

Saturday Review

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The Greatest Discovery

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following guest editorial is by Daniel Lang, a member of The New Yorker staff. It is adapted from his book "An Inquiry Into Enoughness," which McGraw-Hill has scheduled for publication next month.*

IF OUR ERA has a theme, it is that we are trying to stay alive. It takes individuals to do this, just as it takes individuals to die. This point, in my opinion, is often lost on us. Many of us carry around only the Big Picture, even though our faces and those of our children are missing from it. We tend to think in terms of ever more powerful bombs, all of them abstrusely named—nuclear, thermonuclear, cobalt, neutron. "Clean" bombs, "dirty" bombs, intercontinental missiles, space satellites tipped with warheads—these are the images that spin in our minds when we feel up to contemplating the state of the world. So formidable is the swirl of modern weaponry that few of us dare to stop and wonder whether our lives—our personal lives—are being helped or hurt by what is going on. A subtle disowning of our own creations is at work, as though we ordinary mortals couldn't possibly have anything to do with such matters. They are unreal to us, and our impulse is to surrender to the ways of magic, like savages staring at lightning.

The possibility that the reasoned, calculated works of our scientific age are being mistaken for magic is, of course, a huge irony. The last guise in which most scientists care to appear is that of magicians. They know that this can only make for a public, untutored and gaping,

whose mesmerization is as likely to end in boos as in cheers. This sort of audience, as they also know, is hardly congenial to science, which thrives in an environment of intelligence. Indeed, intelligence is its stock in trade; without it, the scientific method would be nothing. One scientist of my acquaintance, for example, speaks of the scientific method as simply "the good manners of the mind—the rejection of shadow for substance, of dilemma for solution." The broad point that such men are trying to make (and it is not new) is that science should be looked upon as a way of thinking, a pervasive influence that encompasses the biochemist diligently decoding our genetic molecules and also, say, the musicologist establishing the authenticity of a chorale said to have been composed by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Scientists are no longer the novel figures they were twenty years ago, directly after the attack on Hiroshima, but I doubt that the public has yet ceased to think of them as wonder men. With the obliteration of Hiroshima, the popular notion of scientists—and of all intellectuals—altered radically, at least in the United States. The conception of them as addled oddballs went by the board. For their tangible feat of clobbering the enemy with finality, a grateful America awarded them the Order of Solid Citizenship, promising never again to doubt that they could meet a payroll. The view persists, I believe, that scientists are the owners of a super Sunday punch, the fellows who can always be counted on to come in and put out the fire. But the new image, like the old one, scarcely

takes into account the grandeur of the human intellect, its pliancy, its gift for abstraction and synthesization.

This picture of scientists, of course, is not an immutable one. It is already being corrected, I suspect, by the spread of scientific education. Further, as the complexity of unsolved problems and the dangers they present grow more apparent, increasing numbers of people may develop a fresh reliance on the breadth and usefulness of intellectual processes. I hope this day isn't long in arriving, for the sooner it comes, the sooner will the true extent of the scientists' mission become clear: it is, I submit, to teach not only the supreme necessity of the brain but also its inadequacy. The great discovery of the scientific age, I believe, will be ourselves, and it will take all the rational powers of science to show that our salvation lies beyond the rational, at least as we now conceive it. Those powers, I venture to predict, will succeed in solving a wide variety of difficult problems, scientific and social, but new problems will continue to be sighted, like unexpected types of elementary particles. Gradually, it appears to me, we may come to see that final answers are impossible without the play and ascendancy of the human spirit, whose variousness can be comprehended, if at all, only in terms of individuals. We have been caused at long last to face our own primacy, and so be it. Our potential murderers and deliverers are at large, individuals with names and addresses and, very likely, insurance policies.

IN the end, I suppose, the hinge of fate will turn on the ability of people everywhere to do away with suspicion and learn a feeling of trust in each other, which, alas, has more than ever become a form of courage. I would not presume to guess whether this will come to pass before it is too late, but one needn't be a prophet to say that a happy ending is hardly guaranteed. There are scientists, in fact, who assert that even if we conduct ourselves with the utmost intelligence and a full sense of accountability, nature herself will see to our demise. They speak of the phenomenon of life as "a temporary accident," holding that, millennia hence, our planet will be a burnt-out or frozen relic and that life will then be no more existent than it was in the earth's earliest geological ages. Reflecting on this ultimate prospect some years ago, the renowned mathematician Norbert Wiener wrote, "In a very real sense we are shipwrecked passengers on a doomed planet. Yet even in a shipwreck, human decencies and human values do not necessarily vanish, and we must make the most of them. We shall go down, but let it be in a manner to which we may look forward as worthy of our dignity."

—DANIEL LANG.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Right to Know

IT HAS BEEN a tradition of free societies, particularly ours, that given the full and accurate facts the people can decide what is best and right for themselves and their nation. This premise appears to have been sidetracked by our government where U.S. actions in South Vietnam are concerned.

N.C.'s editorial "How America Can Help Vietnam" [SR, Mar. 20] prompts me to make this point. He closed his editorial by suggesting that "a combination of objective thinking and moral imagination might yet save Vietnam and provide a tonic for both the national pride and the national conscience." I could not agree more. To my way of thinking, however, capricious censorship, and that's what it is, as practiced by U.S. military men in South Vietnam also goes against the conscience of all Americans. Reporters in South Vietnam have in recent days told of these developments:

1. Five reporters were arrested inside the U.S. Marine compound at Da Nang, the strategic air base near the North Vietnam frontier. A military spokesman said there had been a misunderstanding and the reporters were released.

2. Six weeks after the Pentagon said it was working on a pool of correspondents to join the U.S. Seventh Fleet and report activities of American naval pilots, a group of correspondents was flown to the aircraft carrier *Ranger* for a one-day visit. A staff of twenty-three carefully briefed "escort officers" stayed with the reporters during the visit.

3. Latest reports are that an "escorting officer" must accompany each reporter admitted to the Da Nang air base.

4. Interviews with U.S. pilots in South Vietnam must be arranged on an individual basis with the "escort officer" present who is assigned to monitor the interview.

5. Reporters have been barred from U.S. military clubs and restaurants both at Da Nang air base and in the town of Da Nang.

6. Pilots flying outside South Vietnam are instructed not to talk to reporters.

Since the United States Congress has not declared a state of war and has not invoked military censorship, what right does the U.S. military have to take such action administratively? The answer is, of course, that they have no right to do so if they are dedicated to carrying out their duties as representatives of a free society.

Military men will, I know from experience, establish censorship regulations based upon the flimsiest reasoning. They frequently make the assumption that they know best what the American public should be told. I don't believe I need to put a label on that type of thinking. My point is that such censorship violates not only America's national conscience; it also violates the very principles that U.S. military men fight to uphold.

The solution, it appears to me, is for every American citizen to express his outrage at such censorship practices by communicating with his U.S. Senators and Rep-



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH
"The idea came to me while I was dancing with Wesley."

representatives by telephone, telegraph, and letter.

HAL D. STEWARD,
 Lieutenant Colonel,
 U.S. Army (Retired).

San Diego, Calif.

Attack on Smog

AS THE AUTHOR of stringent anti-smog legislation now moving through the California State Legislature, I was most interested in Donald Carr's article on air pollution [SR, Feb. 27]. I hope we are not working in Mr. Carr's "vast beehive of costly activism," but that our new legislation will result in an effective solution of at least that portion of smog that is caused by motor vehicles.

One of Mr. Carr's comments needs clarification, and that pertains to his charge of "the lack of attention paid to nitrogen oxides." We in the California Legislature share Mr. Carr's concern about the increased part played by nitrogen oxides in photochemical smog reaction. The California State Department of Public Health has been working to establish ambient air quality standards for nitrogen oxides, and I have introduced a resolution requesting the Department to establish these standards at the earliest possible time in order to define the maximum allowable emissions of these potentially dangerous pollutants. We hope these standards will be established this year so we might break through what Mr. Carr has categorized as "an absurd impasse" and reduce the production of nitrogen oxides within maximum legal limits. . . .

RANDOLPH COLLIER,
 California State Senator.

Yreka, Calif.

How to Get There

AS USUAL, I enjoyed Goodman Ace's TOP OF MY HEAD column in the February 27

issue. However, I am astonished that Mr. Ace, living, as he probably does, in or around New York City, is not familiar with the method of inducing cab drivers to take him anywhere he wants to go within the city limits.

Taxis are licensed and required, under their license, to take a fare anywhere within the city limits. Refusal to do so subjects the driver, upon complaint to the Hack Bureau, to a penalty. I have had two occasions when it was necessary to report a driver to the Hack Bureau. In each instance, the penalty was being "set down on the street" for a week. This means that he could not drive his cab for that period. In addition to that, he was obliged to attend a hearing, which cost him about a half-day of driving.

I regard the taxi as a public carrier, exactly the same as a bus, train, or subway, and, fortunately, so does the City of New York. If more people reported cab drivers instead of accepting their refusals, the taxi situation would be much improved.

M. M. REID.

Wailuku, Hawaii

Affirmative Votes

THANK YOU FOR YOUR new series, CLASSICS REVISITED, by Kenneth Rexroth. I hope that you will consider making this a permanent feature of SR.

(The Rev.) JAMES P. DALE,
 Seminole Methodist Church.

St. Petersburg, Fla.

I WOULD LIKE to cast a quiet but most earnest vote for more, more, *ad infinitum*, of your new series, CLASSICS REVISITED.

MRS. KEITH GERRARD.

Seattle, Wash.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers' reactions to the series, we are happy to report, have been excellent, and Mr. Rexroth is currently revisiting still other classics.