

The Way Things Are

I. MATERIALISM: About 25 years ago Robert Frost went to South America as a cultural ambassador and returned with a story he enjoyed telling.

"They kept asking me about American materialism," he would say. "I told them, yes, we are a materialistic people, but we are worried about it. I explained that I have traveled to many colleges and been a guest in many American homes, and that I have never gone into an American bathroom without finding a set of scales on the floor. That's how I know we are worried about our own materialism."

II. RELIGION: But Americans are not only worried about their own materialism: They are religious about it. How else can one explain the vocabulary of American business? A card enclosed with some goods I ordered read: "The maker cannot be responsible for delays in promised delivery, but all orders will

be manifested to consignee within three days of credit substantiation."

My insurance company wrote me that I had 10 days of grace on my delayed renewal.

A note came due, and I had to take some bonds in for redemption. It was either that or file for bankruptcy and be absolved of my debts. In one way or another a man puts down enough cash to show good faith, and his order is confirmed.

I won't pretend I have the whole vocabulary, but *maker, promised delivery, manifested, substantiation, days of grace, redemption, absolved, good faith, and confirmed* are certainly clues to something.

Do they suggest that we are religious about business, that we are businesslike about religion, or that we don't know one from the other?

I sense, as Robert Frost did, that we are worried about it. This morning I spread the financial pages of the *Times* on the bathroom floor. I had only to

stand on yesterday's market quotations to feel myself grow less and less materialistic and more and more worried about it.

I sense I am feeling my way to some insight that will not be said flat out. Faith speaks in parables, doesn't it? Very well then:

III. A PARABLE: A misguided sparrow remained in Siberia for the winter and was found all but frozen to death by a kindly and thoughtful Siberian, who tucked it inside his fur coat to warm it, thinking to take it home with him.

The thought came to him, however, that the heat of his house might misguide the misguided sparrow into thinking spring had come, and that, once revived, it might dart through an open door only to be nipped again by the cold while still warm from the heat of his fire.

As he approached his house with this worry upon him, the kindly Siberian saw one of his cows drop a steaming end-product, and he saw at once what he must do. He deposited the sparrow in the deposit, tucking the poor creature in up to its neck, and left it there with his blessing. The heat of the flop, he knew, would revive the sparrow, and the returning chill would be so gradual that the poor misguided bird would have time to adapt to the freezeze.

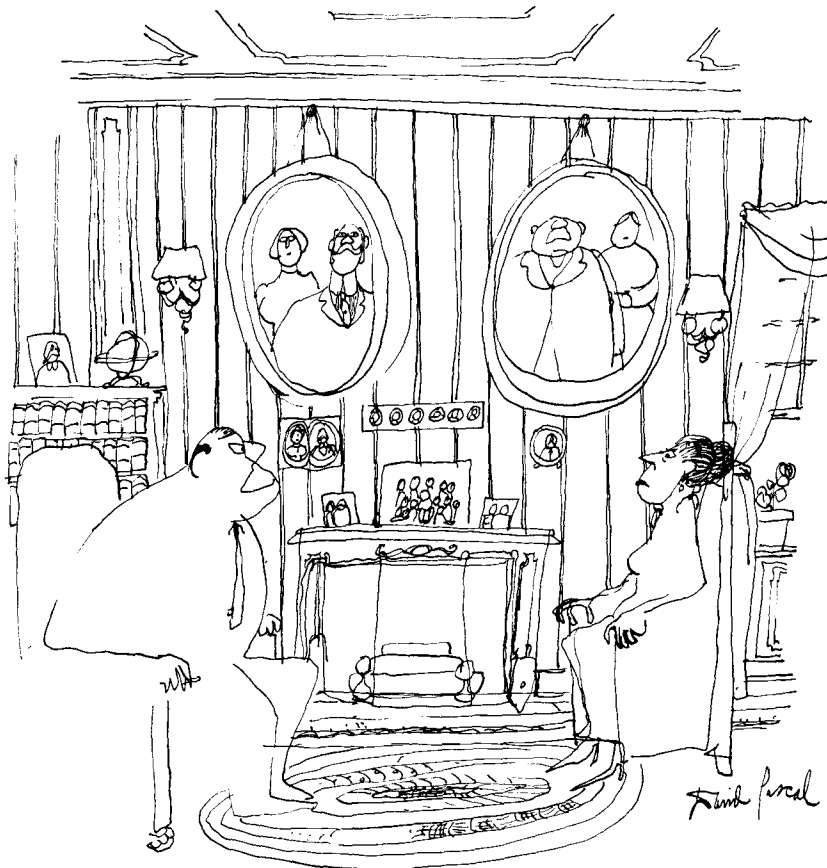
So much for kindly worry. The heat did revive the sparrow. So revived, it began to sing for joy. Alas, who knows when joy will turn to sadness? A Siberian fox, too hungry for kindly intent, heard the singing, pounced upon the bird, and took it down in one gulp. Either that fox was unworried about its own materialism, or it was standing on its own winter of frozen quotations and was ready to grab at anything that might sustain the spirit.

Such speculations about the character and the situation of the fox to one side, there are three separate morals to be found in this parable, and any man would do well to put them on his own scales to worry about.

First: The one who gets you into it is not necessarily your enemy.

Second: The one who gets you out of it is not necessarily your friend.

Third: When you are in it up to your neck, have the good sense to keep your mouth shut. □



"I feel our little love nest has become a Strindberg set."

World Environment Newsletter

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World Food Conference: Strong Goals, Weak Commitment

Global conferences of governments are designed to get the world's attention. In this regard, the World Food Conference in Rome did better than most. Further, the 1,400 delegates, representing 130 nations and 47 U.N. agencies, put together some solid proposals. But, as with its predecessor meetings, "action plans" and "global strategies" remain expressions of intent until they are given substance by the political will of individual governments. For the most part, that will has yet to be shown. Our correspondent in Rome writes:

"Those who feel that the conference was something of a disappointment note that agreement on broad policy outlines was not matched by specific commitments to action where action is clearly required. The United States made no specific new commitment of food aid and no financial commitment to assist agricultural development above what is currently before the Congress. What the United States did specifically pledge was modest indeed: a total of about \$100 million for applied research in agriculture and nutrition, nutrition aid to especially vulnerable groups, and the treatment of blindness and anemia.

"The really specific and helpful commitments came from elsewhere. Canada pledged, in addition to more for agricultural development aid, 1 million tons of food aid per year for the next three years, a substantial increase over its current level. Australia promised to follow suit. Sweden committed 75,000 tons of wheat per year for each of the next three years for international food aid, about half through the United Nations' World Food Program and the remainder to be held on call for emergency needs.

"Norway, noting its earlier special contributions of \$7 million to the FAO fertilizer pool and \$10 million to the U.N. Special Fund, announced a new pledge of 10,000 tons of wheat for emergency needs. Because Norway imports 90 percent of its grain and wishes to avoid a straight cash purchase of 10,000 extra tons on an already tight world market, it will free that amount by mixing homegrown barley with wheat to make bread. With 10,000 tons less barley for cattle feed, Norwegian diets will move toward a relatively lower consumption of grain-based ani-

What the Conference Did

- Approved a Declaration and 20 resolutions with 123 operative paragraphs, the majority of which dealt with long-term strategies for increasing food production and gave sensible attention to nutrition, soils, water management, fertilizer, pesticides, population, rural development, research and training, and the role of women.
- Set a goal of 10 million tons a year of food aid to developing countries (generally considered a bare minimum).
- Created an International Fund for Agricultural Development that for "potential" as well as "traditional" donors may prove more attractive than existing institutions.
- Provided that national food reserves, when they can be created, shall be internationally coordinated.
- Instituted a Global Information and Early Warning System for Food and Agriculture so that deficits may be better anticipated and areas of surplus identified.
- Established a World Food Council to coordinate all efforts to fulfill the objectives set forth by the conference.

What the Conference Did Not Do

- Obtain any significant amount of pledges of financial aid, despite wide agreement that foreign assistance for agricultural development in the Third World must be increased from \$1.5 to \$5 billion annually.
- Persuade the United States, by far the largest grain exporter, to specify an increase in food aid above the 3.3 million tons announced earlier. (A similar reticence was shown by Russia and the European Community.)
- Establish an international emergency grain reserve.
- Induce the Chinese to participate in the Global Information and Early Warning System. (The U.S.S.R. was evasive.)
- Persuade the developed nations to extend additional trade preferences to the developing nations.
- Adopt any measure binding on all parties (nor was this expected).

mal products' and the Norwegian people toward direct participation in a more responsive world food policy.

"Hungary announced a decision to increase its contribution in kind to the World Food Program by 25 percent; Yugoslavia has already doubled its previous level. Iran pledged a first-year contribution of \$150 million for agricultural development, and the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Japan made particularly positive promises of increased aid, though without specifics. . . .

"In sum, positive steps were taken at Rome, though their effects will not be felt as immediately as many wished. But the conference does signal a willingness, expressed more fully by some governments than by others, to seek to pass through the lean years of food shortage together rather than separately. While the U.S. government has failed to sense the urgency of the need and to respond at a new level, other governments are clearly prepared to pick up where American leadership falters and to move toward more global solutions to the world food problem."

The difficulty is that "global solutions" are virtually impossible without the strenuous participation of the United States, which was vague in Rome primarily because Washington as yet has no agreed policy. Nevertheless, the United States has assumed a strong moral commitment, and it is significant that the first operative paragraph of the first resolution approved by the conference adopts the language of Henry Kissinger in Rome: The international community as a whole accepts the goal "that within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, no family will fear for its next day's meal, no human being's future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition."

Chairing the First Committee throughout the two weeks was Sulaiman A. Jabathi, permanent representative of Sierra Leone to the FAO. Ebulient, humorous, and refreshingly unconventional, he knew how to take advantage of adversity.

On the closing Saturday, after five hours of continuous meeting without a break for lunch, the English, French, Spanish, and Russian interpreters simply walked off the job, leaving only the disciplined Chinese. "Just as we are