshire may never suffer the strains Miami does, but it won't be able to ignore their effects. The future's color is brown, not white, and Miami is its port of entry.

An Easter Message

The other day I read a bumper sticker that said, "If you don't like my driving, dial 1-800-EAT-____." The last word is four letters and drops from horses. I remember seeing a tee- shirt at Hampton Beach last summer which said, simply, "Go F___ Yourself." I think about them as I listen to the church bells the next block over summon people to the celebration of Christ's resurrection. Such contrasts.

The people who sport the bumper stickers and tee-shirts seem angry about their lives, impatient with the world and the normal ambiguities of life. It seems that their owners have reduced life to a strict sequence of "if/then": if you don't like this, then do this. And the "this" involves punishment, either something inflicted by the driver or wearer or something self-inflicted. In either case, "this" means calculated pain, calculated revenge.

Their advertisements, and the clang of the bells, make me think about what are our sources of grace and rising, what is it that we can bring to bear to refute the entropy that seems twined around our hearts and minds. Easter has one answer: faith in spiritual transcendence.

But the bumper sticker people don't have this: they're Puritans without a sense of grace, nihilists. And here are the millstones we all lie between: on the top, hope that the existence of things unseen will save us; on the bottom, the bruises of a world that opposes our mortality.

The real challenge of Easter is not emulating Christ's resurrection, though that is what the official doctrine tells us we should do. It's living with the choices Christ's absence forces on us. Christ's disappearance into the clouds leaves us all in the situation of Flannery O'Connor's Misfit: angry that Christ left us behind to figure out why we have to die and confused about what the answers are.

But that confusion, ironically, is the source of how we can come to create our own salvation and not depend on one to fall on us from the sky. We can continue the anger - and many humans have. Pope John Paul recognized this when he mourned in his Easter message the self- destructive impulses of the human race. Sometimes we can harness the anger to a good cause, transmute vengeance into a hatred of injustice. We can also create our own salvation through self-disciplined acts of happiness.

The point is, we have choices, and they all vibrate with possibilities. Yes, there is risk in taking responsibility for our lives. But that risk is what makes human life so much more vibrant than any life in heaven. Perhaps that's why Christ left, knowing that we would come to depend on him instead of ourselves. If so, the greatest gift that Easter offers us is our own freedom.

Ethics In The Schools

It seems that there's a proposed contract between the state education department and Boston University's newly formed Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character to teach character and values in New Hampshire's schools. Teaching ethics in the schools - now there's a radical idea. I'm all for it - but not for what I think the educators and politicians want.

As usual, moral education is discussed in a vacuum, as if its lack in the schoolroom has no connection with how schools are structured, the pressures of adolescence, or the surrounding society. Moral education is deficient in the school system we have because the school system we have is by and large not moral in nature.

It's a system based on acquiescence to authority (for both teachers and students) and learning enough to get a good job. If moral education means anything, it at least means vigorous investigation, good-natured skepticism about authority, and the chance to come to conclusions one can live with - all traits missing from most of the system's curriculum.

We must realize that those authorities calling for moral education usually mean two things when they intone the "moral education" mantra: we must get back to some system of values that supposedly existed in the past and that the present offers no values worth emulating.

In short, given who they are and how they got to their positions of influence, "morality" means teaching behavior that supports the status quo, which does not mean devoting a lot of energy to critical analysis of social structures or creating students who are free-thinkers.

But if we really wanted to have a "moral" education, which is different from simply "moral education," then we would revamp our system to accomplish it. What would that entail? First, reduce the curriculum to four areas: math, science, history, and literature.

Second, create smaller classes - ideally, six to ten students - who would be tutored by excellent teachers.

Third, restructure the time in school away from the assembly line of "periods" and towards an environment that encourages deliberation and inquiry.

Once this preliminary editing has taken place, then the teachers will have the time to teach their students how to read intelligently. And once students can do that, they can confront the knotty moral problems they are going to find in literature, history, and science. It's in talking about and solving these problems that education in morality really happens.

We need to build a system that encourages moral behavior. When that gets done, we won't have to suffer the nonsensicality of people making contracts with Centers for Ethics and developing programs which are nothing more than sermonizing in curricular garb.

The Hero

It's disturbing that so many people want Oliver North to get a pardon. It's disturbing that people like Nacky Loeb and Jim Finnegan, who dress themselves as staunch defenders of individual liberty, would call someone who subverted the Constitution a "hero." The historian Richard Hofstadter once remarked that the American people are never far away from wanting to give up the ambiguities of democracy. The veneration of Oliver North shows how accurate he is.

Oliver North, whatever his qualities as an individual, is a dangerous man. I would have liked to ask him, during his testimony to Congress and his trial, what he thought he was defending when he took an oath to defend the Constitution. I think that despite his often cloying homilies to freedom and democracy, North had no loyalty to the Constitution. His loyalty was to something I would call the ethic of obedience.

The Constitution, at least in its Bill of Rights, is about the extent to which government must be obedient to the people, not the other way around. The first ten amendments are based on the premise that a democracy needs to protect an informed and vigorous opposition by individuals to the state's appetite for tyranny.

North subverts that premise, and thus the Constitution. North thrills to following a command from the state. He delights in obedience, believing that filling the orders given by a superior is the highest ethical act. What's frightening about this concept is that it confuses a Mussolini-like affection for efficiency with defending individual freedoms.

I'm sure there were times when North, having finished off a tricky bit of maneuvering, felt that he'd made the Free World just a little bit stronger. This is the basic formula for fascism, substituting the efficiency of the state for the messiness of laws, individual choice, and disagreement. Prosecutor John Keker was right when he equated what North did to what Nazi officers did.

So how can anyone call North a "hero"? Why should we honor a martinet with a pardon? I think there's more important work to do, like impeaching George Bush. Senator John Kerry's recent report on drug trafficking among the contras and the 42-page memorandum released during North's trial clearly show that Bush was very much in the loops of the Iranamok shenanigans. He's lied to the people about his involvement, and what he did helped break the law.

If we're really interested in honoring the 200th birthday of the Constitution, then we should exercise our democratic muscles and drive the burned-out Bush from office. Now that would be an heroic action.

New Orleans

Sometimes I think all New Hampshirites should be required to make a pilgrimage to a warm climate at least once a year to provide a respite from the quarrels of New England coziness. And a suggested Mecca? My choice would be the French Quarter of New Orleans in the middle of May.

Mid-May is Jazz Festival time in New Orleans, what the locals call the "Mardi Gras with manners." And the music was good: the N'awlins blues of John Lee Hooker, Cajun bounce from Buckwheat Zydeco, the licorice zing of clarinetist Michael White. Plus food, of course - blackened redfish (overrated), Cajun popcorn (excellent with Tabasco), crawfish etouffé (tasty).

But the best treat is the French Quarter, the part of New Orleans that is "New Orleans" to most people. My friends and I were staying at the Clarion, a few blocks from Bourbon Street. As you walk from Canal down Bourbon, it's as if you're going through an invisible yet tangible door, a warp of air and sound that lets you know you're moving away from the usual homogenized clutter of American life. We stopped for a dozen oysters at Felix's, right on the verge of the French Quarter. Thus fortified, we plunged in.

What's happening in the French Quarter depends on the day and time you're there. During the day, with a mild but sultry sun beating down, the French Quarter hosts street bands playing for donations, sidewalk artists, and a zillion tourists ripping off roll after roll of Gold 100 film. Daytime is for browsing the antique stores, galleries, voodoo shops, and small cafés.

As evening draws up, the French Quarter, especially Bourbon Street, begins to get dressed for fun. Dinner outside on a second-story balcony gives a feast for both eye and tongue. The street fills up until, by 10 o'clock, the bars begin to thicken with patrons, and the thrum of Dixieland, funk, jazz, rock'n'roll, and Cajun will weave through the air until dawn.

Of course the drinks are over-priced. Of course most of the stuff in the gift shops is kitsch. Of course, of course, of course... But there's energy here from the crowds, from the wrought iron balconies, from the dark roast chicory coffee and beignets at Café du Mond, an energy that comes from a mix of cultures - African, Caribbean, French, and European - and their tentative sultry blending.

Every once in a while the townish tranquility of New Hampshire, like gin, needs to be shaken and stirred, and in New Orleans one can feel the decaying

eloquence of a Tennessee Williams play, the spiky resonance of the islands, the turgid history of slavery, the cosmopolitan shine of the French. But then it's also good to get back to the clean air of Littleton, the mountainous beauty of the Notch, the Merrimack River at full rip under its new and elegant span.

Backstage

It's over - finally, sadly. I was fortunate enough recently to work backstage in the Palace Theater's production of *Peter Pan*. I flew people on cables, built sets, painted flats, enmeshed myself in the satisfying craziness that is the theater.

I've done a fair amount of acting, singing, and dancing, and I've always found it a lot of fun. But working backstage this time, rather than "frontstage," gave me another look at the mysteries of the theater. The "frontstage" mysteries come from the "magic" of making an audience believe that muslin and wood and paint and lights are more solid and more pointed than ordinary reality so that the production can expose the audience to the poetry that is underneath the prose of life.

For the few hours of the play we get taken out of the common, and the common gets taken out of us, and we get to see ourselves from a fresh, or at least a slightly refreshed, perspective.

But when you work backstage you become privy to all the bones that hold up the flesh of the production. You work long hours wrestling with a viper's nest of physics problems in order to make things appear as if they've simply "appeared," to make the magic look like magic and not the creaking machinery that it really is. You realize that the magic of the theater depends almost entirely upon the audience's ignorance or amnesia about the fact that the well-crafted presentation, and the skilled presenters, are really jury-rigged rube goldbergs of pulleys and screws and personal quirks.

I remember learning this sharply during the first theater production I was in. The lead performer, who had just finished a riveting scene onstage, come into the wings cursing at the rude boob in the third row and telling a dirty joke to the stage manager. I was shocked to see that he was not the character in real life that he was onstage, shocked to see the framing under the façade.

One might think that all these doses of "reality" would be disillusioning, but they aren't. They deepen the magic by expanding its dimensions. For every "mystery" that's exposed as you sit in the wings, other mysteries take their places, mysteries about why, given all the sweat and tedium and dyspepsia that comes with doing a show, people still choose to stretch and angle themselves to receive that bath of light and applause, that moment of lift and completion, at the end of an evening's performance.

Backstage I got to see people get their living together, braiding all their complaints and skills and points of view together to make a common moment of uncommon power. These aren't mysteries of contraption and light cues, but of recognition and purpose - in short, of living itself. The best show is often the one the audience doesn't see.

The Exxon Trap

Seabrook now has an okay for low power testing. In Alaska, they're still scraping goo off the rocks. What's the connection? The conventional answer is that we can no longer depend upon fossil fuels to answer our ever-increasing energy usage. We need reactors like Seabrook so that we can be assured of adequate energy and not be dependent on finite resources or brown-skinned people with towels on their heads.

But there's another way to look at this scenario. First, it's assumed that energy needs are "ever-increasing" and that the only way to solve this problem is to create more plants, nuclear or otherwise. But this ignores history as recent as a decade ago.

When OPEC strangled the industrial nations, Americans and others adopted conservation measures that reduced oil imports from the Middle East significantly. Under the threat of a deteriorating standard of living, people began to accept "radical" ideas about energy. Smaller cars, retrofitted buildings, increased use of passive solar design - these and other practices helped American society save a great deal of energy.

But now that world oil markets are glutted, Americans are forgetting. And this amnesia is abetted by gigantic corporations who tell us that we need more when we could be using what we have a lot better and by lackeys like Jim Finnegan who suggest that Seabrook protestors are really crypto-terrorists.

What Seabrook and the Exxon Valdez suggest is that we need to examine how our "free market" mentality and practices have made us unfree. If you believe in the virtue of free enterprise, consider the following. Exxon dumps 11,000,000 gallons of oil into pristine waters. The only one who gets blamed is Captain Hazelwood (no one suggests that president Lawrence Rawl be brought to trial) and Exxon gets to raise oil and gasoline prices with impunity and even be eligible to deduct clean-up expenses from their tax obligations (not that the obligations are all that high to begin with.)

Those are the privileges one gets when one is a company whose profits last year were larger than most nations' economies. It's not a privilege you or I get. The glories of the free market will also soon saddle us with inflated electric rates to pay for a reactor with a useful lifetime of at most 20 years and then pay for the opportunity to take it apart.

Whatever one thinks of the Seabrook protestors, they at least do not swallow the party line. Thoreau said that people who love freedom should provide a "counter-friction" to any machine that threatens to take it away. In this case the machine is called "free enterprise," and it should be opposed whenever it opposes common sense and the needs of ordinary people.

Copywriting

The title of this piece is "The Ad Ventures of a Copy writer," and the gist of it is in the title's pun. As part of my business, Full Court Press, I write copy for ads, brochures, flyers, and so on. "Copy" is an apt term. It isn't usually original, and it can be replicated without editing.

At first I thought it wouldn't be hard to do. As an English teacher I had often done classes on how to recognize the subtle and blatant persuasions of copy writing, and I thought knowing the principles would make it easy to write the copy: just plug in the jargon and the copy would appear, like a print in developer.

Not so. One of my first assignments was to write brochure copy for a local realtor. He gave me a spec sheet about the property he wanted to sell and I had to write up an appealing description of 200 to 300 words. I thought all I had to do was gum together some real estate buzzwords and I'd be done.

But the property wouldn't allow me. It was a distinct entity with its own theme. I had to find the property's "feel" that would convey its tangible value. In short, I had to really write and not just simply transcribe real estate lingo into complete sentences. I worked on that single page of prose for three hours before I got a take I liked.

I don't know why this should have surprised me. For years I'd told my students that all writing was creative and that every writing task required imagination. But in my arrogance I assumed that writing copy was a step below "real writing," when in fact it required all the approaches associated with so-called "legitimate" writing: developing a thesis, supporting it with facts, and packaging it in a way that was persuasive and distinct.

I would go so far as to say that what I have to do as a copywriter, and what every copywriter who pens a memorable phrase does, is create poetry. In writing poetry the poet aims to give the reader a "re-vision" of the ordinary through innovative word play and form, seeking to make the eyes of the reader see something new. This is exactly what good copywriting does.

Good copy has the same powers of arrest that a good poem has. It won't be remembered in the same way as "April is the cruelest month," but just because copy is words put to capitalist use doesn't dilute the inventiveness, wit, and surprise that good copywriting can display.

And giving the poetry of copywriting its due offers you a small opportunity for a bit of subversion: critiquing the capitalist art gives you a chance to control it, and your enjoyment means a small defeat for Madison Avenue's effort to invade your subconscious. Not a bad exchange at all for a moment's pleasure.

Father's Day

What does it mean to "honor thy father"? What, in fact, is a father? Who is he? What is he supposed to do? I wish answering these questions were as simple as singing "My Dad" and buying a Hallmark card, but it's not, especially since not all fathers deserve honor from their children. The only way I can think of to honor my father is to provide, by way of saying thanks, an account of what he gave to me that made my life possible.

He has always been "the provider." He joined the Air Force at 18 because he had a family to support. He's bought a zillion dollars worth of life insurance in his lifetime so that, as he says, "my mother wouldn't have to worry if he died." For as long as I can remember he was the sole breadwinner in the family, and we never lacked for anything we wanted. He is, in short, the epitome of responsibility and self- discipline.

At times in my life I have wished he had not been so responsible because it made him define love as providing things rather than affection; or, to be more accurate, to equate giving things as being affectionate. And while I appreciate his having taught me the value of self-discipline, I wish sometimes he had been less wedded to seeing life as a series of obligations to be met and toted up and been a little more spontaneous in letting out what enthusiasms I know he has inside himself.

But part of maturing as an adult came when I stopped wishing for such things and accepted what he gave me as love, as the best love he was capable of giving. The picture of I now carry of my father came to me when I was six. We were in Biloxi, Mississippi, and I cut my toe on a piece of glass while swimming in the Gulf. I remember howling in pain - the cut was deep enough to require stitches. As we drove to the hospital I can remember my mother's soothing "You'll be okay" and my father's strong hands on the steering wheel.

At the hospital they prepped me for stitches. As I lay on the table with the doctor sewing me up, my father stood to my right, and while he held my hand he looked down at me and said, "Be like Zorro." Zorro was my hero at that time, and I knew what my father meant about digging into myself for strength. But I also felt the pressure of his hand and knew strength from that as well.

There he is, giving me the party line about independence and self-reliance, but underneath it all he's holding my hand, not leaving me alone to suffer the

rigors of too much reality. I honor him by recognizing just how much of his life he gave to me, and how much of his life is in me. Not all fathers have served their children as well as mine has served me. I can only hope that my life has given him moments of pleasure and satisfaction.

Jesse Murabito

There was an interesting piece of journalism in the August 20 issue of the *Union Leader*'s Sunday News. It was an article on Jesse Murabito by Michael Cousineau and Pat Hammond, two usually fine writers. It began with a one-sentence lead: "The more one learns about Jesse Murabito, the less one seems to know." The next three paragraphs proceeded to say, in essence, that some people remembered her as vivacious and competent, some didn't remember her at all, and one person recalled her as obsessive and "overly possessive of her children."

The rest of the article goes on to describe a woman who led a full and interesting life, but those misleading and empty first four paragraphs cap several weeks of negative and one-sided reporting in the *Union Leader* about Jesse Murabito, and this needs to be exposed. I don't know if Jesse Murabito is telling the truth; her perseverance in protecting her children is not proof positive that her husband is guilty of what she's accused him of. But the *Union Leader* has seen fit to disparage Jesse Murabito and either leaves Mark Murabito alone or reports favorably on the justice of his claims.

The *Union Leader* is doing exactly what Nacky Loeb said editorially it doesn't do: filter the news through ideology. But in the Murabito case, the conservative principles it has said time and again it supports have colored its reporting. Jesse Murabito's biggest crime seems to be that she doesn't know her place. Rightly or wrongly, she decided to fight the system. She may have made misjudgments and been inconsistent, as Jim Finnegan pointed out with apparent glee in a recent editorial.

But her defiance has been characterized by such adjectives as "obsessed," "compulsive," and "overly- protective," while Mark Murabito's "obsession" with getting his children back (and getting back at Jesse) is seen simply as one man trying to get his justice. She is "frenetic" in guarding her children; he is simply exercising a calm, rational response in the heated situation.

The picture the *Union Leader* has painted of Jesse Murabito is of a woman who is out of her place. The newspaper emphasizes inconsistencies in character and exaggerates what anyone would agree would be normal psychological responses for a person under intense pressure. Why? Because there is no room in its ideology for someone whose intelligence and drive force her to fight and resist.

This is not to say that Jesse Murabito is right. But the fact that the *Union Leader* finds it necessary to demean someone it does not agree with is in line with the kind of conservatism it espouses: resist change, fear those who are different, and disguise its meanness by calling it truth.

Peace And Lasting Security

What is "national security"? In a series of recent polls titled "Americans Talk Security," the greatest threat to national security was drug trafficking, not the Russians. In other words, "national security" was no longer synonymous with the military. Instead, to the respondents "security" meant what any human being other than George Bush knows it means: freedom from fear, a reasonable expectation of justice, a decent opportunity for food, shelter, and clothing, and a sense of purpose.

Dr. Wes Wallace, national chairman of the Physicians for Social Responsibility, gave a talk in Concord to about 30 people on August 17. In his remarks he cited some interesting comparisons, one of which will illustrate his point: 3 days of the military budget is equal to the total amount spent on the health, education, and welfare of children for one year.

The questions he raised are fair ones: can we afford billions for Star Wars and not immunize children? are we more secure if we spend $50 billion on tritium production and poison people in the process? In short, what will there be to defend once the military budget has soaked up funds that could have made our children healthy, our air cleaner, our soils less toxic?

In 1988 New Hampshire residents funneled $1.35 billion into the Pentagon, a third more than all the state property taxes combined. What could that money have bought here at home? In the same year 15,000 homeless in New Hampshire were served by public agencies; uncounted others were aided by private agencies and churches. Not to mention the pressing number of people who work but are paying 50% and more of their incomes in housing; they are one paycheck, one major emergency, away from joining those 15,000. 85,000 people (almost the population of Manchester) are hungry for some time each month, and soup kitchens are becoming permanent features in the urban landscape. And on and on.

What can be done? to use Lenin's phrase. One option for New Hampshire residents is work on an upcoming event sponsored by New Hampshire Action for Peace & Lasting Security. Between now and October 21, P/LS will gather 23,500 cans of food to create a "food arsenal" to match the 23,500 warheads in the "military arsenal." The food will be displayed at the State House on October 21 and booths will be set up to educate people about the need to work for a new and healthier definition of "national security." An undertaking like this requires

an enormous amount of effort and P/LS could use all the help it can get. They can be reached either at P.O. Box 771 in Concord or their offices at 80 N. Main Street. Their phone number is 228-0559. There really is a choice.

Neptune

Voyager's trip to Neptune, the full eclipse of the moon, the Perseid meteor shower - August has been a celestial month. And refreshing. It's good for the spirit to be occasionally overawed by the universe. So often we feel limited, and pictures from Neptune remind us that each of us is at the center of more than just a bedeviled and foreshortened psychological universe. A good searing meteor across the sky can sometimes ease our lives more thoroughly than the most ardent discussion with a therapist.

The Voyager journey has called attention to a very basic fact about our natures, a fact we never think about, or if we do, prompted by a Carl Sagan Parade magazine article, we don't give much weight to. A fundamental tenet of quantum physics is that nothing exists until it's observed, which means that the observer, in a real and not a metaphorical sense, creates what exists.

As we interpret the data Voyager sends back to us we are continually creating a hybrid creature called the "human-being-slash-universe," a creature that brings into being both itself and the world it lives in as it observes itself learning about itself and the world it lives in. (Got that?)

An easier way to say it is this: humans are important to the universe because without us, the universe would not exist as it does. This is not hubris; it's quantum mechanics. This isn't to say that how we notice the universe couldn't be improved.

But humans are not aberrations, they are not a pestilence, even if they act like that sometimes. There is a "natural wisdom" in the universe that tells us that we are needed if the universe is ever to become fully whatever it's going to become.

George Bush wants to go to the moon and to Mars because it will do our characters some good: we'll find new resources to exploit and in the process we'll redeem our spirits (at least until we screw up our new environments) - a practical approach laced with a little "wow."

But there's a better "wow" for our money. We should go to the moon and Mars because that's where we are, literally. Not just because we are made of the same stuff as the stars, but because both of us, planets and people, need each other if we're ever both going to become what we're going to become.

In *The Martian Chronicles* by Ray Bradbury, a colonist takes his daughter to one of the canals to show her a Martian. As she looks into the water she sees herself - she has become the planet. In the same way, the pictures Voyager sends back are really family pictures; we can see ourselves becoming ourselves as we look at them. The more we look, the more we look like the universe, and the more the universe will look like us.

Thornburgh And The Reporters

On a recent NBC's "Meet the Press," Attorney General Richard Thornburgh said he wanted the authority to examine telephone records of reporters who may have been leaked information from the government. Thornburgh obviously wants to chill a reporter's zeal in chronicling government misdeeds, but he doesn't have to trash the First Amendment to do that. Reporters, according to recent articles by Ben Bagdikian in *The Nation* and *The Progressive*, pretty much chill themselves out when it comes to investigating the activities of the first three estates.

It's not due to character flaws in the reporters, who today are far better educated than earlier generations, are fairly scrupulous, and on the whole take their vocation seriously. It's the institutions they work for.

First, some numbers. A dozen corporations control half the circulation of the nation's 1600 newspapers; a half dozen control most of the revenue of the country's 11,000 magazines. Three major studios have most of the movie business; six book publishers have most of the book sales; three companies have most of the television audience and revenue.

As Bagdikian points out, owners of these giants "seldom appoint [editors] likely to be interested in emphasizing those events...that undermine the owners' political and economic interests." For example, William Kovach, until recently editor of the *Atlanta Constitution & Journal*, was hired "to be fearless and make his paper the best in the country." When he started printing stories about problems in Atlanta, he was squeezed out - and it took no memos from the owners to let the staff know which kinds of stories would and would not make the pages.

This, of course, leads to a great deal of self-censorship in the media. In 1980, at least one third of the members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors did not feel free to print news harmful to the parent corporation of their paper. Given the massive conglomeration of media corporations in the last few years, one-third is probably a conservative number.

Thornburgh doesn't have to clamp down on reporters; their employers and the capitalist system that employs them already do. The result is that we don't get the really important news, the news that "afflicts the comfortable" and allows people to make real decisions that empower them. Alternative publications offer

some relief, but most people get their news from the biggies, and that news usually supports the status quo and soothes, not sharpens, debate. So, our press is “free” in that we don’t have official restrictions; but it’s decidedly unfree because the money that controls it won’t let us hear the inside story of the American empire, which is the only real story in town.

What government can’t do, money has, and that makes us all poorer.

Ethics In The Schools (Part II)

This past August 21 New Hampshire school teachers completed a three-day ethics seminar at UNH, designed, according to news reports, "to impart values and citizenship to New Hampshire public school students." The participants studied, among other things, Plato, Aristotle, and the Declaration of Independence.

The seminar, and the Board of Education's proposal last November to teach ethics in the schools, seems to imply that ethics aren't being taught in school, or are being taught haphazardly. But that's not true. In addition to the ethics lessons given each day by the behavior and demeanor of teachers and administrators, the system has its own ethics agenda, shown in its separated rooms with straight rows of desks and attention spans fragmented into "class periods."

The ethics here are decidedly undemocratic and untrusting, and students learn how to play the game well in order to succeed (or at least survive) in the educational corporation. We want them to act independently and maturely, yet the ethics of where they spend hours of their lives tells them that the real game in town is in being a good functionary of the corporate world.

This is why students are so passive in schools. But they would become excited if ethics teaching aimed to get them to question and criticize their "institutionalization." Then they could learn a lot about decision-making and critical thinking, not to mention sociology, history, and civics.

But one of the strongly understood, if understated, limits of the seminar seems to be that ethics, as one participant put it, "doesn't have a lot to do with controversial topics."

This is a comment Plato, Aristotle, or Jefferson would find absurd. Ethics embodies controversy, since ethics involves a choice based on beliefs that someone might disagree with. To keep ethics non-controversial means to deprive students of the chance to work out their beliefs on topics that directly affect their non-school lives: AIDS, abortion, war and peace, the job market.

Instead, they'll get pabulum about trustworthiness or courage in the form of in-class exercises, hand-out sheets, readings, and episodic discussion. None of it will stick and in two years we'll have another report about the moral looseness of American students.

It's not a matter of money; Education Secretary Lauro Cavasos just told us we spend more on education than the Pentagon spends on war. The problem is we have schools that teach an ethics contrary to the kind of American citizens we say we want. We need schools that enter the lives of students, not curricula designed to pacify. We need a new attitude that embraces ethical controversy as the heart and soul of a good education.

Midlife

The outward signs are all there: a half-step slower on the fast break, grey hair at the temples, less thatch on the peak of the roof. My appetite is faster than my metabolism, I wake up in the morning with aches I didn't go to bed with, and I find myself worrying about gingivitis. Not to mention vague hankerings to invest in long-term CDs and suddenly getting solicitation letters from the American Association of Retired People.

Mid-life has arrived. "Do not go gentle into the next larger pants size" Dylan Thomas might write if he were still alive, and scores of men would nod their heads in agreement and suck in their guts. Charles Reich wouldn't write the *Greening of America* but *The Broadening of America* as he watched hundreds of thirtysomething-aged executives scuttle along New York streets at lunchtime. Pablo Picasso wouldn't paint Cubism but Roundism, and Gertrude Stein would change her poetry to say "36 is 36 is 36 is 36."

It's not something I'm accepting gracefully, I'm afraid. I have lived so much for my body for the last 36 years as a dancer and an athlete that I find it hard to accept its branching out without my permission. I don't care for being ambushed by minor revolutions in republics that had been quiet for a long time, and I don't appreciate how the morning after has started to shade into the afternoon after and the evening after.

In short, I hate how the servant has suddenly become the master, how I suddenly feel like I'm carrying around cargo that hadn't been listed on the original bill of lading.

I am not done being young yet. I am not willing to give up some of the perks that go with youth: not just elastic skin and that seemingly bottomless faith that the bad things in life happen to others, but also the breezy confidence that there are endless possibilities, that it's a serious business in life to break out of expectation and buy that pair of Bugle Boy neon orange shorts - and wear them in public!!

Midlife seems to be about that struggle to keep feeling young in a body and a mind that's moving into unknown and finite territory. Not all of that struggle is like trying to shovel mercury with a hay fork; there are good moments as well. If anything, the notices of my mortality being posted around has made me more

decided to do those things I have always labeled as “I’ll get to them later.” It’s now “later” from now on, and if the first half has been rehearsal, this is performance.

Not to get morbid about it. Sweetness comes in many flavors, even the ones laced with my eventual absence; the most important thing is to taste as many as possible. Time to get those shorts on and walk down a crowded street!

Nest-Making

This summer two sparrows built a nest in the gap between my air conditioner and window jamb. Each day I heard their commerce behind a thick piece of cardboard I'd set up to block the gap. When they were both gone, doing whatever sparrows do when they take breaks, I'd open up the window and survey their work. They'd figured all sorts of debris into their weave: the crinkly brightness of cellophane, a pigeon feather, white thread, mud, the usual grass, twigs, and leaves. They started out with a bowl where the eggs would sit and gradually built a dome over it - in essence, a shell to cover the eggs, an Astrodome of incubation.

As I'd sit at my dining room table I'd find myself glancing over to the window, my ears pitched for the by-now familiar scrabble of their building. And then, one morning, in the middle of my toast, I heard a peculiar morse code. Peeping out the window I watched the parents shuttling in worms and seeds. The chicks were here. I often pressed my ear against the cardboard to hear their faint monophonic beeping.

One day, as I walked by my bedroom window, I saw one of the chicks dangling like an angry pendant from a length of white thread. It flapped and flapped and shouted what must have passed for "Help me!" in sparrowese, but the parents were powerless. All they could do was hover and panic.

Opening the window, I reached out and reeled the fledging in, the parents buzzing only a few inches from my hand. I shut the window. The chick had gotten its foot thoroughly shackled by the thread, and as I prized the loops apart with a pin, I could feel its warmth against my palm. Its eyes glinted; occasionally it pecked me, just to remind me what it was I was holding.

I got the thread off. Before I opened the window I looked at the two parents sitting on the hindquarters of the air conditioner; they looked at me. For a moment the species difference between us was suspended. I heard myself say, "The chick's all right!" and it sounded distinctly sparrow-like. They bobbed and weaved their heads, their body language saying, "We know." I opened the window and reached over the cardboard barrier toward the nest - the chick scrambled back in, almost as if the nest had opened up and swallowed it.

They're gone now, all of them. I had to knock the nest out to get the air conditioner in for winter. In it there was some shell pieces, not much else. The

nights have been getting colder lately, despite the beautiful days we've been gifted with. Winter, or at least its advance press corps, has arrived. But soon I'll put out the bird feeders; soon I'll have a visitation of wings, a congress of flight back at my window.

Soul-Searching

In a recent feature on WEVO, Robbie Harris interviewed a philosophy professor about a talk he'd given on the question, "Why, of all possible people, was I born?" What was interesting about his explanation was that he barely mentioned genetics, physics, or even science in general. He missed a far more provocative answer than his musings about available souls and the movements of spirits, stuff that would certainly be on the front page of the *Enquirer* were it not coming from a Ph.D.'s lips.

I can understand his impulse to want to find some larger purpose to the daily comings and goings of the human race, but the fact is, as far as anybody can tell, any one person is here solely because of the multiple recombinings of DNA that have occurred since the primordial soup. It's that simple, and that complex.

It seems as if life in this universe has no discernible purpose, or at least if it does, it's simply to create more life in whatever form that life can take. Life does have pattern, order, energy, and its share of mysteries, but the force that moves it along is wholly and indivisibly material, not divine.

The professor's admittedly religious way of thinking is really not very helpful when it comes to figuring out the why's of life. Religions are essentially a "No" to the question, "Is this all there is?" because many people simply don't want to face that we're only dealt one go around apiece. By focusing on that "No," religion tries to ignore our DNA, to put it one way, or attributes our DNA to something called God that has no DNA at all. Wrong on both counts. Most likely, this is all there is.

Joseph Campbell, in his six interviews with Bill Moyers, explains that humans have created myths to explain the reality around them and illuminate how things in life connect to each other to make meaning.

In its own way, science is a mythology. What makes it different from other mythologies is that what it posits as facts, or at least as conditional understandings, can be tested and, if need be, refined or repealed. Religions, with their mythologies geared toward the vaporous, can't do this.

In fact, the odd thing is, the closer religions come to the material, either by advocating social commitment, like liberation theology, or talking less and less about God and more about "A Supreme Energy," the more cumbersome

and less explanatory the religious mythologies become. Eventually, as even the Greeks learned, religious adherents will understand that lightning comes from electricity, not Zeus.

What an extraordinary *is* this "all there is" *is*! We should honor it because it's what gave us the ability to know it. We should honor it by knowing it fully.

Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe's photography, "The Perfect Moment," is now here at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, and it's about time that people heard about all the other pictures there. This commentary is adapted from an article of mine on Mapplethorpe that will be appearing in the August issue of *The Boston Review*.

As a photographer Mapplethorpe wanted to achieve "perfection," by which he meant having "[everything] where it should be" in the photograph. This approach produced photographs with cool surfaces but which suggested strong energies bubbling just underneath what one critic calls the "skin" of the photograph.

A good example of this is a 1985 black-and-white photograph called "Grapes," part of Mapplethorpe's work with still lifes. A cluster of dark juicy grapes, sprinkled with water, in the rough shape of a human heart, is covered with a light so sharp that we can even see the texture of the grape's skin.

But Mapplethorpe doesn't want the eye to stop at the exquisite detail. His uncluttered surface forces the viewer to move so close to the object that the space between viewer and object becomes charged with a kind of seductive electro- magnetism. Suddenly, these grapes feel robust, erotic, even dangerous and exciting. He wants the viewer to see how ripe these grapes are, how much life and force is in them, and to know that the life-force that ballooned these grapes also works inside each of us.

Mapplethorpe brought this vision of the erotic energy underneath the skin to his work with female and male nudes. His nude studies aren't about "the body," as an abstract object, but about bodies, in all their physical and sexual power. And he takes a step beyond this, suggesting that gender identity is not something we are stuck with but can vary according to feelings and needs - a notion bound to make some people uncomfortable.

What bothered Jesse Helms was just this quality of pushing against boundaries - sexual, racial, political. Mapplethorpe was bound to shock and disturb because he was trying to get people to move beyond what they'd been told they were by the society in which they lived. In his own way Mapplethorpe was trying to encourage that process of self-definition and self- discovery, which

is also a means of resisting authority, that drives the culture and politics of a democracy.

This is something even Ronald Reagan understood about art. In a speech given in 1985, Reagan said that artists "have to be brave;...their ideas will often stretch the limits of understanding...[and] express ideas that are sometimes unpopular." "Where there's liberty," Reagan concluded, "art succeeds." Mapplethorpe would agree.

The Public Mind

Bill Moyers may be the only television journalist with any interest in or understanding of what might be called "civics." In his programs Moyers is concerned about two things: what is a citizen in a democracy (and the public good for which the citizen should act) and what are those forces which erode citizenship.

In his most recent offering, "The Public Mind," Moyers explores how images have been substituted for moral and political issues, and the ways in which image-makers manipulate the way people feel and perceive in order to sell then something: soap, a candidate, an ideology. His concern is that such a strong emphasis on the intuitive and the subliminal undercuts, and indeed makes irrelevant, what he likes to refer to as the "political dialogue of a democracy."

Moyers is quite clear about who and what is responsible for this. First, we live in an economic culture that values marketability over utility: if something sells, it must be valuable. This may work for concrete goods, but when information becomes a commodity, then, as Moyers says, "the market becomes the heart of the visual experience."

Once information and ideas become considered commodities, no different than cars or shoes, then an idea's value is proved by how well it can be sold, not by whether it is sound or useful. In terms of democracy, which depends upon the conflict of ideas, Moyers says that the urge to make everything a visual commodity to be sold to some group turns "representative democracy [into] the representation of democracy" and deprives people of a chance to say what they think, indeed, to think at all.

The practical effect of this transformation of ideas into salable images is to rewrite the Golden Rule: He who has the information makes the rules. And there are some very big players making the rules. Ben Bagdikian, in his recent book on media corporations, points out that more and more information is being controlled by fewer and fewer groups, and that devotion to the bottom line has reduced all information to its "entertainment" value.

This is most evident in news shows, which are increasingly evaluated on the basis of their ratings rather than on their ability to deliver news honestly, accurately, and engagingly. In fact, Moyers says we don't have news any more; we have "infotainment," world events reduced to sit-com.

Those who cry loudest for increased civics education should make Moyers' programs required viewing. The image they present of American democracy is not flattering, but Moyers believes that when people are given the right information, they'll act like democratic citizens. His shows are a step toward that.

Licenses For Dropouts

I'm sometimes amazed at how departmental people's minds can become. The mental departments never communicate with one another, with the result that a person can hold mutually exclusive positions and never feel a bit of discomfort.

Take the lead story in the *Union Leader* on January 16, where the great and glorious legislature of New Hampshire proposes to deny a driver's license to any high school student who drops out. Earlier this month Lauro Cavasos, the head of the Department of Education, said that the nation's schools are terrible, and on an inside page of the same issue of the *Union Leader*, there is a story about a report which says that the United States is close to the bottom of a group of 16 industrial nations in the amount it spends per pupil.

An un-departmental mind might see some connections here between drop-out rates and the lackluster institutions from which teenagers drop out. But not Senator Delahunty, sponsor of the driver's license bill. His argument seems to be that the only real motivation any teenager would have to stay in school and complete an education is to drive a car, and the only stick we have to prod the teenager with is the license.

All this makes a departmental sense, but it makes no real sense at all. What are the connections here?

First is the issue of fairness. You can't, with one hand, penalize students who want to drop out of school for whatever reasons, sound or not, and with the other hand keep funds away from programs designed to help the students stay in school. The Office of Dropout Prevention, for instance, created with so much ballyhoo last year, has no director.

Second, if the citizens of the United States aren't willing to spend the money to have good public schools, as the report states, then why should the students suffer for their stinginess? Why blame the victim for the victimization?

I share Senator Delahunty's frustration at the high drop-out rate in New Hampshire, but his bill isn't the solution. One of the real, as opposed to the departmental, questions that must be faced is, what's so bad about the schools that 25% to 30% of New Hampshire's students don't want to finish out their term? Or perhaps more generally the question needs to be, how can we create schools that will, by their nature, encourage students to want to stay and want to learn?

The basic assumption behind Senator Delahunty's bill is that the schools are okay; it's the kids who are mis-programmed. But the opposite assumption is true: the schools aren't okay, and the kids are telling us this by voting with their feet.

Abortion (Again)

January is the anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion, and while it shouldn't have to be necessary to defend again the right of a woman to control her own reproductive powers, the actions of such groups as NH for L.I.F.E. force the issue. Since New Hampshire will be facing its own abortion legislation this session, it's important to make sure that the arguments in favor of choice be reiterated.

The "debate" over abortion, if it ever was a debate, can no longer lay claim to such a genteel term. Clearly, anti- choice and pro-choice people will never agree. The anti-choice group sees itself as the equivalent of the abolitionists, with the fetus as the enslaved being; the pro-choice people are constitutionalists, defending the right of the mother's choice. There is no common ground because the two groups argue from completely different principles, and the fighting will not end until one side vanquishes the other.

If, then, an end to the fighting must come, the pro-choice people should win because they have a better argument. The fetus is not a full human being deserving of full constitutional rights. To say that it is is to simply assert an opinion as fact, to use Humpty Dumpty's logic: it's true because I say it is. Only when a fetus is born does it become a child, and only then would killing it constitute murder, which makes the argument that abortion is murder also just a matter of opinion, not fact.

Second, anti-choice people want to use the state to interfere in a woman's life but don't seem to see the irony that this is the same state they say has no business telling them how to run their families or discipline their children. If it's wrong to use state power to compel people to do things in one area, then it's also wrong in other areas as well, and it's a sign of hypocrisy, cynicism, or foolishness to argue that the state should compel a woman to complete a pregnancy and become a mother. We don't tolerate this kind of compulsion in other areas of American life; why should be it acceptable when applied to women who don't want children?

Access to safe and legal abortions recognizes the fact that women do not need to have babies to define who they are and what they're worth. This doesn't scant the seriousness of the decision to seek an abortion, nor does it mean we should stop talking about self-responsibility, birth control, and moral consequences.

But women must have a full complement of choices if they are to lead satisfying lives, just as men do, and the state should not interfere with those choices. Anything less than this is a betrayal of our social and political values.

Bathtub Madonnas

They're scattered around the predominantly French-Canadian West Side like roadside shrines in Italy, sometimes known as "backyard Marys" or "bathtub Madonnas" (for the practice of sticking a cast-iron tub vertically in the ground with the statue of Mary inside the arch made by the tub). Made from plaster or plastic or marble or wood or coarse cement, these backyard shrines are as varied in shape and vintage as their owners.

The faces of the statues are never the same face. On some there is a generic mass-produced gaze. On others the face is girlish or matronly or blandly beatific, and on still others one could swear there is discomfort and concern and a tint of sadness. But Mary's feet always pin down the fanged devil/snake of temptation as she stands confidently on top of the world.

When I was in Catholic school, we boys prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary (or "the BVM" as we called her) a lot because she was supposed to intercede for all those humans like young Catholic boys who just couldn't resist throwing snowballs at the prissy girls clustered on the playground or who wore their shirt tails out and called the nuns, in their black and white habits, "penguies" (for penguins, of course).

We prayed to the BVM for mercy because for us Mary was first and foremost a mom, someone we felt we could depend on. Christ came to being human like an immigrant who comes to a new country, but Mary was human from the start. Our kin with Mary was blood to blood, and her love was unconditional and "familiar," tied to family, to intimacy. We young Catholic boys believed in Christ, but we depended on Mary to get us through.

These statues express that same desire to have a religion that's not too austere or distant. A statue of Mary visible from the kitchen window feels "okay," part of the accepted normal, one of their own who will care for them without any prepayments or fine print.

It's important that such small, mundane icons exist. It's good to know that as the social landscape becomes corporationed and the frequencies on which we are allowed to communicate get more filled with static, someone makes the effort to evoke the mysteries and pay attention to the spirit. And the statues are interesting all by themselves, these blends of the domestic and the mythical and the Christian and the pagan, representing human desires and visions as

common and miraculous as the grass growing around their pedestals. They are signs of care and comfort in small ways on small properties, a recommendation that we pay attention to the portable mysteries residing neighbor-like just outside our window.

Best of all they prod us to remember that there is greatness in treating each other like human beings with common roots in the mysterious and the awesome - and that's a message that cannot be said often enough.

Valentine's Day

As holidays go, Valentine's Day is pretty benign, the hard edge of its marketability blunted a little by its theme: loving other human beings. Even if the emotion is extruded Hallmark sentimentality served up in an FTD reusable Merlin Olsen vase, at least it has some sweetness to it, some light and carbonation.

The heart is a versatile organ. A millennium ago people were said to feel their affectionate vibrations in their livers. But over the years loving has cut its mooring and drifted up to dock at the heart. That happened because while the "guts" are more geared to survival and savvy, the heart offers haven to all those feelings we might call "tender," feelings which might become shredded or displaced if forced to compete with the realpolitik of the guts. It's an ascension from bile to rhythm, from digestion to cadence.

We find this "heart" so necessary to a full sense of who we are that we've worked it all through our language and our actions. Look on bumper stickers: it's there, from New York to golden retrievers. When we want to talk ideas, we have a tête-à-tête, but when we want to talk about important stuff, we have a heart to heart.

When we are depressed, we're sick at heart; when we're happy, we're light-hearted.

The core of anything is its heart: the heart of the matter, music from the hearts of space. (In fact, "core" comes from the Latin word for "heart," which is "cord." Shakespeare doubles the sincerity of the heart when he talks about the "middle of the heart" in *Cymbeline* as a person's inmost conviction.)

If something is the way I like it, it's "after my own heart." To cheer up is "to be of good heart." To know something cold is to "learn it by heart." To have courage is "to take heart." I make an oath to be faithful "with all my heart." If I am determined, I have "set my heart upon it." There are damages to the heart: heart-breaker, heart-rending, a broken heart. And the heart becomes fearful: my heart fell to my shoes, my heart is in my mouth.

We should take the lead given to us by Valentine's Day and make an effort to rediscover the heart, our heart, not only the thumping blood-rich cache of our individual feelings but also the collective heart that hammers our ribs, dervishes the wind, and moves the ocean.

Charles Siebert, in the February 1990 *Harper's*, likens our modern problems to a kind of cultural heart attack. The image is apt because for us to regain our health we are going to need to give ourselves the equivalent of cultural heart therapy: fruitful exercise, a regimen of humor and common sense, and, above all, a diet of connections. In our heart of hearts, we know exactly that this is what we need to do.

Obscene Phone Call

I had a disturbing thing happen to me recently: I got an obscene phone call. What interested me about the event was not what the caller said, but how I felt afterwards: a tad amused and annoyed, but above all, surprisingly, a bit frightened.

At first I tried to shrug the call off for what it was, a prank. The call, lasting no more than five to ten seconds, came in the midst of trying to get my day jump-started, and it blended in with shower, breakfast, dressing, running out the door. But I couldn't shrug the call off into anonymity. It lingered, a slight nagging, like something caught in the teeth.

Why couldn't I shrug it off? Why wouldn't it run away with the shower water and the morning coffee? Most of the time most of us feel safe. We may feel a generic foreboding from toxic wastes percolating in our Perrier or something called "crime in the streets," but when we cross the threshold into our homes, all of that, seemingly by accord, retreats, and we don't fear that the enemy will pillage our sense of well-being while we sleep.

But an obscene phonecall - that changes the equation. The enemy's crossed the doorsill, taken up residence in the telephone lines that run unimpeded through the house, and transformed a means of connection into invasion. But it's a subtle invasion - not the Attila sort, with muddy boots and blood-darkened swords, but more like a draft under the door that just briefly brushes the skin and makes it crawl. A friend of mine described it this way: It's the feeling that no matter how tightly you close the blinds, someone can see through them. There's no longer any privacy. Someone out there has your number; someone's turned your name into a shadow with a razor's edge.

What I disliked most about the whole incident was the not knowing: who it was, why he or she did it, what they wanted. If I couldn't know any of this, then I couldn't control the situation, and that lack of control, that being at the mercy, turned me cold inside. And I disliked the forced intimacy, the rude assumption that this person was going to own my ear without having to earn my trust or take the time to know me. I was a commodity, and I felt like one.

My friend calls an obscene phonecall a "mini-rape"; the term is apt. For a short time, and in a very limited way, I think I felt what many women must feel: a sense of strong forces out there that do not have my best interests at heart.

Tonight I feel safe in my home; but for a few days after the call I locked my doors, something I had never done before. There's been no repeat performance, and the incident's worn off. But the sound of the lock turning in the door - I don't like that at all.

NKOTB

I confess - I like the New Kids On The Block. Until last summer, though, I didn't know who they were. For some reason that escapes me now, I took three under-the-age-of-ten girls to a Tiffany concert at Great Woods. (For those of you not up on the Nutra-Sweet, steamy pre-pubescent pop music scene, Tiffany is a teenage phenom with just enough good-intentioned verve and wholesomeness to keep jittery parents happy.) What I didn't know until I got there was that Tiffany was the warm-up act for - you guessed it - New Kids On The Block (or NKOTB, as they're known).

I liked their music. As they used to say on American Bandstand, "it's got a good beat and you can dance to it." It's a music much like the eight-to-fifteen age group that soaks it up: momentarily effervescent, straddling the grey area between innocence and sensuality (one Kid cultivates the image of a smoky James Dean while another looks like a ducktailed member of the Brady family), and commercialized to the last drop.

NKOTB has, in the past year, acquired something like cult status. They have, for instance, their own 900 area-code fan line with impersonal personalized recorded messages. One concert was canceled because the security forces couldn't guarantee their safety against the press of giddy youngsters in the arena. One mother claimed that her autistic child, seeing the video for "Hanging Tough," began singing and dancing to it. (The problem, it seems, is that this is all she'll say and do.)

Door-size posters are marketed right next to iconographic lapel buttons, and, as with the Beatles, kids argue seriously which of the five is the best. (I remember similar long, drawn-out fights about who was cooler, John or Paul.)

I know, the parentalized, rational voice of Tipper Gore might think that all this fan worship and ballistically-driven bass-dominated musical production is Satanism in the offing, but it's really just a whole lot of fun. Sometimes it's a good idea to give in to the enthusiasms of kids and pick up some hints about how to nurture the child in ourselves, that life-filled part of us that loves to indulge the moment and is too often punished by routine and loss of nerve.

At the concert there were as many parents as kids, all dancing together and having an unembarrassedly good time, and for a while that night many well- worn, too-experienced adults reacquired the knack of having nine- year

old hearts thump in their chests. Every once in a while it's good to hip-hop to the beat and clap your hands over your heads. It'll at least keep the joints from freezing up and make the heart feel good, and, at the best, will break apart the fogginess that threatens to cholesterol up the coming years.

A State Of Emergency

State of emergency. The phrase smells of South Africa, the Philippines, Beijing: suspension of civil rights, loyalty to the party line, a free hand for the state's police. "State of emergency": the last refuge of tyrants.

So why was this odious phrase used on February 21 when 40 House Republicans, including our own Fred-and-Ginger team of Douglas and Smith, met to co-sponsor a bill declaring a five-year "state of emergency" as a way to win the nation's war on drugs? Weren't they aware of its questionable odor? Of course they were; that's why they used it, because it describes exactly what they want to do. For these politicians, as it is for Bush and czar Bennett and many other people, the war on drugs is not about stopping drugs but about trashing the Fourth Amendment and consolidating the power of the state over the individual.

This war will not accomplish what it wants to: People will still sell, buy, use, and suffer from drugs. What it will do is erode the Constitution. If the drug warriors have their way, no one will be safe from random testing, police won't have to follow any due process for obtaining evidence, everyone will be subject to unannounced searches, and even one-time users will be subject to license revocations, property confiscations, and loss of government benefits. The politicians and their servants in the media have successfully induced a state of hysteria about drug use in this country so that all they need to do is say "war on drugs" and people will respond like Pavlov's dogs and get in line. I'm reminded of Orwell's 1984 when his office workers scream out their hate at the enemy's face on the screen.

In fact, the allusion is apt because, as in 1984, our leaders want the citizenry not to think about the problem but simply support what the leaders say. How else can any fair- minded person interpret the statement by William von Raab, former head of U.S. Customs, when he said, "anyone who even suggests a tolerant attitude toward drug use should be considered a traitor"? A traitor for thinking, for speculating? When thinking becomes the crime, then we are all living in scary times.

The best thing for everyone to do is say no to drug hysteria and get on with the business of building a society that's just, satisfying, and productive enough to make people feel that they belong and make a difference. Above all, we need to fight against the state's desire to enlist us all in diluting the protections in our

Constitution that keep the state at least minimally off our backs and out of our houses. If we value our freedom, let's get rid of the czars, just as the Russians did, and build a society worth not taking drugs to escape from.

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) - Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) - Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

Block & Tackle PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com