

The years in which we live are full of conflict; conflict between nation and nation, religion and religion, class against class. All over the world are found newly formed groups of small nations, or of professions and skills, banding together to demand what they call their rights. "Human rights" has become a slogan brandished about in the faces of opponents who are held to have departed from the principle of according to every man or woman, or section, the natural rights appertaining to human beings.

The curious fact about all this is that, among humans, the section of society most oppressed and denied those very rights, are the human children themselves. We live on a planet rich in innumerable species, animal, bird and insect life, whose habits, for some centuries now, we have begun to observe. Mammals and birds care for, instinctively nurture and feed their young, and begin to teach them to emulate how by flying, swift walking and leaping, they may prepare as adults to seek the necessary foods, to attack the prey which they need for survival. The parents try to guard their young from danger, carry them, if need be, on their backs. Aggression and killing are not directed, by most species, against their own. The human species alone, once the habit of killing animal life for food began, has shown itself brutally predatory and destructive against itself. In this the chief sufferers have been the children and the young. So long as women were prepared and able to give birth nothing has been so cheap, as far as the holders of power are concerned, as human life itself.

In 1974 the American psychiatrists asked a number of historians to study the condition and treatment of children in the various periods of history which were the subject of their researches.(1) This 'History of Childhood' covers the centuries from Roman and Greek times almost to the present day. The reports showed that child bodies could be treated with less concern than those of cattle. Unwanted babies were exposed to die on barren hills frequented by wild animals. The young themselves were beaten until broken in to blind obedience. Obviously it was only possible to obtain detailed information about the children of the middle and upper classes. The remarkable revelation emerged that even these more privileged sons and daughters - treated as property to serve the purposes of their elders - were subject regularly to severe beatings and discipline, and were very little valued or cherished for what they were in themselves. Even the grand monarch Louis XIV of France received daily beatings from his tutors.

Tradition demanded that reverence be given to the elders, even to the graves and memories of ancestors. The honour of the tribe or nation rested upon these memories of any great achievement of the past.

As we look back on history and ask what were these purposes and achievements of mankind, we find - having regard to what we have learned about animal and bird life - that man appears to have departed from instinctive concern for and preservation of human life for survival; that his greatest glory is in wars, the wholesale slaughter of men, women and children and the conquest of their territory and goods.

Here it is vital to consider that in the centuries before the theory of human evolution, men will only have considered their actions in terms of the present and immediate future, or obligations imposed by tradition. Children growing into young men and young women would thus only be considered in short term for the use of territory or state, in the present or immediate future. Beyond that the world of the future lay in the dreams of the human imagination, nor could there be as yet, any vision of the destiny of the human species as a whole. Few would have said - as some do today - that we must nurture and care for our young, because they are our future.

It was a modern poet who wrote,

'Regions Caesar never knew  
Thy posterity shall sway'

And we had to reach the twentieth century before any thinking person enquired what went on in the mind of a child. The destiny and purpose of every living species rested on the lifespan on each generation. That this was equally true of human beings still does not explain why mankind devoted that lifespan to glorying in the destruction of fellow human beings in war.

It would seem as though the growth of consciousness of man led him to consider himself superior to the rest of nature. He evolved the notion first of the soul or spirit within him. Man now had something that other animals lacked. Perhaps it came from some god, hence religion. At this point, when he endowed himself with the divine spark, man began to refuse to accept that he is an animal. Henceforth human beings should repress every impulse prompted by the despised animal nature, more especially the sex impulses by means of which, unfortunately, human beings were born.

Education, as traditionally we understand it, which is teaching the young their duty, what is right or wrong, and presently, to an elite of scholars, to read and write, thus came from the monastic men and women dedicated to abstinence and denial of life. From the concept of soul man went on to develop another human faculty - reason, or intellect, which gave birth to mathematics and the sciences. On these so-called higher qualities education was concentrated, not on the whole person, man or woman. When we consider the

extent and enormous equipment of what is established as education today, we are apt to forget that it is still directed by these abstract concepts and traditions.

On the flyleaf of my book, 'The Right to be Happy' (1927), I quoted the Hon. Rev. E. Littleton (ex-Headmaster of Eton) from the Evening Standard, October 14, 1925:

"Children go to school impressed with the belief that they have a right to be happy, that God will give them a good time. This is the perversion of true religious self denial and obedience."

Whence had these children acquired this outrageous new notion of happiness? It came to them from the flood of new ideals on sex, marriage, psychology, liberty, pacifism, that inspired intellectuals in the aftermath of the European 1914-18 war. Many educators, more especially A. S. Neill and also myself, wanted to set the young free of the authoritarian system imposing servile obedience to teachers, a curriculum and time-table of subjects that must be accepted and learned; the humiliation and brutality of physical punishment. We saw young children as in fact they are, young animals full of life and energy, newly come into a world they did not understand, were a little afraid of and anxious to explore. Like young puppies they needed to gambol, run, jump, use their limbs. It amazed me only recently to see an account of some American professor who is teaching parents that their childrens' minds are like bags (his word) into which from the earliest years information can be poured.

The very reverse is the truth. Education starts from the eager and lively curiosity of the young, not from the dogmas and precepts their parents or teachers wish to impose. The function of the adults is first of all to observe the growth of the personalities under their care, to answer their questions, offer them the opportunities for the skills and talents of mind, imagination, the use of hands, and their senses in the experience of their environment which will begin to appear.

Children nurtured and reared in this way are living organisms, born of the substance of our blood and bones, carrying within them the genes of our heredity. In them we can discern the probable truth of human evolution, and cherish the hope that, in its continuance, they hold our future. But because we have long since abandoned the elementary duty of a species to preserve itself, preferring to use our young as cannon fodder, we have denied the young the elementary right to determine destiny either for themselves or for us.

Let alone the rights of children, are there today any human rights? In these times of conflict and recognition of mistakes, perhaps our utter failure to cherish and educate our offspring will at last be remedied by the coming - long delayed - of new ideals. Nearly 60 years ago before the world was sunk in the nuclear imbecility and the worship of science and machines purely as weapons of war, I wrote a parental vision of adventurous youth equipped to embark on a totally different destiny.

To sum up, then, what a modern parent may desire for children. First of all the health which gives the vitality and beauty on which all their functions will be built; next an early training that will call out in them friendliness, courage in thought and action, sensitiveness to love, to beauty, and the happiness of others; and a life which, by providing few but right outlets for fear and its correlative rage, will lead to the easy abandonment of the baser passions. Finally that their minds be filled with the visions of scientific and artistic achievement, inspired and tuned to understanding of human life by literature and poetry. Once their character has taken shape, let them know all that man is capable of, not only his heroisms, but his crimes, hypocrisies, his pitiful follies. Let there be no Achilles' heel of ignorance and repression through which lust for wealth or power or cruelty may enter to poison and corrupt the personality. So equipped, so armed, so adorned, pennants flying, sails swelling, bows lifting in eager pride, they glide to the launching, they the ark of our deliverance, the argosy of our adventure. Breathless in heart and body with the effort of creation, trembling with hope for their achievement and fear of their disaster, we watch, till life and vision fail us, their gallant progress towards the uncharted seas.'<sup>(2)</sup>

1. History of Childhood, 1976. ed. Lloyd de Mause, Souvenir Press, London.
2. Quoted from The Right to be Happy, 1927. Dora Russell, Harper and Brothers, USA.