

Letters to My Children

'In The House Of The Hanged'

Stan Ovshinsky

1966

First Letter: 'In The House of the Hanged, One Does Not Speak of the Hemp.'

Today there's a great deal of preaching to young people. One can hear the tongue clicking of sophisticated adults worrying about what is happening to the younger generation. There's also the thoughtless embracing of the superficial fads of youth today by those adults who wish to appear to be "with it." I don't feel I've suffered from any generation gap, at least, this is how you have always treated me, so let's get to the heart of some of the important things that bother all of us, Young and old, today. I have never worshipped at any shrine and I know that you, at least, will not mind the irreverence that I might express. After all, one of the things I want to warn you about is not to accept a man's words except as you learn from them, but judge him by his deeds as you see him.

I've been concerned with the effect of the drug culture on one of the most promising generations ever to develop—yours. The world is an especially perilous one for you. There is no anchor of security and hope that has steadied other generations. I consider this to have some good aspects, for without illusions, one cannot become disillusioned. It is obvious that collectivism which enticed radicals in the past is now suspect. What Youth has to face is a world of imminent destruction with almost complete hypocrisy from its elders, pretentious institutions which are transparent to the as yet uncorrupted eyes of the young, indecency in its most exposed form in terms of racial relationships, and the callow wisdom of those to whom they normally look for leadership in society. It's entirely understandable and commendable that young people seek to understand themselves and look inward for answers in a world wherein the outward look is filled with poverty, death, and disintegration. If, however, this inward look has no more relevance, meaning or significance than the outward society, and, in fact, reflects, in a subtly corrupt manner, some of the worst aspects of the society to which they find themselves opposed, then WE should ask, What IS happening, Baby?

First of all, with all this drug cult, we should inquire not about the New Left, but we ought to change the question to "What's left?" Or, to put it another way, if religion is the opium of the people, what is opium? There is no greater fulfillment of Huxley's concept of the totalitarianism of Brave New World than the fact that one controls people by making them "happy" in an internal sense in an unhappy world.

Humphry Osmond, who coined the word, psychedelic, is a very good friend of mine. It was Humphry who gave Huxley the mescaline that started this whole LSD craze. Let's talk about Huxley for just a minute. Once, when Iris and I saw him, in the space of a few short hours, we spoke on almost every concern of human beings. Our talk embraced history, culture, politics, and sexuality of animals. Believe me, he had a great mind. In the last part of his life, LSD did not ruin it.

In my own field of science, I have seen scientists raise beards and wear tennis shoes in order to look like scientists. It happens to be one of the facts of life that neither tennis shoes nor a beard make a scientist; only a scientist is a scientist, whether he is in gray flannel or in dungarees. You can be a scientist in dungarees, but they do not help in making you one. A uniform may help establish your identity to yourself, but it does not, nor should it, establish your identity as a thinker to others.

To young people seeking an identity and understanding of the world, hoping to have transcendental revelations by synthetic means is not too helpful. If one of your group who you knew had no literary talent proclaimed himself a Huxley, you would treat it as an aberration. One must be prepared to have a real understanding of life, before one can distort it creatively. There is no surer way of taking people out of the struggle for a better life than to give them a sense of introspection wherein the internal, still formless, still to be shaped belly button is contemplated while society and culture around them manipulate and make the decisions affecting life and death, future, education, etc. How often has last year's activist youth revisited the campus to find that this year it's acid or pot? This process is not an innocent one, for we lose young persons as functioning people in our society.

Their internal "happiness" can be likened to that of the Indian miner in South America who lives in abysmal poverty and de-gradation with his family but receives his daily quota of coca. What a "happy," ignorant, exploited man! Don't tell me he's a Huxley! Not even in reincarnation. (Excuse me, Aldous.)

How did the imperialist powers subjugate China? Rapacious, mercenary murderers, possibly?—maybe a couple. But like liquor is quicker, opium is optimum. The Indian must fight to change his external world so that his internal world can become meaningful and have possibilities for ecstasy. This is the story of us all, by the way.

Now let's talk about identity. Before a frame of reference is established, which really represents an understanding and a stance to the real world around one, it seems ridiculous to come to terms with anxiety by investing substantial meanings in hallucinatory visions. A confusion as to why drugs are taken seems to be prevalent. They are taken because of conformity, because of the pressure of peer society which even The Fifth Estate helps establish by making it part of our culture and identifying it with the "in" (how stupid that word is). You identify it with rebellion and art, and your friends whom you admire take it and so you take it and continue the process by rationalizing it to others.

Let's ask first questions. Isn't the fad for drugs tied up to a public image created by mass media which is self-fulfilling? Creativity does not come packaged in bottles or capsules or even in sugar cubes.

There is absolutely no evidence that there has been any change for the better in creative output by drug takers.

It has been shown, in fact, to be the opposite. Among those whose life pattern has been long established, the skew of drugs may be of minimal harm, but think of the thrust on formative minds, yet to develop their genius.

There is a story that you possibly have heard. A man felt that in his dreams he discovered the answer to the riddle of the Universe. In a state of great elation, he told a friend of this occurrence but was unable to remember the answer. His friend agitatedly told him to keep a notebook beside his bed and upon awakening to hurriedly write down his tremendous knowledge. He did this in the middle of the night and in great trepidation the next morning, he read what he had written. It was, "Higgledy, Piggledy, my son, John."

Who says "nonconforming youth?" The tisk-tiskers have it all wrong. This is one of the most conforming generations that's ever been around. Rebels who refuse to accept any ribbon as a flag choose the conformity of dress and appearance and if that isn't bad enough, the importance of clear individual thinking is becoming subjugated to trite, meaningless words. How often in The Fifth Estate do I read over and over again the term, "beautiful?" There was a time in the past, there is a time in the present, and there will always be a time in the future when poets have a reverence for the written word. Blake, with his internal visions, Poe, with external help, never, nevermore abused the English language as do some of your columnists.

Avant-garde must mean exactly that—an improvement of the rotten past, a creating of new form, a building of new content.

fifth Estate

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