



**"A Shrike"**  
Carroll Kerner

## The Importance of Whistling in the Dark

When you consider the extraordinary muddle our minds are in, is it not a great presumption for us to undertake to educate anyone else? It is not only that the physical arrangement by which our minds mostly function is composed of a bewildering complexity of minutely intricate ganglia with an apparent life of their own. But it is also that any seeming consistency with which that seething community within the skull behaves is preserved only by our shutting down or otherwise ignoring certain disturbing inconsistencies that tend repeatedly - having also a life of their own - to manifest themselves in our heads. And then, of course, there is "the big booming buzzing confusion" of the extraordinary world outside.

Ah, but as to that. Have we not made enormous inroads on external reality, using the very same unsatisfactory minds to do it, for all their unreliability? Have we not painstakingly and with subtlety and precision rendered ordinary and predictable, by our understanding, almost all the phenomena of which we are aware in the external world, to the point where we are now comfortable and secure in an environment that once continually punished and terrified our ancestors? Surely there remains only a matter of organization and of understanding each other to enable our sharing that comfort and security throughout the world, right across the spectrum of the human species.

By concentrating on the external world, it seems we can also manage to bring calm to our messy minds, finding them of some use after all in discovering consistencies outside them. Turn those minds upon themselves, however, and the whole system tends to set up unpleasant vibrations that should warn that something is going wrong. Now if - speaking of education - we were simply to undertake to tell our successors in their generations what we have figured out about the external world, there would seem to be nothing presumptuous about that. There is much to tell, an enormous amount, and it is sound; or else

why should that space laboratory hang so serenely in the empyrean, or those explicit messages return to us so certainly from far within the tiniest cells, or from far beyond Venus and Jupiter?

Those parts of our educational undertaking that deal with the external world typically arouse our least concern indeed, except as to the numbers of people they reach. Teaching and learning in the natural sciences always seem to go forward calmly and rewardingly for all involved. Those who are involved nevertheless repeatedly deplore that we give their kind of education less time, attention, and manpower than other kinds enjoy. What most people mean by "education", and constantly aspire to gain from it, is what people are least qualified to give to it - an understanding of themselves and of the fundamental blind purpose of the species. Without that understanding of people and the species to begin with, how is it that we can presume to know how to educate anyone else, let alone know what to educate them in?

A great deal of our muddle about our own nature appears to be engendered by trying to cope with the differences between a man and man - or, as we must translate it nowadays, less pithily, between a man or woman and the human race. The one must die, the other goes on. The life of the one has a perceptible pattern to it, and passes through phases; the span of the other is hardly knowable - nor is there any evident pattern. We confuse these considerations when we attempt education. And in addition we confuse the idea of a society with that of the human race as a whole.

A society will see to it that education is organized for its regenerating young, as an act of renewal of itself; but then we teachers turn around and talk about educating individuals. This sort of mix-up has been going on for ages. We manage to reconcile these confusions only by rhetorical gimmicks, with unconvincing assertions about "socialising the individual", and that "the ideal society should meet every individual's needs", etc. Individuals have been consequently known even to die "so that the society might live." Yet it is not as if any given society could represent the interests of the whole species. There are hundreds of societies; and they are in constant disagreement with each other about that other huge, dim continuity of the species, and what it's for.

What is it for? Each one of us is born, and after the passage of years becomes aware of an identity, struggles to keep it or survive, copes more or less to satisfaction, realises he or she must die, and wonders why. A major thread in each such selfish life is the demand of the species for reproduction, yet who would know it to hear us talk? Oh we know that sex is important, especially in the twentieth century, but important for what? To see this urge to mount one another as a matter of entirely personal gratification is to behave as the animals we really are - and to do that, because it is after all an

acceptance of reality, is perhaps progress. But it is also to be as blind as animals to the real reason why we do it.

In trying to understand ourselves we sophisticated animals are in the habit of talking to each other a lot; this makes some sense, when you consider that the data - ourselves - unlike those of the external world, can talk back to us in our own language - although this of course carries an infinite potential for self-delusion. We also like, in pursuing such inquiry into ourselves, to use metaphors a lot. When we cannot see pattern or structure in some group of phenomena we wish to understand, we try out a pattern we have seen in other phenomena. We have certainly done better so far at understanding the external world than the internal, so we have successively tried to apply to human behaviour ideas borrowed from mechanics (such as leverage, force, and momentum), hydraulics (potential and capacities), steam power (pressure, safety valves), electricity (short circuits), systems (feedback), not to mention chemistry, magnetism, and so on and so on. Our common speech about ourselves is full of language from these fields, blithely mixing the lot.

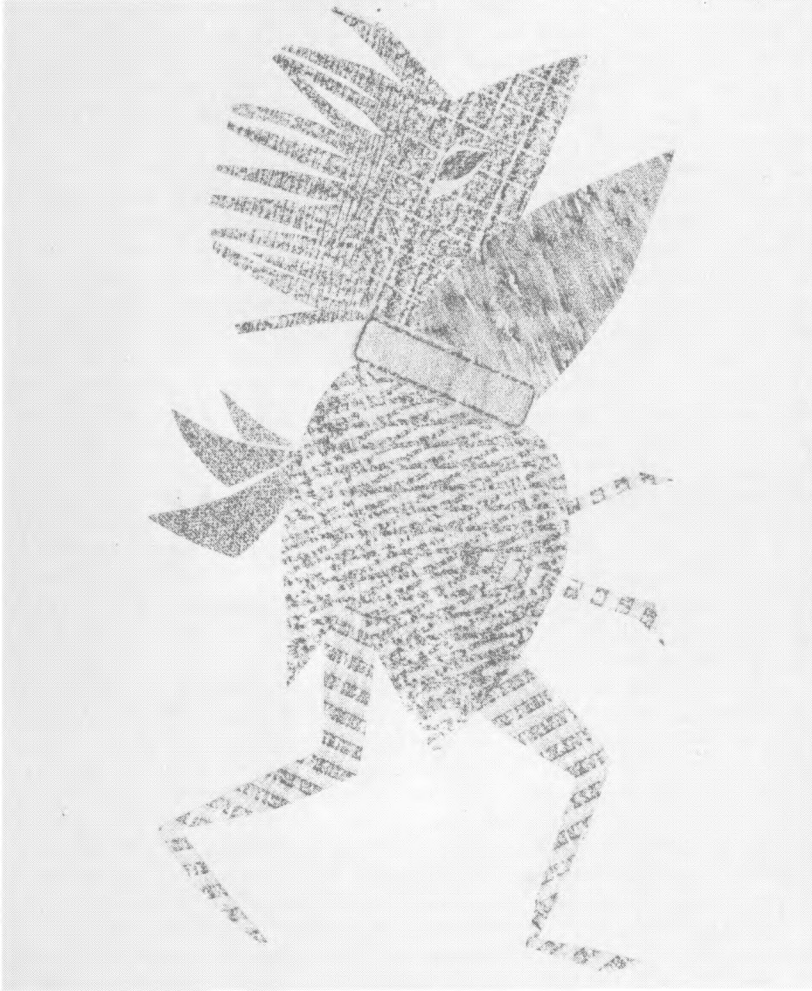
But serious students of any aspect of human behaviour must work, consciously or not, with **one** hypothesized pattern in mind, that promises to render the phenomena consistent with each other. This hypothesis for structure must come from somewhere. Principle dictates that it should emerge from an impartial observation of the data alone, and represent the recognition of a pattern there. In practice, however, recognition means that one usually recognises something one has seen before elsewhere. One transfers the familiar pattern, with its language, to the new data; and so another metaphor sets its foot in the door.

That there is much trouble as well as reward in using metaphors is the theme of many articles in this issue. That there is also a great deal of fairly comic muddle, occasioned when people more or less unwittingly switch metaphors, or remain unaware that they are using one as a paradigm at all, is one of the issue's main points. (It was a great relief for this editor - at the conference last year at Vancouver from which many of these papers come - to find the themes of education at last being taken in the comic spirit that they deserve.)

Shifting from one metaphor to another may not mean progress, then, but it does keep us interested and hopeful. And all that talking to each other that is the other method in our search of ourselves, if it does little else, does at least keep bringing up things that we hadn't noticed before or had forgotten. So an education that proceeds by talking to one another in metaphor, about the confusions in human nature concerning the whole point of the human species, may not establish much understanding in our students - because we as teachers have such muddled minds about it ourselves; but at least it helps both teachers and students to learn more than

they knew before, and so to preserve us all from despair and disgust. Maintaining hope and interest like this is vital for our species. For our disgust with ourselves, and our despair, now seriously threaten our survival.

**J.K.H.**



**"Iain"**

Wendy Curtis

The collage designs in this issue were produced on the theme "An Imaginary Creature", by undergraduate students enrolled in "Basic Arts Media," a course given in the Department of Education in the Arts at McGill University by Professor Clifford Papke.