



—David Fenton (Liberation News Service)

## CHILDREN OF THE APOCALYPSE

by PETER MARIN

*To oppose Fascism, we need neither heavy armaments nor bureaucratic apparatuses. What we need above all is a different way of looking at life and human beings. My dear friends, without this different way of looking at life and human beings, we shall ourselves become Fascists.*

—SILONE.

I am not really interested in "education" as a subject. What moves me more are the problems of the young. At best, questions about education should be treated topically: as a way of living with the present, of *making do*. But there is something beyond that too, a way of looking at men and women, a visionary expectation, that keeps us seeking the most human ways of making do. But the most human ways of making do these days have little to do with our rhetoric

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about the public schools, and we forget in the midst of it what we really owe the young.

But knowing what we owe them means knowing what is going on, and it is hard to get a fix on that. Whatever happens is shrouded in folds of propaganda and rhetoric, abstraction and fantasy. *Revolution, Repression, The Age of Aquarius, The Counter-Culture, Law and Order, The Great Society, The Death of Reason, The Psychedelic Revolution*. . . . It goes on and on—a vast illusion comprised of banners and winking neon meanings that fog the frantic soup in which we swim: the mixture of innocent yearning and savagery, despair and exhilaration, the grasping for paradise lost, paradise *now*, the reaching for a sanity that becomes, in frustration, a new kind of madness.

If this is not the kingdom of apocalypse, it is at least an apocalyptic condition of the soul. We want the most simple human decencies, but in our anguish we are driven to extremes to find them. We reach blindly for whatever offers solace. We yearn more than ever for some kind of human touch and seem steadily less able to provide

it. We drift in our own confusion, chattering about the "future": at once more free and more corrupt, more liberated and bound, than any others on the face of the earth.

In the midst of it, adrift, the young more than ever seem beautiful but maimed, trying against all odds to salvage something from the mess. With daring and luck many seem to survive, and some few thrive, but too many others—more than we imagine—already seem destined to spend their lives wrestling with something very close to psychosis. Despite all our talk we have not adequately gauged their suffering. Theirs is a condition of the soul that marks the dead end of the beginnings of America—a dreadful anomaly in which one loses all access to others and the self: a liberation that is simultaneously the most voluptuous kind of freedom and an awful form of terror.

Merely to touch in that condition, or to see one another, or to speak honestly is to reach across an immense distance. One struggles with the remnants of a world-view so pervasive, so perverse, that everyone must doubt whether it is possible to see anything clearly, say it honestly, or enter it in-

nocently. The tag ends of two dozen different transplanted foreign cultures have begun to die within us, have already died, and the young have been released into what is perhaps the first true "American" reality—one marked, above all, by the absence of any coherent culture.

The problem is not merely that the "system" is brutal and corrupt, nor that the war has revealed how savage and cynical a people we are. It is, put simply, that "social reality" seems to have vanished altogether. One finds among the young a profound and befuddled sense of loss—as if they had been traumatized and betrayed by an entire world. What is release and space for some is for the others a constant sense of separation and vertigo—a void in which the self can float or soar but in which one can also drift unmoored and fall; and when one falls, it is forever, for there is nothing underneath, no culture, no net of meaning, nobody else.

That is, of course, what we have talked about for a century: the empty existential universe of self-creation. It is a condition of the soul, an absolute loss and yearning for the world. One can become anything—but nothing makes much sense. Adults have managed to evade it, have hesitated on its edges, have clung to one another and to institutions, to beliefs in "the system," to law and order. But now none of that coheres, and the young seem unprotected by it all, and what we have evaded and even celebrated in *metaphor* has become, for a whole generation, a kind of daily emotional life.

The paradox, of course, is that the dissolution of culture has set us free to create almost anything—but it also deprived us of the abilities to do it. Strength, wholeness, and sanity seem to be functions of *relation*, and relation, I think, is a function of culture, part of its intricate web of approved connection and experience, a network of persons and moments that simultaneously offer us release and bind us to the lives of others. One "belongs" to and in culture in a way that goes beyond mere politics or participation, for belonging is both simpler and more complex than that: an immersion in the substance of community and tradition, which is itself a net beneath us, a kind of element in which men seem to float, protected.

That is, I suppose, what the young have lost. Every personal truth or experience puts them at odds with the "official" version of things. There is no connection at all between inner truth and what they are expected to be; every gesture demanded and rewarded is a kind of absolute lie, a de-

nial of their confusion and need. The "drifting free" is the sense of distance; it is distance—not a "generation" gap, but the huge gulf between the truth of one's own pain and possibilities and the world's empty forms. Nothing supports or acknowledges them, and they are trapped in that gulf, making the best of things, making everything up as they go along. But that is the most basic and awful task of all, for it is so lonely, so dangerous, so easily distracted and subverted, so easily swayed. The further along one gets the more alone one is, the more fragile and worried, the deeper into the dark. It is there, of course, that one may need help from adults, but adults have no talent for that at all; we do not admit to being in the dark—how, then, can we be of any use?

If all this is so, what sense can one make of the public schools? They are stiff, unyielding, microcosmic versions of a world that has already disappeared. They are, after all, the state's schools, they do the state's work, and their purpose is the preservation of things as they were. Their means are the isolation of ego and deflection of energy. Their main structural function is to produce in the young a self-delusive "independence"—a system of false consciousness and need that actually renders them dependent on institutions and the state. Their corrosive role-playing and demand systems are so extensive, so profound, that nothing really human shows through—and when it does, it appears only as frustration, exhaustion, and anger.

That, of course, is the real outrage of the schools: their systematic corruption of the relations among persons. Where they should be comrades, allies, equals, and even lovers, the public schools make them "teacher" and "student"—replaceable units in a mechanical ritual that passes on, in the name of education, an "emotional plague"; a kind of ego and personality that has been so weakened, so often denied the experience of community or solitude, that we no longer understand quite what these things are or how to achieve them.

Whatever one's hopes or loves, each teacher is engaged daily in that same conspiracy to maim the young. But I am talking here about more than the surface stupidities of attendance requirements, grades, or curriculum. Those can be changed and updated. But what seems truly untouchable is what lies behind and beneath them: the basic irredeemable assumptions about what is necessary, human, or good; the treatment of the person, time, choice, energy, work, community, and pleasure. It is a world-view so monolithic and murderous that it

becomes a part of us even while we protest against it.

I remember returning one fall to a state college in California after a summer in the Mexican mountains. I had been with my friends, writing, walking, making love—all with a sense of freedom and quietude. That first day back I felt as I always did on campus, like a sly, still undiscovered spy. After all, what was it all to me? I walked into my first class and began my usual pitch: They would grade themselves, read what they wanted or not at all, come to class or stay home. It was all theirs to choose—their learning, their time, their space. But they were perplexed by that. Was it some kind of trick? They began to question me, and finally one of them asked, exasperated: "But what can we do if we don't know what you *want*?"

It was a minimal satori. I could not speak. What ran through my mind was not only the absolute absurdity of the question but the lunacy of our whole charade: the roles we played, the place we met, the state's mazelike building, the state's gigantesque campus, and, beyond all that, what we mean by "schooling," how we had been possessed by it. I knew that whatever I answered would be senseless and oppressive, for no matter how I disclaimed my role, whatever I said would restore it. So I stood there instead in silence, aware that what I had taken lightly to be mad was indeed



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mad, and that one could never, while there, break through those roles into anything real.

Well, almost never. The most human acts I have ever found in our colleges and high schools are the ones most discouraged, the surreptitious sexuality between teachers and students. Although they were almost always cramped and totally exploitive, they were at least some kind of private touch. I used to imagine that one fine afternoon the doors of all the offices would open wide with a trumpet blast, and teachers and students would emerge to dance hand in hand in total golden nakedness on the campus lawns in a paroxysm of truth. In a sense, what I imagined then is close to what sometimes happens more realistically in the student strikes and demonstrations. One finds in the participants a sense of exhilaration and release, a regained potency and a genuine transformation of feeling: the erotic camaraderie of liberation. There is an immense and immediate relief at the cessation of pretense. It is one's role, as well as the rules, which is transgressed, and one somehow becomes stronger, more real—and suddenly at home.

But that doesn't happen often, and usually only in the colleges, and the young are left elsewhere and almost always to suffer in silence the most destructive effect of the schools—not their external rules and structure, but

the ways in which we internalize them and falsify ourselves in order to live with them. The state creeps in and gradually occupies us; we act and think within its forms; we see through its eyes and it speaks through our mouths—and how, in that situation, can the young learn to be alive or free?

We try. We open the classroom a bit and loosen the bonds. Students use a teacher's first name, or roam the small room, or go ungraded, or choose their own texts. It is all very nice; better, of course, than nothing at all. But what has it got to do with the needs of the young? We try again. We devise new models, new programs, new plans. We innovate and renovate, and beneath it all our schemes always contain the same vacancies, the same smells of death, as the schools. One speaks to planners, designers, teachers, and administrators; one hears about schedules and modules and curricular innovation—new systems. It is always "materials" and "technique," the chronic American technological vice, the cure that murders as it saves. It is all so smug, so progressively right—and yet so useless, so far off the track. One knows there is something else altogether: a way of feeling, access to the soul, a way of speaking and embracing, that lies at the heart of all yearning or wisdom or real revolution. It is that, precisely, that has been left out. It is something the planners cannot remember: the living tissue of community. Without it, of course, we shrivel and die, but who can speak convincingly about that to those who have never felt it?

I remember talking to one planner about what one wants from others.

"Respect," he said. "And their utmost effort."

"But all I want," I said, "is love and a sense of humor."

His eyes lit up. "I see," he said. "You mean positive feedback."

Positive feedback. So we debauch our own sweet nature. I don't want positive feedback, nor do the young. What they need is so much more important and profound—not "skills" but qualities of the soul; daring, warmth, wit, imagination, honesty, loyalty, grace, and resilience. But one cannot be taught those things; they cannot be programed into a machine. They seem to be learned, instead, in activity and communion—in the *adventurous presence of other real persons*.

But there is no room in the schools for that. There is no real hope of making room there. Those who want to aid the young must find some other way to do it. Yes, I know, that is where most of the young still are. I can hear the murmurs protesting that only the demented, delinquent, or rich can go

elsewhere. But that is just the point. This is the monolithic system of control that must be broken. We have wasted too much time and energy on the state's schools, and we have failed to consider or create alternatives. Now it is time to cut loose from the myth. We must realize once and for all that, given the real inner condition of the young, the state's schools are no place to try to help them.

But if that is the case, my friends ask, what *do* you do? I have no easy answers. There are cultural conditions for which there are no solutions, turnings of the soul so profound and complex that no system can absorb or contain them. How would one have "solved" the Reformation? Or first-century Rome? One makes accommodations and adjustments, one dreams about the future and makes plans to save us all, but in spite of all that, because of it, what seems more important are the private independent acts that become more necessary every day: the ways we find as *private persons* to restore to one another the strengths we should have now—whether to make the kind of revolution we need or to survive the repression that seems likely.

What I am talking about here is a kind of psychic survival: our ability to live decently beyond institutional limits and provide for our comrades enough help to sustain them. What saves us as men and women is always a kind of witness: the quality of our own acts and lives. This is the knowledge, of course, that institutions bribe us to forget, the need and talent for what Kropotkin called "mutual aid"—the private assumption of responsibility for others.

I remember talking one evening with a student who was arguing the need for burning things down. Her face was a stiff, resisting mask of anger and grief.

"But what else," she said, "can I do?"

I wasn't sure. "Try to get to the bottom of things. Try to see clearly what we need."

"But when I see clearly," she said, "I freak out."

"That's why we need friends," I said. "But I have no friends."

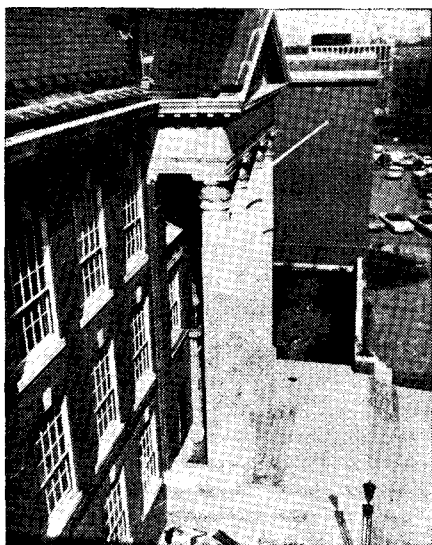
And she began to cry. That is it precisely. How does one really survive it? There is nothing for such pain save to embrace it, to heal it with warmth, with one's own two hands. One comes to believe that what each of us needs is an absolute kind of lover—not for the raw sex, but for what is sometimes beneath and intrinsic to it: a devoted open presence to perceive, acknowledge, and embrace what we are.

That is the legitimacy which comes neither from the ballot nor the gun, a  
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... "malmed, trying against all odds to salvage something from the mess."



"... the six longest years of my life, at Boston Latin School."

by NAT HENTOFF

The more I have to do with schools—as a parent, as a writer on education, and as a teacher—the less concerned I am with descriptive terminology. I am, for instance, generally heartened by the rapid growth in recent years of independent “free schools.” But I am much more interested in the specific morphology of each of those schools. I agree with George Dennison that “there is no such thing as ‘freedom,’ but only the relationships between persons.” And some free schools are so rigidly libertarian that rhetoric often substitutes for the hard work of developing those always singular and unpredictable relationships between students and teachers that are essential if *children* are to be taught—not subjects, and not philosophies of education.

In other free schools, fortunately, these organic relationships, sometimes acerbic, sometimes exhilarating, nearly always exhausting, are in a continual process of development. There teachers keep earning their natural authority as adults, and each child is able to learn how *he*—not the class as a whole—learns.

But even that’s too simple, and therefore misleading. Some years ago, in researching *Our Children Are Dying*, I learned an invaluable lesson about learning. In that Central Harlem elementary school, each teacher was free to work in his own way—provided that he was not just a custodian or a time-server. Accordingly, one second-grade class was as Summerhillian as you can

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## THE SCHOOLS WE WANT:

get in a public school, while I was appalled in a fifth-grade room by the stern, seemingly authoritarian, no-nonsense zeal of *that* teacher to make sure that everybody left his class much more confident in basic skills than when he started. At first, I visited that fifth-grade room as a silent condemner. The man was anachronistic!

By the middle of the year, however, it was overwhelmingly clear that the children in that room were very much into learning, eager to push on. Not because they were being force-fed, but because they were responding to the palpable desire of the young man in charge that they learn as much as they could. And, tough as he was, he also communicated his unyielding confidence that they *could* learn. It was not a “free” classroom, but it was a place where something real was always going on. The day, for instance, he brought in an analogue computer. The kids were anxious to see it work. “It’s yours,” he said. “You make it work. The instructions are there.” And in time, a class composed of what had been previously regarded as “slow readers” made the machine run. Some were quicker, but one way or another each had a part in bringing the computer to life.

What I first look for in a school, then, are two things. To begin with, a head or a principal who sees teachers as well as children as quite disparate individuals, and who therefore does not try to lock both groups into a pre-determined catechism of what “education” ought to be. I would not and do not send my children to schools where memorization and the acquiring of test-taking skills are confused with learning how to learn. But on the other hand, my wife and I have removed two of our children from a school that has become a shrine to John Dewey (misunderstood by the head). It is a fascinating museum piece of early “progressive” education, but since everyone is expected to follow the house line, the natural heterogeneity of the children is continually being constricted to fit the school’s righteous model of how *the* child should “naturally” develop. The teachers there begin heterogeneous, but if they stay in that school long enough, they begin not only to sound alike but even to look alike.

Secondly, I look for teachers who

are chronic learners. My own memories of school—including the six longest years of my life, at Boston Latin School—are of teachers who had learned their sector of their “field,” up to a certain point. And at that point, they had become teachers, with little else to learn. Oh, some took “refresher” and even advanced courses once in a while—more for incremental salary reasons, I suspect, than because the passion for learning would not let them rest. But the general ambience was that those teachers up front knew what it was we had to learn in their specialty, and their job was to fill us up. With few exceptions, the process of learning didn’t interest them at all. Why should it have? They already knew what *they* had to know.

By contrast, there are teachers—still relatively few, but growing in number—who believe that the test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we have a problem for which there is no solution in the back of the book. It is in that kind of classroom that teachers are not at all satisfied simply with correct answers to questions but want to know how thoroughly the child knows *why* the answer is correct. And that kind of classroom requires a teacher who is continually questioning his own knowledge of processes, rather than results. Not only how people learn, but how each individual learns, and what that discovery reveals about the child as a whole.

But I go further in my expectations of teachers and of schools. I am exceedingly wary of teachers who are only specialists and of schools that regard each subject as a self-contained unit. I mean those neatly divided buildings where, as Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner put it in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*: “English is not History and History is not Science and Science is not Art and Art is not Music, and Art and Music are minor subjects and English, History, and Science are major subjects, and a subject is something you ‘take’ and, when you have taken it, you have ‘had’ it, and if you have ‘had’ it, you are immune and need not take it again. (The Vaccination Theory of Education.)”

What I want, in sum, is a school in  
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