

Kidding in the Family Room: Literature and America's Psychological Class System · Carol Bly

NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR a stage-development theory for the American class system. The very phrase “stage-development” offends half the world, let alone applying it to a national family secret—the American class system. We don’t welcome a theory that says adults can and should change; we keenly don’t want to hear any theory that says *whole enclaves of adults* can change.

We literary people nearly curl our lips at expressions like “personality change,” even though in the next breath we may argue that what’s needed for the ghetto is “education.” Well, and what if “education”—some sort of education, at least—is what’s needed for the mentally idle, suffocating, bored middle-class American sprawled in the family room? There may be such a canny and humane kind of education already designed, already in use in the world: there may already be such a stunning intervention, if you can use the expression “intervention” in things cultural, that if our family room TV addict could experience it he or she would leave off glaring at Bill Cowher’s new quarterback; he or she would abandon forever the desultory and dreamless conversations, laced with kidding. He or she would become, willfully, a serious human being.

Everyone, individually or in groups, has some psychological wants that don’t work out very nicely for other people. One psychological want I have noticed in privileged, educated people is their idea that nothing can change the half-educated or discultivated or totally uneducated middle-class American sprawled in the family room. Oh!—of course the ghetto person and the ghetto enclave must be educated so they can change—but the American middle-class person is off-limits. Apparently there is something terrifying about the idea of re-educating this type of middle-class person. Although uneducated or half-cultivated or discultivated middle-class people are the butt of all novelists: there is not any writer I know of who wants the working-class protagonist to rise and join the sneering, kidding, cynical middle class. Non-intellectual, often non-voting, non-*thinking*, non-imaginative people are the villains in all literatures. We all hate the

non-reflective and non-civic person who can't care for anything beyond his or her own family concerns. They are what keep life in Arnold Bennett's St. Louis Square bloodless. They try to come up for air in George Orwell. Of all their stereotypical crimes the one I dislike most is that they constantly miss the historical moment. They are like the torturer's horse and the skating children and the bridge officer or helmsman of the expensive ship in Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts." Whatever of moment is happening it is none of their business. For unreflective people life is simply a sequence of incidents of which the most passive or least self-confident make nothing much. The more voluble of them can make anecdotes, but no connections. They don't devise, consciously, principles by which they decide to live or not live. They are psychologically unconscious. In case of doubt (when something comes up) they commit the most ubiquitous, least criticized social offense. They *kid*. If you live among them you must "take some kidding."

The above remarks have the sound of nasty diatribe, but I want to talk about kidders in the family room the way physicians talk about wounds which happen to be pustulant. Doctors are willing to describe repulsive conditions because they mean to think through a diagnosis and then look around for what curatives anyone has thought up. They mean to help. Dickens despised the insensitive, uneducated bourgeois for his or her insensitivity, but Dickens didn't know any theories for psychological transformation. Authors are still rather like that. If we rail against something in human nature or against one enclave of human beings, we tend to avoid saying, "I hate the way that class background operates." And should our colleagues pontificate against any certain class background, we lose respect for them: they are lacking in love of the universe.

Such piety would be all very well if literature were the only medicine for the world's ills. It isn't. Literature is not a transformative discipline: most people who write it and most people who teach it regard it as a descriptive discipline. It tells us how the world is, with the implication that how the world is is how it ever has been and ever shall be — an endless mix of appalling and gorgeous human behavior set among the small props and major scene drops of nature. Literature is a loving field, in a way — nearly all poets and novelists and playwrights and short story writers love such particulars of the universe as they remember from childhood. They love most of their

love affairs. They remember, with amusing or poignant interest, the various workplaces of their life. They are quite tolerant. They are tolerant, in addition to practising the literary philosophy that the more things change the more they stay the same. Bede described things that happen in the 1990s. Such a *Weltanschauung* does not produce change agents.

It is terribly important to realize that if we follow only the intellectual style of our literary habitat we will miss serious chances to change the world. We will be, in effect, children skating while the white legs of Icarus disappear into the sea. Here is a small example: everyone supposes they love the work of Wendell Berry, but it is the political scientists and philosophers and ecologists who have spotted the brilliance of Berry's essay "Solving for Pattern" (in *The Gift of Good Land*). In this small essay, Berry teaches a way you can reorganize your whole life. You can use the essay the way Socrates used works he got hold of (if Plato reports him rightly). But which works of Berry's do literary people like best? Those along the coast of literary habit—nostalgia for simpler, better ways of life, detailed and moving descriptions of nature in rural places, and so forth.

It is all right not to be changers of people if people are doing no harm and if they are happy in what utilitarians call "fecund happiness"—that is, happiness which breeds more happiness rather than happiness which breeds less happiness. If you are an alcoholic, happy with the bottle, you are not engaged in a "fecund" happiness: quite the reverse, it will take ever more drink to bring you up to past levels of kicks, and what's more, drinking itself will considerably lessen any happiness you yourself can get from other activities in life, and it will lessen the happiness, without exception, of everybody around you. "Fecund happiness," on the other hand, includes such things as philosophical reflection and making cognitive connections between particular information and likely meanings for that information (the kind of work Piaget described in early stage-development theory). People who do philosophical reflection become happier the more they do it. They make people around them happier. When they connect information about particular subjects to meaningful generalizations they enable themselves and the rest of us to move from aesthetic enjoyers of the particular (this day, this faint moonlight, this music) to political and ethical creatures (it ought to be that all creatures have leisure and income enough to spend time in a place where the faint moonlight can be cleanly seen for hours and hours).

We know there is such a thing as *cultural abuse*. I have made up the phrase for it, but its facts are known to us all—especially throughout the years of the Reagan and Bush administrations: disfunding educational and cultural programs first for the poor, then for us all. If we are willing, just for the purposes of this essay, to think of Americans in their family rooms as people living in a psychological habitat, and to think of the traditional rich, in their living rooms (they wouldn't be caught dead using the term "family room") as living in another psychological habitat, we might see that the family room joker is not a *type* of person who will always be the same, but that he or she might be someone at a certain level of psychological and cultural growth. Further growth—however firmly nature programmed potential growth into the head—is being *psychologically blocked* just as ghetto kids who are kept from abstract conversations with adults are measurably cognitively slowed by the age of two, just as puppies, kept from all loving touch, either in the litter, or by human beings, become measurably more stupid and unsocialized dogs than do other puppies, just as eighteen-year-olds are intentionally bullied by the Marine drill instructor until they give up spontaneous decision-making during boot camp.

What is the invariable among these three cases of psychological, which is to say cultural, blocking? It is that in each of the three cases the subject of the experiment leaves off a pleasurable activity which is (to the Utilitarian philosophers) "fecund,"—that is, as explained above, a pleasure which leads to further pleasure in the subject and in the creatures around the subject. Instead, the subject is reduced to activity which does not breed life-giving happiness. The cognitively blocked child will grow up unable to do principled thinking. When the privileged make their haphazard remarks about how "what the ghetto really needs is education," I believe they mean that people, including ghetto inhabitants, have a right to learn and enjoy principled thinking—and of course everyone will be safer as more Americans practice principled thinking. It is something of a deterrent to murder. The puppy will grow up into a dog that mindlessly bites instead of distinguishing between who deserves a bite and who doesn't. (By the way, if you haven't seen it recently, Plato's remarks in *The Republic*, Book II, on the training of dogs is genial, elegant thinking. I mention it because most people's reading of Plato happens, frenetically, in college, and we then miss the charm of it.) And finally, any reading of boot camp memoirs shows us that

making someone who mindlessly kills is the primary purpose of the sergeant's bullying. But it is also the reverse of cultural stage-development: it is taking a reflective person and changing him or her into something like a Nazi—someone who fearfully and promptly takes orders. Someone who obeys orders is of course dangerous. There is an effect incidental to the discultivation of soldiers: every study I have seen suggests that men (for it is predominantly men) who undergo de-sensitization of the conscience in combination with mindless obedience to orders must change their sources of *pleasure*. They trade in the pleasure of being a free-standing individual guided by his own will for the pleasure of being in a herd of likeminded folk (one's platoon) and in *believing that the particular herd one is in is the best*. Such pleasures (herd companionship and my herd's superiority to your herd) are the most improvident pleasures there are! They de-intellectualize the subject, since whenever "I" and "my" must be kept opposed to "others" and "theirs," holy connections are necessarily stopped. All sense of empathy is blocked. For it if isn't, "I" and "my" might seem too germane to "others" and "theirs," in which case I might lose my feelings of superiority, and my ability to hurt those others when ordered to do so.

If we are willing to call reverse stage-development *cultural abuse*, then we can raise an ethical hue against such discultivation as lack of humanities education, or anything else that blocks contemplation. For the sake of clarity, a short, rough list: junk culture, violent TV, the endless stupidity of politicians' lies, the noise of rock music which is known to scramble cognition, and the encouragement simply to kid one's way through life as if life were a kind of recreation period sometimes interrupted by income-earning are all influences that block earnest talk and thinking. As with other kinds of abuse, we can identify its victims by the stories they tell of their experience and the symptoms they show. As with other victims, we can look at them as people who could be doing better and who deserve better luck. Just as many battered wives refuse offers of help and keep returning to the batterer, many kidders in the family room may well resist school literary and social programs. Such parents now have a lot of power: they can be great killjoys to their children's cultural life. They don't want their characters or their behaviors examined, not to mention deplored, by any big-shot experts. And traditional literary-minded people shiver with repulsion at

the idea that the family room joker is not just a necessary, pathetic element of a naturally hierarchial society but is, on the contrary, someone experiencing *cultural abuse* and who will, if not intervened with, bring up his or her children to the same psychological limitations. In fact, who in the world does a writer think she is to suggest that something should be done about the constant joker—good-natured, cynical, coarse, unpretentious, unpolitical fellow that he is? If she doesn't like the type, why not put a few of his number into short stories or essays or poems and then shut up and leave him alone. Or if he is so bad, don't tell us about him at all. Someone asked Hemingway why he didn't write novels about ordinary middle-class Americans: his answer was, Why should I write about people with broken legs? Hemingway was not a change agent, to say the least. He was, classically, as psychologically ignorant people nearly always are no matter how marvelous they may be in their own fields, a typologist.

To a typologist, the family kidder is the way he is and always will be. He is not a blocked artist, philosopher, or statesperson. Literary people may equably agree that a remarkably ascerbic critic who jeers at most of what he or she reads likely is a blocked author: they are more or less allowing that unfulfilled intellectual potential turns the temperament to resentment. It's a nice, solid idea. It is much like C. G. Jung's idea that any gift unused will turn to poison in the unconscious. If we allow that such a psychological theory of poisoning-the-personality-through-blocking-potential operates for the English professor we had better allow that it works for the family room cynic as well.

One has quite different feelings when one says, "It looks as if old What's It hates everything he reviews because he hasn't published anything creative himself," from when one forces oneself to say, "In thousands of circumstances I never thought of before, there is a kind of cultural advantage or disadvantage being practised: this is a question of justice and I shall have to respond to it, if I am a member of my beloved but shaky democracy." *It is admitting to psychological theory in the normal zone of things.* I feel tolerant of people not wanting to give credence to psychological theories in the normal zone. I spent years like that, never guessing that therapeutic skills can move one from a simple and low level of willpower to a complex and high level. Nobody had told me about this life-enhancing aspect of "interactional skills," and since social psychologists write such dreadful Latinate

jargon no one lightly reads through their books.

I am not annoyed that people avoid psychological applications altogether but it is enraging that the same people who reject any *hopeful* use of psychology will avidly agree to hope-denying, deterministic, fatalistic psychological ideas. They willingly hear out a theory provided it is full of doom: they say with a sigh, “O yes, I suppose that *would* be so.” Or more pretentiously: “Right! I can see how *that* would be operative, all right!” Here is an example of such a theory of doom:

Enviably democracies turn into empires; they acquire the ugly markings of empire—wars abroad paid for by taxation for which only the rich find loopholes, delapidation of the infrastructure because the rich have voted money for repair to go elsewhere, such as into shareholders’ dividends or into the— for uncultivated people, at least—exhilarating foreign wars, mentioned above. Empires or the private sector in empires devise ever more violent circuses if it’s late Rome, ever more violent television if it is recent America. Empires thus debauch the tastes of common people so that our species-wide hunger for justice and meaningful challenges is instead redirected by distraction for its own sake and repetitive jolts of violent stimuli.

That is a deterministic stage-development theory of government. Its implication that we can’t choose to keep our democracy from going all the way to empire has a depressing, therefore authoritative, sound to it. If we are in a living room talking about Rome and America, the word “factors” quickly enters the conversation. Here is a psychological secret of sorts: when a group of people start talking about factors, or phenomena that “factor in,” our willpower, the energetic ego inside us, the part that is game for anything hopeful, begins to sag, the way gardeners’ spirits sag when sleet furs the unripe fruit. The hopeful will retire from the conversation because it doesn’t want to be depressed; once will has left, the remaining part of the personality is all we can hear. A perfect parallel is a church. Once the strong, processing choir, which knows the music, and the litany, and can sing, has passed, all one hears is the disparate and unsure voices of the congregation. When leaders leave, the followers make the responses.

In the case of the human mind, then, what is this follower part of the personality once the ebullient leader (will) is absent?

It is our passive nature, generally glad enough to take over the way the weakest, surliest, stupidest vice-president of any organization is usually more than willing to take over should the president die or leave. The uncreative elements inside us, just like the uncreative elements of society, want a day or two in the sun. Human beings may want to live creatively, but they also have fun living uncreatively. Now the uncreative or “follower” aspect of us happens to be partial to depressing, hopeless, somewhat scientific-sounding theory—the more particular its arguments the better. People who are in their follower mode briskly agree that indeed you are damned right that all governments get worse as they go along.

One marking of a follower, as George Orwell warned us in *1984* is his or her poor memory for history. That means that the follower aspect inside each of us has a poor memory for history. (I am awfully sick of people quite seriously talking about being respectful of the Child within them: we need to recognize the Follower within us and make sure it isn't doing too much of the talking!)

We are supposing that everyone in the room, however, is in his or her follower mode, quick to agree to pessimistic generalizations and short on anecdotes they themselves can bring to bear. They therefore tend to be impressed if you document your pessimistic determinism by citing some history they don't know—say, the gradual change of the medieval Germanic tribes from crude, communal gangs of tough guys and their women to communal gangs of tough guys and their women who have awarded notable privilege to the soldiery. An ominous fine point: it was one thing when privilege went to living soldiers in return for brave, large-scale killing. It is the job of soldiers, killing large numbers of people bravely, and if they do it they are good workers. To award them is like giving a house and picket fence to Sergeant Alvin York. But soon, in less than hundreds of years, Saxon soldiery *inherited* privilege, as had royalty in Rome. These privileged soldiers became the thane class, which most of us know of only through the Thaneship of Cawdor which Macbeth coveted and killed for.

How obvious it all sounds, this bad news! But it has a second implication—if we feel intellectually sound as we mutter, “O yes—inherited blessings and evils!” we might make an ethical mistake because it feels comfort-

able enough in the conversation: we might let the concept of inherited evil flow over to our social class system. If evils seem indeed to be a part of *fate* then we get to go on taking our class system as merely one aspect of human fate. We get to say that human beings are frozen wherever we are on the continuum of psychological sophistication (from culturally and psychologically blocked at one end, let us say, to free-hearted at the other). "You can't get people to grow past the class values they are brought up to" is one of the most common, most hopeless remarks made by educated people. It is quite common, quite respectable, follower thinking.

Let's look at those class values we are brought up to. Some things really are intercultural, international, probably interspatial for all we know. One is that when you say to nearly anybody, "So and so is sadly limited, of course, by his or her class background," the listener invariably makes a mental picture of the class background in question, the one no one ought to get stuck in, such as lower middle-class social life. We imagine the swiller with two guys from next door before the TV. The wife's gone up to fix up a tray of high-salt crackers and a pretty good-sounding new spread that may not be homemade, (so who wants to spend all week working and then half of Sunday afternoon inventing some spread when the guys just wolf it down whatever, hey forget it). The kid, poor naif, has just said for the first and the last time, "Dad, I have just written a poem!" Dad, friendly enough, gives a wide shout: "No kidding! Pass it over! Listen, you guys, which one of you got a kid's a poet!" The poem chinks into the family culture coffer along with taking in the satisfactory pass between the Steelers' passer and a wide receiver a second later.

The bad, uniformly accepted news: genial, mindless Dad, kidding in the family room, was born to the cultural-intensity level at which he now lives and he will stay there. He is a type of his class. Anti-stage-development people claim that once childhood is past people are what they are. "One thing you sure can't change," the beginning group therapand tells the group therapist with aplomb, "is human nature." But group therapists know that adults can be moved from less sophisticated psychological or cultural levels to more sophisticated psychological levels. It is why group therapists are group therapists. They are stage-development practitioners, not typologists. They can't believe in frozen, inherited, genetic, unchangeable types. But non-social scientists often do. For one thing, if what you

are is what you are and it can't be changed, then you're free to think about something else and not makes changes. One needn't entertain such unnerving ideas as, what if American culture creates, in itself, certain dreadful psychological types? Not just the young ghetto male crazed by discivilization, but dreadful *middle-class* types?

What's more, in our follower mode we enjoy eternal, unchangeable truths. They are fun. People get a kick out of taking the Briggs-Meyer test: their vanity is half-charmed, their analytical instincts half-abstracted. I have never seen silkier smiles than those on the faces of people whose whole acquaintance with social psychology is the Briggs-Meyer test they just took and got deliciously interpreted. They cheerfully accept that they are a what's it-what's it-what's-it-what's-it type. I have never heard anyone emerge howling, denying that they are a what's-it what's- it what's-it type at all.

I am not sure why bad news offered as a *principle* gets such a thoughtful listening from such a variety of people, when the same sort of principle, applied where it gives hope, rouses the killjoy in people. "That will never work" is the classic response. I have great respect for social-psychological ideas, so I try to think of social-psychological explanations for why people agree to a stage-development theory of governments but not to a stage-development theory of character. Now we have to watch like a hawk lest we inappropriately apply our own favorite theories. I have never forgotten how the nutritionist Adelle Davis suggested we treat cranky pre-teenage girls with nightly calcium, as if nutrition could mitigate one's grief over cruelty to women in a sexist society. Perhaps I am making the same mistake. Perhaps I am looking for a social-psychological theory for something which is merely habituation. Perhaps a very simple reason that people turn down hopeful applications of stage-development theory is that most news on television and in American newspapers other than the *New York Times* is either bad news or isn't news at all. Neither papers nor television discuss theories much. Therefore, it is possible that people whose minds feed daily and principally on newspapers and television do not recognize information as real unless it is pessimistic. If it is not pessimistic, it must be some kind of hype, and faced with a hopeful theory, we quite automatically draw ourselves up and say: "I will not be played for a fool." Aloud we say: "Oh—*that* will never work!"

Perhaps resistance to hope-filled theory is as simple as that. Or perhaps the word “work” in the expression “That will never work” should give a key to a less pleasant explanation: theories do need *work* – first to see if they consistently apply in all like situations; and second, if they are to improve life, they call for us to work to devise and carry out programs making use of them. A deterministic, pessimistic theory lets us out of both levels of work. Another point: starting new projects doesn’t threaten the ego so much as having to undo some up-to-now prevailing evil. Tiresome to get roused up for any cause, it is all the more tiresome if we must gear up to correct some evil *our* generation and our parents’ generation used to be content with. It is hard to confess, “My attitude of hopelessness about middle-class psychological habits is wrong and now after thirty years I must change it.” And that’s only *thirty years’* emotional investment in culturally abusing the family kidder, spouse, and children. No wonder there is something of a male backlash to the women’s movement! How could one enjoy admitting to having been coarse and wrong about women for 35,000 years? (I use 35,000 years under the assumption that European white males have been wrong about women at least since the Lascaux and Altamira caves: recent opinion suggests the cave paintings might be 35,000 rather than the previously thought 15,000 years old.)

I should like deliberately to use innovation problems in farming as an example of how people respond to having to rethink what they thought were givens. Farmers, as a group, still tend to be somewhat psychologically unconscious: that is, since they haven’t spent much time around pop psych conversations nor done much research into social work theory, they don’t hide their psychological responses. It is something like the frank way people tell their dreams who don’t know any psychological theories of dreaming. After they learn some of the theories, they fix up their dreams – and they learn to spot which ones not to tell at all. Farmers are not at all what you could call psychological social-climbers. Group psychology has only just begun, like thin waters over a very high dam, to flow into the countryside. People therefore speak their minds without adjusting what they say to sound politically (which is to say, psychologically) correct.

Farmers still respond to scientists’ suggestions that they till with equipment they have not tilled with before, or that they till differently, or that they till less thoroughly than they have before, with one of the four responses here:

1. That's been tried and it didn't work (even though it has in fact not been tried to anyone's knowledge).
2. That wouldn't work.
3. I will wait and watch while someone else tries it.
4. I will ask questions right now about aspects that sound doubtful to me, and if they answer them satisfactorily I will give the new process a try on a pilot-sized scale, maybe on 20 acres where I am not doing anything much anyhow.

If you find yourself thinking that a less educated person might use Response No. 1 (denial) or Response No. 2 (negative assumption without much information and unwillingness to gather more information before making the assumption, then you are trying on a kind of cultural stage-development theory. You are saying that a certain kind of education would free Farmers No. 1 and No. 2 from their style of receiving new ideas. But if you decide that Farmer No. 4, the one wanting the answers to whatever questions came to his or her mind, was born that way—innately able to wait in the presence of new data without feeling threatened, and wise enough to ask for more explanation, then you are subscribing to *type* theory—a theory that character is set the way plant life is set. In type theory, one kind of person is simply that kind of person.

In type theory then, the kidding father in the family room was born a kidder. He will always kid around. Perhaps it is realistic and sensible and true: maybe kidders are kidders. One lone fact makes me shudder: the kidder, like the earnest philosopher or just-minded statesperson, has a child. As we heard, the kidder's child said, "Dad, I have written a poem." There is no one who doesn't think that if Dad takes the poem seriously and treats the child respectfully the child will grow up with different values than if Dad crows to his pals, kidding, "Hey you guys! Hey, which of you guys got a kid's written a poem, huh?"

I want to argue for Farmer No. 4's not being born wise but having had a *psychological experience* (e.g. good teacher or mentor or parents) which brought forth No. 4 response. I want to argue for the eleven-year-old kid's ability to go on participating in art and in thinking, which will presumably result in a life with both reflection and earnestness in it, provided someone enacts an intervention from the class background and foreground (e.g. a

good teacher, a mentor, or a change of heart in the parents). Everyone agrees that interventions are needed for those regarded as a danger to society—males in the ghetto, for example, with such low self esteem that they quickly fire the weapons they so frequently carry. In some less frantic way, should we not also regard the kidder in the family room as a danger to society?

The kidder discourages earnest creativity. He models philosophical sloth. Abstract language such as *justice* is little used at his dinner table. He models fear of being foolish to his child—worse, it is foolish to be creative. He models wasting hours and hours of human life that could be spent learning about soul or government, working on issues of soul or government, and honoring work on soul or government in others. That's uncultivated middle-class life throughout the ages. The kid brought up in it is being brought up to a bleak place along the continuum of psychological privilege to psychological blocking.

A century ago no one thought of all the nice points of class definition that sociologists talk of so confidently. A century from now I think that it will be thought ridiculous that we have not laid out lists of what influences people to be full-hearted and free-spirited and daring-minded. It will be thought all the more appalling because looking backward from 2092, scholars will know that we had the social work conversational skills and the group dynamics savvy about how to make people use them instead of talking to one another brutally as so many of us do. Scholars will be taken aback that humanities-educated people have balked at (or never even heard of), laying out lists of:

- what psychological influences make people passive
- what psychological influences make people low-spirited
- what psychological influences make people hyperobedient
- what psychological influences make people likely to take their pleasure in distraction and random stimuli rather than in imaginative mental life.

More negative studies have been done than positive: that is, we know that children jeered at early tend to develop weak enough egos so that they will not venture confidently into new ideas. We know that children who

receive fewer hours' modeling and mentorship from their immediate grownups (usually parents) will go up through the recognized cognitive stages more slowly than children who spend more time with mentors than with juvenile peers. Logically, then, we *can* upgrade a human being's psychological acuity.

Most people are certain we can't override nature's law that the majority of any species are too mediocre to achieve the best goals of that species. We are proud to look at our species in a detached way, as if we were sensible people willing to grant, like Hamlet, that we are "indifferent honest, crawling 'twixt heaven and earth." We feel we are impressively humble in being animals and like animals, subject to natural laws. This is a notion that sounds sensible and consistent, but one fact of the human brain is that we overcome and build up so much public opinion against certain natural laws that they never again are taken as "all right" by anyone. An example of this is slavery. People still have slaves in some corners of the world, but they do not think it is all right to have slaves. No one—absolutely no one!—would now write benignantly about how slaves and their masters should behave, the way St. Paul did. Slavery is very practical in nature: animals practice it whenever they can. Ants do it. It is no longer all right in human life for big things as a matter of course to reach a paw across in order to kill two or three smaller things nearby who happen to annoy one. Large people do. Males with their enabling musculature kill women who haven't the muscle to fight them off. But it is no longer thought *all right*.

Therefore I propose that we stop thinking it is all right that the discultivated person go on being discultivated and discouraging his or her children from moral seriousness as well. Even if the discultivated person is in the majority, the previously accepted mediocre majority of the species, let us start saying aloud: it is not all right. Besides, we know how to change such households, just as the liberals of England knew how to keep mine-owners from using child labor once they set their minds to it.

Let us say we want and mean to get, for the kidder's poetical child, the best intellectual and ethical expectations of the species. We are in luck, since social scientists of our time have already identified serious influences of two types:

a) Bad Psychological Influences. Hannah Arendt, Alice Miller, and most recently, Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Markusen in *The Genocidal Mentality*

have identified six or seven distinct influences which 1) make people insensitive so that they can commit atrocities, and 2) incite them addictively to follow leaders—to getting high on obeying others without question. Albert Speer, one of Hitler’s close minions who experienced such addiction, tells us at first hand about what Bruno Bettelheim and Hannah Arendt warned of: having a power crush, so to speak, on a leader is a formidable pleasure. One wants to crowd up close. One wants to get slap-up against the person, so that his power palpably flows into you. When he comes into the room, you feel like an iron filing which has lain inert waiting for a magnet: now that the magnet sweeps over, the iron jerks a little, shivers, and then literally flies magically to the magnet. Sometimes American males mistake such power crushes as homosexuality. Power crushes have nothing to do with homosexuality; there are in fact studies that suggest that such crushes tend to fragment all sexuality. Power crushes have to do with specific combinations of weak self-esteem, a vacuum in early ethical thinking, and the corresponding hunger of the leader to lap up his followers’ souls. It is helpful to notice how these forces have their effect not only upon Nazis but, scaled down, of course, in the moderate zone of American life. We see them operating in a football team, among the coach and his players. We see them operating in creative-writing classes, where frequently enough the teacher drains ego-strength from the students. Perhaps such psychological forces are so common that we don’t notice them: Wittgenstein pointed out that fish neither question nor contemplate the salinity of seawater.

b) Good Psychological Influences. Several influences make people spend less time in followship stages in favor of the riskier but more exhilarating lifestyle called, in the nineteenth century, leadership, and in our time, “good psychological health,” “being centered,” “being open to change,”—all wonderful! The jargon is a dog’s breakfast, but I am so grateful that this work that undoes cultural abuse has been done and is being done that I forgive the practitioners.

People whose contemplation of life is received with respect from an early age (around eighteen months) find such contemplation pleasant and they are disposed to spend their lives being philosophical people. One might argue that Socrates was in a very small minority—those who find the only life worth living the examined one. That is a factual, not a normative

remark. If all children were treated respectfully—that is, symbolically speaking—if their fathers and mothers received their poems and their early observations with serious interest, and did not turn them into jokes, jeers, or even the ubiquitous kidding of the family room—most of the children might choose to live rather philosophical lives. Priests used to tell Roman Catholics, just give me the child until he is seven and I will guarantee you a Catholic—by which the priest meant, among other things, someone who will be fearful of and obedient to uniformed authority, in addition to having a spooky penchant for feeling guilty.

The priests were right. Seven years of age is very old in the cultural shaping of a human being. If you gave the kid in the family room, once a week, an hour or two with a mentor who would say things like, “I saw you’re reading *Charlotte’s Web*! Have you got to where Templeton the Rat says, Trust me with the rotten egg: I handle this stuff all the time?”—that child’s personality will be guaranteed a safehouse for the following:

1. Conversations using metaphor for ethical play: children love good and evil issues! You can tell the species is programmed to assess things as good or bad—we feel positively nourished by Templeton’s marvelous avarice and the geese’s misuse of freedom.
2. Conversations just for the sake of joy in sharing ideas.
3. Conversations which are earnest and not related to the child’s family but to *other*—not instructions from a large, powerful parent to a small, weak child about practical issues close at hand. It is horrifying to hear how in some families the children never hear a conversation that is about unfamiliar people or animals or things.
4. Conversations which have much curiosity in them: after all, the mentor asked for information about the child’s reading.
5. Conversations of great courtesy: the mentor inquired about the child’s activity instead of sacrificing the child to grownup buddies—in the way that the kidding father sacrificed the child who had written a poem.

What good is all this? What if there always has been a psychological class system without our taking it for a psychological class system, in somewhat the same way there was always electromagnetic presence around our planet

before we focussed on it as such. It was handy to learn about magnetic fields, and to develop compasses once the presence of magnetism was accepted. I think it is fascinating that the medieval Catholic Church frantically opposed the study of magnetism and on occasion excommunicated ships' captains who kept compasses in their binnacles.

There is always someone who will lose power if a new force is recognized. It did not help the wheelwrights of England to have the steel wheel and rubber tyres come in with the car. The power-habituated parish priest lost considerable clout when seamen consulted their compasses instead of petitioning him for prayers for fair winds.

If it turns out that there is a natural psychological growth pattern for groups (classes), just as stage-development claims for individual people's moral reasoning, then some people embracing the old-hat determinism will suffer having their ideas seem less interesting—or worse, which is death to academics—out of date. Sociology is the now somewhat scorned field among the social sciences: it is the field which decided to be ethics-free about forty years ago. It decided to describe how groups of people of differing heritages act, but not to fight for justice for them or commit itself to admitting some natural class phenomena are grossly unfair.

If there turns out to be a kind of identifiable, studiable grid of psychological development (by classes or enclaves) and we accept the presence of it (the way we accepted once, and still accept, the presence of electricity with its behaviors), we are going to stop being determinists, in which case the chill-hearted deterministic fields of social science will look dreadful just as the Church looked dreadful when it blocked early use of the natural sciences. We will certainly work with them! No one with an inch and a half of sanity behind the forehead would fail to use tools to free first children, then adults, from psychological low-life.

Social workers and family systems therapists already know that specific habitats produce (with exceptions of course) full-hearted people and other habitats produce (with exceptions of course) ethical slobs. Some of the studies done will be spectacularly hateful to fundamentalist Christians. For example, during World War II, people who spontaneously endangered themselves and their families saving Jews came not from rigid families with strong paternal discipline but from homes where caring, relaxed, comparatively undocrinal adults modeled helping others as a matter of course. *In*

every case the adults treated the children with courtesy and respect. They did not “set their teeth on edge” as so many moralistic parents do their children. When the kidding dad makes fun of his son’s poem, he sets the child’s teeth on edge, too. If the child were to say, “Dad, you have just set my teeth on edge yet once again!” we know that Dad would say, “Can’t you take a joke? I was just kidding you. You’d better learn to take kidding, sonny!”

One psychological fact about the stage-development of families we already know is: *Being raised without being jeered at produces human beings willing to take courageous action on behalf of people who are not blood relations.* And on the negative side we know: *Being bullied vitiates a human being’s daring to decide, on his or her own, whether or not to take an action.*

Let us suppose that some combination of skilled and caring people such as school social workers and elementary school English teachers decided to offer literature courses designed to show children better ways of interacting with one another than the ways their families now interact. (These people would intervene in much the same way that social workers intervene in crisis situations such as battering families.) The child used to being “kidded” will have the experience, in an English class team-taught by an English teacher and a social worker, of being treated earnestly. It is important to remember that all Saturday morning cartoons are kidding. Most of the plots of those cartoons are practical jokes. All the conversation is ironic and disrespectful and therefore anti-intellectual. So any program of interaction, using the poems and stories of ordinary elementary school anthologies, will be the *only* earnest discussion tens of thousands of children will have ever heard. If these children *write journals*, it will be the only acknowledgment of personal history in the lives of tens of thousands of children. If these children talk aloud, hearing their own voices and the voices of their friends, about *ethics*, using abstract words like “goodness” and “cruelty” and “fairness” and “others,” it will be for those tens of thousands of children their only experience of abstract concepts being used with respect, by mentors and peers together.

Will it make much difference? People with inherited privilege and useful old-boy networks may continue to impoverish the United States anyway. Even if all the violent TV watchers and all the anti-poetry and anti-intellectual jeerers in the United States rose up and protested the S & L bailout, they probably couldn’t prevail. We live, after all, in a *kekistocracy*—

government by the worst men. Worst men know intricate ways to protect their interests. I bring up this example that “won’t work” in order to propose that psychotherapists’ first remark to therapands who say, “Oh that’ll never work!” is “We don’t know what will work. Let’s look at what works for you now, and in the past. And let’s look at what hasn’t worked for you. Let’s leave the future alone for now.”

Let’s make a loose list of facts. We can adjust them if they are wrong:

1. The rich, we suppose, do not get themselves or their children through first-rate, tremendously expensive schools just so they can spend hours and hours of their adult life consciously galled and shamed by American national behavior. The upper class has its own style of pain avoidance. The privileged are now objecting to our heartless government: it isn’t an accident that they have come to the fight late, years after *Utne Reader* and *Z Magazine* and XXIII Publications and all the other vanguards of ethical writing. Comfortable people are slow to move ethically.

2. But everyone avoids pain. We do it in the style we were brought up to unless someone has intervened. Adult alcoholics, to give one example, often come from families whose pain-avoidance style is to deny anything untowards at all. An alcoholic family won’t ever say, “Mom has a drinking problem.” They will say instead, “So Mom takes a few drinks now and then! You perfect yourself or what?” If people have had no education in literature and history, and have dosed themselves habitually with television, and have met all serious activity with sneers, they too will have a characteristic style of pain avoidance. They avoid serious newspapers; they take manly and womanly satisfaction in announcing that it’s out of their hands anyway, regardless of what “it” is; they typically choose to fill their houses with high-decibel sound, which provides such a high threshold of stimulus that life seems more interesting, more full of meaning, than it is. They avoid public TV because they do not expect to participate in democratic decision-making past the most rudimentary assessment of presidential candidates every four years. Their educational background didn’t promise any political meaning in life so they feel left out of political discussions that last more than three or four minutes, in the same way that *my* background did not lead me to expect, and therefore achieve, mastery of a foreign language: when I’ve lived abroad and the company in the room stopped speaking English for my benefit, my response has been to get

depressed. Did it make me chide myself and say, “Look, why don’t you shape up and study Norwegian seriously? Why don’t you speak German with a vocabulary of more words that Goethe happened to use in “Über alle Gipfeln” . . .? Why don’t you practice French until you have it fast enough so people don’t dare shove you out of the queue in the PTT?” I haven’t chided myself like that. I have rested with the psychological expectations of my class – which were to read some foreign languages for the literature but be content to grin apologetically all across Europe. I therefore empathize with the kidder in the family room. His or her background did promise the right to some fun when lying around the house.

3. This is one of the oldest ideas in social psychology but it wants attention: it is, as Michael Arlen mourned in *Passage to Mt. Ararat*, that people who live the little bourgeois life concern themselves addictively with their own provincial interests. You can hardly rouse them to concern about people they haven’t met personally. Half- or non-educated middle-class people concern themselves with the props and bumps of their own lives – the new 27-incher and the car seats – and their memory of history is short. The devastation of American public education funding is worst in the humanities, which includes history, so today, tens of thousands of Americans whose parents learned some history don’t know the simplest data. We are experiencing discultivation whenever the children of educated people are uneducated. It is an outcome of television-watching and the Republican dismantling of public education. Most high school teachers don’t know any history. Remembering events once the TV anchors no longer cite them isn’t a general goal. Some people have no experience in sensing *history in the making*.

4. One grows psychologically and culturally if one takes history seriously. That is because “taking history seriously” pushes us into two elegant steps: first, one forces oneself to put galling news into long-term, not just short-term memory. It means remembering, for example, that General Schwartzkopf remarked in the autumn of 1989 that if there were a war in the Persian Gulf it would be a “catastrophe.” (Quoted in the *New York Times*). Why should we remember such a thing? It is important to realize that highly placed, well-thought-of people are capable of carrying out orders given by fools or rascals even when they know and have stated, well ahead of time, that those the orders will bring about a catastrophe. What is

so important about that? If one is either unlucky or psychologically unsophisticated, one abdicates from most of life's rightful choices and calls everything "fate": that is, one says to oneself, "If one is a soldier one kills when ordered." But if one is a choice-making (thus psychologically privileged) person, one resigns from an organization rather than do its dirty work.

5. If one discusses public events in a quiet, safe-hearted group, one loses nearly all respect for authority as such. One sees famous public figures doing appalling actions and telling appalling lies. Literature makes a kind of laundry hamper of tossed psychological evidence; if one has read and talked about literature in a quiet, safe-hearted group, one sees that how character is built is up for grabs. There appear to be causes and effects which one can observe and predict from! Children see that Ariel's mother, in *Charlotte's Web*, is conventional and unimaginative and therefore lives a far less joyful life than Ariel does. In a quiet, safe-hearted place people use not only literature, but also their own experiences as possible analogs to public events. They can predict some of their own psychological reactions, consciously, instead of being flooded with unconscious angers and unrealistic attitudes without even knowing what happened. There is a perfect lesson in interactionary skills in the old movie, *Gulliver's Travels*, nicely wasted on me when I was a child. Let me add that to the list! Here it is:

6. If children read literature but lack skillfully mentored conversations about human behavior as it appears in the literature, much of the effect is lost on them. How people relate literature to life is dictated by the psychological habitat we call their "class background." Point in case: when I was young, my friend's parents never discussed the stories she read. Their one remark to her was, "You know perfectly well you don't get to hide your nose in books until you've done your chores!" They took literature only for something one hid one's nose in, and what was *good* was maintenance of the homestead (chores—by definition repetitive and boring). The child was taught, then, that boredom is to be expected and that being able to apply oneself to boring work shows character. It's a point. Boredom is real for all species: only intellectual interest or terror or grief intervene.

My background was different, but psychologically wasteful of literature in its own way. I was taken to see *Gulliver's Travels* and loved, as did my family, the Lilliputians' ingenuity in tying up the giant, winching him up

with coarse but sturdy blocks, shoving a flatbed cart under him, and dragging him to the castle. The moviemakers omitted the mechanical ingenuity that Jonathan Swift laced the original book with: when the castle caught fire, Gulliver made water into all its windows and got the fire out. My family delighted in the mediocrity of it—the fairy tale aspects—the town crier. The movie was chock full of good will, too. The Lilliputians went to great pains to make Gulliver a new suit of clothes: Archers had to shoot arrows carrying thread through home-built three-hole buttons at the neck opening of his shirt. My family discussed the movie a) with enjoyment of the funny mechanics, b) having been clued in by our parents, and therefore, proudly making the parallel between Lilliput and England (with what little of Swift's core ideas Walt Disney left in the movie), and c) ignoring all relationship-process because in my family people dealt with each other with humor but without interest in relationship skills.

We come to the last two items for our list:

7. Literature can be talked about in the 3rd and 4th grades as examples of how people handle themselves psychologically. (That would be a considerable refinement of most conversations about how people handle themselves: we must all be tired of “Do you hear yourself, what you’re saying?” and “Consider the source!”—examples of the lowest level of inchoate if unmistakably engaged psychological assessment.) An incidental blessing of such skilled, mentored conversations about behavior would be that they would hurry the children through the lower psychological consciousness levels such as anger or superiority. The more children are hurried through those stages at age eight or nine, the fewer of them will be aggravating their families with that particular kind of rudeness at age thirty! If this sounds coarse, it doesn't seem so coarse if you jot down the names of seven or eight simplistic psychological bullies whom you happen to know, and then ask yourself if it wouldn't be an improvement if they had learnt some other way to think and converse when they were eight, well before you met them.

8. (The most vital and society-changing idea.) Imagining oneself to be the protagonist or any of the characters in a work of literature. Unlikely as it sounds to those of us in our fifties and sixties and higher, most children now, studies suggest, do not really imagine themselves in the stories they read. Children whose parents read aloud to them tend to, but children

brought up on very loud music or television rather than books tend to read the words but cannot playfully imagine themselves *there*, in the stories.

Let us imagine that a kid has been brought up in an intellectually lifeless environment. His or her parents never talk about ideas around the house. No one writes down journals. The parents, perhaps, believe kids should learn data, not do imaginative process, so the only books in the house are very dull—*World Book*, let us say. Never in this child's life has he or she heard the question, "What would you do if you were in such-and-such a predicament?"

In the 4th grade, a teacher asks the whole class to describe the characters of the fox, the sausage, the crow, and the goose who go into the wide world together to seek a fortune (in *The Wonder Clock* by Howard Pyle). Soon the fox and goose marry and the fox contrives to eat both the sausage and the crow. When the goose gainsays him, he bites her head off too and makes a soft bed of her feathers. Pyle remarks at the end, in a joyful recklessness of philosophy, "I tell you this: the ways of the world are the ways of the world, even in the dark forest!" Let us say a good teacher gets a discussion going: what *are* the ways of the world and what would be ways not of the world, but of principle?

The question alone is like a first fence pole augered in to build a psychological fence inside a child's mind between cynicism ("That's how it is, period!") and imaginative inquiry into the child's own ethical feelings.

As the years of studying literature go on, this young person reads more complicated literature, in which the hero of the story has difficulty surmounting the moment's pressures in order to accomplish long-term decency. I think of Lord Jim panicking, and jumping into the lifeboat with the other whites. I think of the stepmother in Alice Munro's "Royal Beatings" not moving fast to save the girl.

In many of the literature classes, the discussion is about what psychological and ethical principles are involved or not involved. It is important that human voices discuss these principles: here is why. When what gets validated in the classroom is just the technical success of the author people will think only slightly about the principles involved. Idealism, therefore, remains hidden inside the young person's mind. If teachers don't encourage it then young people won't learn to ask themselves, "How would I behave in that situation?"

Is this serious? What brought me to regard it as serious is the number of English majors and graduate students who have made no use of the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, and Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which make it quite clear that joining armies is not a way to glory. What happened to the literature after they read it? It must have sunk into them, unimagined, not made real, somehow. It is amazing that Philip Caputo, the author of *A Rumor of War*, whose chapter headings are elegant and apt literary quotations, and who was a graduate student in literature himself, joined the Marine Corps looking for meaning and glory. The clue to this odd missing-of-the-whole-point of literature, I think, lies in his having been brought up, as he explains, in the unnuminous surroundings of a mid-west suburb. The only times his spirit glowed was when he was in nature, in the woods hunting. What if he and his parents had discussed World War I in reference to Sassoon's and Remarque's views? Perhaps Caputo's soul would have found a home in those very conversations: if the mown lawns weren't numinous, at least there would have been high seriousness in the family circle.

Back once more to the boy we are imagining: the boy whose dad is the kidder in the family room. We said that he heard no serious conversation about anything until his 4th-grade English teacher engaged him in a group thinking about the Pyle story. Later, let us say, he was lucky: he joined other groups which discussed literature, expressly asking for the insights one gets if one imagines oneself as someone else.

Then let us say that this boy is eighteen and is drafted for the Vietnam War. He cannot prove conscientious objection because his church (the church of his family) is keen on patriotic war service. Off he goes then. One day, at Song My or My Lai, an officer orders him to exterminate a village full of civilians. His family background, in itself, would not lead him to do anything but follow orders. But he had more than family background: he had a few hours' skilled discussion of ethics with an earnest mentor and a group of his peers who were not jeering at one another's earnestness because the ground rules of such discussions prohibit jeering.

He refuses the command. The military code has in fact been amended so that a young officer can refuse an order he or she considers evil.

Of course we don't know if adding ethical mentorship and courteous discussion skills to English courses in elementary schools and high schools

also their own experiences as possible analogs to public events. They can ask themselves: How has it been working so far? Is the United States in a fair way to protect its foreign policy from further indecency and its domestic politics from further ravenous theft? Does our middle-class American feel entitled to be emotionally immature? psychologically chaotic? incapable of remembering history and incapable of recording his or her own growth?

The next question is the hopeful one: if there are some techniques of intervening with the forces in people's backgrounds so that heretofore cynical and childish consumers can become earnest and courteous philosophers, are we up for trying it?