

the joys of self-love



about the movement was connected to what I have mentioned here: the proliferation of sects and cults, and an attendant willingness on the part of many persons to abandon individual responsibility in favor of submission to narrow and shallow creeds or therapeutic "masters." The speakers invited were men whose names are familiar to those who read Esalen's catalogues: Claudio Naranjo, Werner Erhard, George Leonard, Sam Keen, Jerry Rubin—all of them leaders of therapeutic schools or theorists of what George Leonard has rosiely called "the coming transformation of humanity." As for the several hundred members of the audience, some had come to cheer their favorite gurus on and others merely to be present at what had taken on, in therapeutic circles, the nature of a celebratory event—the equivalent of an all-star rock concert. But there were other reasons for coming, too. Many people in the audience seemed to be looking for a direction to their lives, and they had come to the conference for the same reason that they had attended workshops in the past: to find help. The human potential movement had still not done for them what it had promised; their lives had remained the same or perhaps had worsened, and the new world, the promised transformation, seemed very slow in coming.

So they came in a peculiar mood, one that combined equal parts of celebration, yearning, and anger. But their mood was further complicated by the conference's taking place at the beginning of the Arab oil boycott. The audience had recently been made aware of the possibility of a world unlike the familiar one in which they felt privileged and safe. To many of them the future must have seemed frightening, and, standing on the stage and looking out at them, one could feel in the air and see on their faces the early signs of a collective paranoia, as if they were haunted by visions of the world's possible vengeance. Packed into the huge hall, its walls lined with gigantic posters of therapeutic heroes—Fritz Perls, Wilhelm Reich, Abraham Maslow, and others—the crowd was restless, impatient, volatile; one could feel rising from it a palpable sense of hunger, as if these people had somehow been failed by both the world and their therapies. It made one apprehensive—not for any specific reason, but simply because beneath the ruffled but still reasonable surface of the crowd lay a hysteria that would in other settings take on any one of several forms, none of them particularly pretty. They wanted someone to set matters right again, to tell them what to do, and it did not matter how that was done, or who did it, or what it required them to believe.

Most of the people in the audience were followers or clients of the various speakers, and as each one spoke his adherents responded with cheers and applause. Others, at odds with the speaker, answered with catcalls, whistles, or groans. I remember in particular the words "total obedience"

and "submission to a perfect master" and "the adolescence of rebellion"—phrases which were used by several speakers and which drew from the crowd a surprising amount of acclaim. But even the speakers who took a stand against submission or obedience seemed somehow to diminish the world of experience and choice. In their words, too, there was a tyrannical refusal to acknowledge the existence of a world larger than the self, the total denial—by implication—of the necessity of human community or relation.

That missing element defined the conference and determined its nature: a massive repression all the more poignant because so much of the audience's feeling was engendered by the world denied. Their relation to that world—what it was, what it ought to be—lay at the heart of their discontent, but it was never spoken of. Even when they began to question the speakers, the questions they asked were invariably concerned with themselves, were about self-denial or self-esteem, all centered on the ego, all turned inward. Behind that, of course, they were asking about something else, about problems for which they had no words, about the proper human relation to an age of catastrophe. But neither they nor the speakers were capable of recognizing that fact, and so those problems remained unarticulated, and they hung in the room like shadows and ghosts, determining the tone of the event but never permitted to enter it.

As I listened, I kept thinking about a conversation I had recently had with a man much taken with mysticism and spirituality. He was telling me about his sense of another reality.

"I know there is something outside of me," he said. "I can feel it. I know it is there. But what is it?"

"It may not be a mystery," I said. "Perhaps it is the world."

That startled him. He had meant something more magical than that, more exotic and grand, something "above" rather than all around him. It had never occurred to him that what might be calling to him from beyond the self were the worlds of community and value, the worlds of history and action—all of them waiting to be entered not as a saint or a mystic, but in a way more difficult still: as a moral man or woman among other persons, with a person's real and complex nature and needs. Those worlds had been closed to him, had receded from consciousness as he had ceased to inhabit them fully or responsibly or lovingly, and so he felt their ghostly presence as something distant and mysterious, as a dream in which he had no actual existence.

Captains Marvel and Castaneda

I saw that at work the first night of the conference and I saw it again, in greater detail, the next day at the various workshops. I remember one in particular: a seminar on astral travel held in one of the local churches. In the huge reaches of the church the few dozen participants seemed dwarfed and lost as they gathered around the altar and the first few pews. Their voices echoed in the empty space as they rose one to testify as to how they had left their bodies while asleep, or how their friends had, or how they had heard about someone who had. The tone was one of strained yearning, a combined will to believe and be believed, as if by sheer force of conviction they could bring into being a new world to replace the old one. They spoke about "space cadets" and "soul traps" and the ethics of psychic power, and after a while they shifted ground and spoke about the possibilities of using such power to get things changed in Washington.

"We'll get to the President while he's

asleep," said someone. "We'll infiltrate his dreams."

"But that isn't right," said someone else. "That's tyranny, too. We can't intervene without his consent."

"It doesn't matter," said a third. "It won't work anyway. I've a friend who knows someone who tried it. He left his body and went to the White House. But he couldn't get in. The President has astral bodyguards. They know what's what in Washington."

So it went, a series of exchanges making of the world of possibility a comic-strip comology. It was both absurd and sad: the exchanges and the pain implicit in them conveyed the participants' anguish at their own powerlessness. I thought automatically of the mysticism rampant in Germany in the Thirties, or of the passion for shamans and mystics in prerevolutionary Petrograd, or of the Christian zealots in declining Rome. The seminar seemed to mix aspects of all three, and the church was a fitting place for it, for the participants were like lost pilgrims trying to create, in its shadow, a new faith to replace the one they had lost. The last remaining shreds of reason and hope mingled with emergent superstition and fantasy, and the end result was neither moral action nor a complex vision of the world, but a child's garden of absurdities, an impotent dream of power. Confronted by a world in which casual goodness was no longer sufficient as a response, the participants were groping for a way to restore to themselves a power and significance they could no longer feel. In this particular instance the salvatory course they took involved astral travel and psychic power, but it might just as easily have been est or Scientology or submission to Guru Maharaj Ji or even a doctrinaire adherence to Reich's orgasm theory. As different as all those enthusiasms are, they have a common ground; behind them all is a sense of exhaustion, the bourgeois will to power mixed with impotence, and the ache of no longer feeling at home in the world.

Perhaps the best example of all this is the immense popularity of Castaneda's works about don Juan. What they offer the yearning reader is precisely what I am talking about here: the dream of an individual potency to be derived magically from another world. In essence it is an updated version of the Protestant dream of the salvation of the soul, and the important thing about the power celebrated within them is that it occurs neither in the actual polis nor in the company of significant others. It is found, instead, in a moral and human desert, a fictitious landscape emptied of comrade or lover or child, of every genuine human relation (save that of master and disciple) in which joy or courage might actually be found.

Castaneda's myth of don Juan is not an alternative to our condition, but a metaphor for it. It is simply the familiar myth of the solitary gunslinger translated into spiritual language, the comic-strip story of Superman or Captain Marvel made into a slightly more sophisticated legend for adults. It legitimizes our loneliness and solaces us with the myth that we can, in our isolation, find a power to make ourselves safe.

Contrast, for a moment, Castaneda's barren mysteries with the work of Levi-Strauss, for whom the world of magic and myth is always a human world, a realm explored and inhabited by others like ourselves. For Levi-Strauss the crucial human moment is not the moment of separate awareness; it is the moment of human meeting, in which the other's existence creates for us a sense of the depth and complexity of the world. That, precisely, is what is missing from Castaneda's world. We forget, reading it, that almost

without exception the visionary experiences of Indian cultures are a collective work, prepared and defined and sustained by the community, by a world view which is, in effect, the product of cooperative labor. Visionary experience leads not only to the gods and into the self, but it also binds on to the world of myth and—through symbolism and tradition—to the historical and social worlds. The individual seeker, though sometimes solitary, is never alone on the quest; the journey occurs within a landscape maintained inwardly by generations of men and women, and the experience is a wedding to them all. Come back from their vision quests, the American Indians recited their newly made poems or sang their songs to the tribe, feeding back to it the shared truths of a solitude that was *not* separate, but shared.

Look, for instance, at the words of Black Elk, the visionary Indian leader, close to death and addressing the gods: "Hear me, not for myself but for my people. Hear me in my sorrow, for I may never live again. Oh, make my people live."

Make my people live! The tale in this instance is not of power but of love—not only for the gods or the self but for the world of others, those whose presence creates for the self a body as truly one's own as the flesh. That love, that sense of lived relation, is at the heart not only of tribal lore, but at the center of the legends of most cultures. One thinks of Odysseus surrounded by comrades seeking to return to his home, or of Gilgamesh driven to seek the secret of immortality by the death of Enkidu, his friend. Both of them are moved by what lies behind all myth and long-lived culture: the felt sense of relation and reciprocity. Indeed, that reciprocity is identical to culture: a collective creation and habitation of value sustains what we carelessly call the "individual" self. But that, in our dream of power, is what we no longer remember. It disappears from our myths, it vanishes from our therapies, and we come to the worlds of mystery much as we came long ago to the new world: with greed and fear rather than awe and love. In the name of power we strip it of everything real, and it becomes nothing more than a reflection of our need.

What is lost in that whole process is a crucial part of our own human nature, our unacknowledged hunger for relation, what might be called "an appetite for Good": the needful reaching out for a life in a larger world. We are moved toward that world by the inner force Freud sometimes called Eros: the desire for relation is as much at work in our need for community and moral significance as it is in our need for coupled love.

To put it simply, it is as if each of us had at the same time a smaller and larger self, as if we inhabited at the same moment a smaller and larger world. The smaller world is the one familiar to us, the world of the individual ego and "interpersonal" relations, a reality acknowledged by our habits of thought and by our institutions and therapies. But we also inhabit a larger and unrealized world, one in which every gesture becomes significant precisely because it is understood to bind us to the lives of invisible others.

The natural direction of human ripening is from the smaller to the larger world, is toward the realization and habitation of ever-widening realms of meaning and value. Just as the young are moved from the inside out through increasingly complex stages of perception and thought demanding corresponding changes in their environment, so, too, adults are moved from inside themselves through increasingly com-

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