

## Images and Children

It is the Year of the Child, that academic abstraction. The Child, of no particular age or sex, but nevertheless singular, and somehow huge. In our times, that seem only able to deal in images, the determination to prop up by all the available PR means in the middle of the world's field of vision an image of this much misunderstood class of person is a fine thing that promises to have good effects. And yet, consider the image expressed by those words. If it had been declared The year of children, then I might indeed look forward to asking children if they were aware that it is being their year, and how they were enjoying it. But how does one ask "the Child" anything?

Clearly one isn't meant to. It has to be realized that this is an adult matter; that the object is to obtain a better deal in the long term for children in general, by institutional action the world over — action that would certainly not otherwise be taken, judging by the widespread institutionalized neglect amounting to oppression of this huge section of the human population. We are all humiliatingly aware nowadays of the immense and inexorable forces of social custom, which action and feeling on a merely individual scale seem helpless to turn aside. Only by collective actions and mass feelings is it possible to alter in the slightest the direction followed by the wheels of the social juggernaut along the ruts of tradition. Those who have read much in the history of childhood know how bloodied those wheels have always been by the crippling of millions who fail to survive intact this most vulnerable period of their lives. In the long perspective of this dismal history one can only welcome the UN initiative.

All the same, it would be altogether more convincing if one could see signs of the Year in ordinary daily life. My daily work is with educators, I talk with them, read their writings, plan, grumble, and hope with them from morning till night. I cannot say I have detected any change at all. Perhaps, however, the Year of the Child is not really for them; for after all, they are among the converted, are they not? All their years of useful life are "of the Child," by their conscious and willing decision in almost every case.

To the extent that many of them may also have based that decision on an abstraction of the child, however, as distinct from any real child you might meet, and on some sort of fundamental distinction made between any such child and any adult you may meet; to that extent many educators too are vulnerable to the accusation of neglect (amounting to oppression) of the actual children of our times, for by virtue of their assigned duties they manage immense institutional inertias binding those same millions of children. These educators' lives are given to a service. But as with all "services" the question is not whether those who make a living in this work believe themselves to be offering a service. The question is whether their work is in fact guided by the wants of those being served, rather than by what the servers think they ought to want.

Among more or less conscientious educators, two kinds of abstracted image of the Child appear to prevail: the Maternal, and the Managerial. The former like motherhood itself is difficult to criticise, it is so manifestly brimming with goodwill. That children are relatively small and powerless, and that they need love and protection, is surely not a question; but that this is all they are and all they want, is. Children are full-scale living humans, entitled to the rights of all such, and they want information, freedom, and ideas. Love is not all you need.

The managerial image is the consequence of a more business-like approach, used by educators determined to get things done in the way things do get done in our times. With the substitution of a word or two, the titles of the projects undertaken by these educators are instantly translatable from this field of service to almost any other, like garbage removal or the food industry: "The management of change in waste-disposal"; "Effective garbage truck deployment within a municipal district"; "A systems analytic approach to the study of supervision of checkout clerks"; "Common determinants of taste and fat content in the grade two sausage". These titles are taken at random (and translated with no great respect) from the list of papers to be presented at this year's conference of the Canadian Society for Studies in Education.

"The Consumer" who is reputedly served by such projects on the part of those who maintain a managerial image of him or her is nowadays at least protected by specific consumer protection Associations, Laws, and even Ministries. Children have no such extensive apparatus, for they have no vote, not even in school board elections. Whether the image of the service offered to them is that of an instant bosom or of rows of shelving in a supermarket, the ideas of children who have to go to school day after day, about what is needed and about the priorities involved, are likely to be drastically different from those of the adults who pass their time devising all those projects. That is, *if* the children were to be consulted. They would probably be unhesitatingly direct about it. The children would then be saying, in effect, "Our notion of what life is good for deserves as much respect as anyone else's" — and the adults in all honesty would have to agree that children do have a sure and enduring sense of what life is good for.

More than one article in this issue goes back, for guidance in curriculum, from the laboratory to the child. It is a route that must be taken only with care, and with as much considered attention as adult knowledge and experience can muster. But when you are dealing with people, it is surely the least that professional obligation requires us to do.

There is a good deal in the attitude of Mordecai Richler, who comments concerning the first appearance of the film of his “Jacob Two-two and the Hooded Fang” — which is surely the sort of way a Year of children really should be celebrated — “I have no special attitude towards children as a breed. They are, after all, merely little people, some of them obnoxious, many more stupid, and a few, a cherished few, absolutely enchanting.” We too should look at them with such clear eyes, and cherish that potential for enchantment.

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