If There Is Any Other Way

by Jack H. Adamson

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Some two generations ago, there was an old play in which the wise grandfather entered the living room chuckling. When asked what was funny he said that he had just been to the commencement exercises at Columbia University, where the speakers seemed to get funnier every year. This was always good for a laugh from an audience that knew what he meant: the bland pabulum of smiling progress, of a world just on the edge of goodness and happiness, in which the sun always appeared to be rising.

By contrast, history acquaints us with a literature of despair. In this literature, the writers generally conceive of the world as such an evil place, so lost in sin or injustice, that the only solution is for God to step in and end it all. Some of the writers take a pathological delight in recounting the horrors of the end as the final darkness settles on a land which they would be happy to see destroyed. I once asked a class of students if there was any literature of that kind around today, and almost with one voice they shouted, "Commencement speakers." In forty years we have gone from funny to frenzy and most of us doubt that we will ever go back.

Even serious artists and thinkers now are suggesting that whereas we once thought that our dreams mirrored our lives, were untrammeled nightly reflections of what transpired during our inhibited days, we now should reverse that proposition, for our lives are taking on the qualities of our nightmares, which are perhaps the most conspicuous thing we share these days.

I suppose that you and I also share this matter of the recurrent and terrifying dream. I have two or three of them which love to haunt me. In my sleep I sometimes sense them coming on and make agonized efforts to awaken, not to be forced to live again through that primordial terror. One of these is so vivid that I wrote a poem about it, hoping that would make it go away. It is a rather long-winded poem but I will read only a short paragraph in which the actual nightmare appears.

> In the dream I run across a wilderness
> of shale,
> No rivers of water, no coverts from
> the wind;
> In the high sun, no shadow from the
> rock,
> Knowing that one time I will fall,
> And the eagle will mount up from the
> rock,
> From her strong place,
> And while I live, while I live,
> Will tear at my pulsing heart.
> Her young ones will suck up the blood.
>
> I will reach for a human hand
> To find only the arms of rock,
> Red rock, scaling and falling
> And building forever a trap for tender
> things.
>
> And I will ask again
> If there is any other way.

If you were comparing this nightmare with your own, you will have noticed first, perhaps, a paralyzing fear, joined with images of torn flesh and violent death. And there is never any-

one to help. When the heart freezes, one reaches for a human hand, and there is none. In these nightmares there is never any human activity: no search parties, no church with distant tuneful bells, no family or friends, not even God, just a man alone with his fear in a wilderness of rock. Because there is nothing one can do himself and because there are never any others to do anything for him, the nightmare is ultimate helplessness.

So I ask the question, Does life sometimes take on the nightmarish qualities this poem has described? What about the fear that paralyzes and that suggests an imminent and violent death? A friend of mine has written a book, not yet published, addressed to your generation. This book says that if you will not enter into the compulsive consumerism of our time, if you will live with a kind of Spartan severity for the first twenty years of your productive life, you can be economically free from then on. The book has the attractive title, *How Much Will You Give to be Free?*

I tried this idea out on a young man whom I liked. How would he respond, I asked.

"No chance," he replied, "that I or anyone I know would try that."

But I persisted and asked why not.

"Because," he said, "we don't really expect the world to last very long. Most of us just don't look beyond thirty."

"Nonsense," I said. "Monday morning always comes."

"I don't think so," he said. "One day it won't."

And so to the extent that this young man speaks for others, life has become nightmarish in that we, at times, fear sudden and violent extinction.

The second way in which life these days sometimes resembles the nightmare is in the feeling of complete helplessness, of powerlessness to alter, shape or halt the flow of events. We have witnessed many human reactions that testify to that: this is the age of the drop-out, the cop-out, the search for Nirvana through drugs, sex and mindlessness. A sign of this latter is the cult of bubble blowing and the popularity of the comic book, which, according to a recent survey, now outsells all other types of books on college campuses. That Batman should outsell Beowulf we can understand, but when D. H. Lawrence loses ground to Little Orphan Annie we know that a really profound change has taken place. Back of this mindlessness is the hopeless feeling that nothing will do any good, that the rivers of good intention run only into the sea of futility.

But I think the way in which modern life most resembles the nightmare is in its dehumanized quality. It is the essence of the nightmare that there shall be no other human beings in it; sometimes there are monsters or grotesque halfmen, but no human beings and no human activities: no tenderness or trust, no affection, no sense of community. It is dehumanized.

I first sensed with a terrible certainty the dehumanization of American life when I realized it would not be possible, anywhere in this land, to build a Renaissance city. That city had bad sanitation, narrow steets and was not immune to violence; but that violence was seldom directed against the city itself. Because that was true, it was possible to incorporate in all of the public works something more lasting than bricks or stone, the fragile element of beauty. That statement may sound paradoxical but all I mean is this: beauty is easily destroyed; if permitted to survive, however, it outlasts all other things. And so in the Renaissance they built handsome bridges; they built fountains, some of which symbolized man's aspirations and some of which embodied his delights; they erected buildings whose design and coloring were like the fountains themselves, perpetually playing; in the parks, the squares, on the streets they erected statues and monuments, hundreds of them, sometimes thousands. These were unguarded, unprotected, and yet mostly survived unharmed

through generations because the people who lived there loved them. It was the inner attitude of the people, not the power of the magistrates, that permitted them to be.

By contrast let me remind you of a few things that have happened here. After World War II the city of Boston wished to build a suitable monument to those who died in the conflict. Quite wisely they chose not to erect another monument ornamented with cannons, flags and young boys with idealistic faces; they decided instead to build a pedestrian bridge across the Charles River, linking Cambridge with Boston, a bridge not for cars, or freight trains or diesel trucks, just a bridge for people, a walkway where men and women could stroll along, as they once did in the city of Florence or London, with a fine historic river flowing beneath them. Surely this bridge was something in which everyone could take enjoyment and pride.

It was with some dismay, therefore, that the architects discovered the first requirement of the design was that it should be vandal proof. It could not be built according to a man's vision of beauty, as that bridge across the Arno had once been, but only according to the measure of hostility that would predictably be directed against it. The bridge proved to be one of simple but pleasing lines with no ornamentation; there were, for safety and pleasure, some recessed lights which were protected by heavy steel bars, imprisoned as it were from those whose way they would light. Even so, within two weeks all of the steel bars were bent, the lights were smashed and policemen were placed on the bridge at night to preserve by force what could no longer be preserved by an inward order.

Let me give one more example: some time ago it was decided to erect a monument in New York City to Al Smith, a reasonably successful, highly engaging politician; a warm man, gentle and unassuming, whose compassionate nature was responsible for much decency and kindness, especially to the underprivileged of his state. Again, the first requirement of the monument was that it should resist persistent hostility. A simple slab was therefore put up with an inscription deeply chiselled and filled with molten bronze. But, before the first year was out, the lettering had been defaced, the monument ruined, not because anyone disliked Al Smith but because there was resentment at any attempt to give a historical sense and an architectural character to the neighborhood. And so I sympathize with those mayors and city councils who bring in workers in metal and torch welders to put up non-representational works of forged steel bars. These may or may not have artistic merit, but at least they survive when nothing else can.

The fury directed against our human artifacts is matched by the fury with which we have attacked our environment: slaughtered the eagles, driven out the grizzly and the wolf, strip-mined the hills, turned our lakes into garbage dumps, our river canyons into asphalt roads and our valleys into nightmares of smog and cement.

I have formulated a theory to cover some of the reasons why this happens, and I call it the theory of critical mass. That phrase has a technical meaning in physics, but I am not using it that way. Rather, I have taken the term and given it a sociological definition. I say that any human institution reaches critical mass when it becomes so large that it is dehumanized, and that is the theoretical moment at which inner controls no longer function and must give way to outer ones. And the outer-controlled institution, no matter how benevolently it is managed and no matter how hard individuals may try, inevitably arouses hostility, resentment and, finally, resistance.

Let us illustrate this by using the example of our universities, all of which I would say are now subject to outer control. What are inner controls? They consist, for example, of traditions which no one has to enforce because alumni remember them and their children anticipate

them. An inner-controlled university would have a definable character, a personality of its own, a way of doing things that the majority like and voluntarily maintain. Before it reaches critical mass the primary concern is not with prizes, awards, columns of public print and that shabby American pursuit of what is called "greatness"; it is rather concerned primarily with students, not with the number of hours they have accumulated or the hurdles they have climbed, but rather with their growth, their happiness and their potential usefulness to others. In an inner-directed school one has a healthy respect for the opinions of others, is able to feel affection, even for the administration, rather than that automatic hostility evidenced by those self-appointed and self-righteous faculty guardians whose mechanical and wholly predictable reactions indicate that they, too, are dehumanized. Inner control suggests that without brainwashing or even trying, faculty and students may come to feel an affection for individual buildings or gardens, or departments of colleges, a sense of identity with the institution, a gratitude for service given which once found expression in the phrase, used with no hint of cynicism, *alma mater,* mother of the soul.

Until recently that is how I felt about the University of Utah. When I considered the teachers who had given me so much of themselves, who had shown for me an affectionate concern, who had cared, and who had tried to open their private visions of Shakespeare's tragedies or the Ottoman Empire or baroque music; when I recalled how the university had given me employment in Kingsbury Hall where, according to my instructions, I "vaxed the floors and wacuumed the seats"; and when I thought of the innumerable decencies it has shown me since becoming a faculty member — a free, relaxed classroom where I can give and receive ideas, a library and time to use it, encouragement to write, and best of all the students whose confidence and trust called for the best I had — when I considered all these things I thought of myself as a man caught up in a tender, human situation, with innumerable lines of affection and concern radiating out to people, to the past and to a living community. I clearly lived in an inner-directed institution.

Now let me give the sad contrast. Two or three years ago my dean asked me if I would come with him and speak to some of the teaching assistants who, he said, had become discouraged. As I listened to their complaints, sensing the bitterness and despair of people trapped in a dehumanized institution, I thought, with some sense of shock, that if these mature students, known at least in their own departments, receiving at least some kind of salary from the institution, felt this way, how must the freshmen feel, lost among 20,000 other students, watching the television set in a classroom littered with paper cups, cigarette butts and the wrappers of stale Twinkies?

And so I said to those graduate students: "Please don't let me embarrass you, but I wish to ask a question. Does anyone here love this university?"

There was a long, painful pause. What must they have been thinking? They didn't wish to offend the quaint old duck who asked Victorian questions, but neither were they about to surrender even a little integrity by lying about it.

Finally a girl stood up, one of my own graduate students, a fine student, a fine human being, and she said, "The only honest answer is that we feel nothing, no love and not even hate, really; we are indifferent."

And so I ask: To what is indifference the inevitable prologue?

I will answer that by another story. A few years ago a young man who was a student at Berkeley asked me in a wistful way, "Do you know any of your students?"

"My God, boy," I replied, "of course I know my students." (And I did then, every one of them; but not now.)

"I have been on the Berkeley campus for four years," he said, "and only once did a professor speak to me." And he added what may be the most poignant remark I ever heard, "But he didn't know my name." Then he concluded, "I hated it. I hated it."

I suppose once, even there, the feeling was only indifference.

We human beings are peculiar; there must be some hidden law of biology which would explain why we can only be affectionate and concerned when we operate in relatively small units. Before our institutions reach critical mass, our inner directions seem to us like silken strings; they control us without appearing to exert force; they give us at least the illusion of freedom. But once they are gone and their place is taken by rules mechanically applied, we feel indifference, resentment, anger and, finally, resistance. In a city that is entirely outer-controlled there could never be enough policemen to protect the things we value; and in a university, how could a police force or even the National Guard protect all those necessary nuances of thought and behavior that make an intellectual life even possible.

Recently, a young man who, along with his wife, had been teaching in a large California public school, said to me that I had no idea what it was like any more, that schools had become cages, that they were places of restraint rather than of learning. I listened sadly, for I was reared in a time when we had high hopes for public education. I said to this young man, "What would you propose?"

This was his reply: Let the government determine how much, in a given area, it would cost to educate a child and then give the parents a certificate for that amount which they could use in either a private or a public school. If that were done, he said, he and his wife would rent an old house and take in fifty children of various skin colors and economic levels. In the first week they would know all of the children's names, and they would give an affection and tenderness that would make any necessary discipline effective.

He seemed exalted as he talked. "Three times a year," he said, "once during every term, I would have all of those parents in my home, talking to me and mingling with one another. They would love my school. And I, in turn, would hope to be in the home of every child at least once during the year. I would reject statistical devices in favor of common sense and sympathy, and I would teach those children three times more than they can ever learn in the institutions our public schools have become."

I know you are all bright people and you are probably feeling respect for this young man's idealism, but feeling at the same time that his solution is romantic or anachronistic. But at least, this school, as he envisions it is a human institution, inner-directed.

We have become, I believe, the tools of our tools; we have lost control of the institutions designed to serve us. Everywhere affection is on the wane; indifference and hostility increase. We need new moralists to tell us that the endless cult of success is a form of spiritual pride; that our search for prizes and honors and press notices, the insane urge to be always bigger, and presumably therefore better, is perverse; and the consolations of our small boastings will trickle away faster than time itself.

Some say that these dehumanized institutions must be destroyed, and they suggest little beyond that. I would put it another way. If a man is having a nightmare he may be awakened with a boot or a fist or a whip, but that would be to fall out of one nightmare into another. The way to awaken someone you love is with the touch of a hand. The real challenge is not to destroy but to humanize.

There is another way, perhaps many other ways, and they are the oldest ways of all, the ways of men with other men they care about and love. We knew those ways once. Now we must find them again.