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From the Editor: Natural Inquiry and "The Miraculous"

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A colleague recently gave me a copy of Theodore Roszak's "In Search of the Miraculous," an article I had missed when it was reprinted in Harper's of January 1981. Because it led me to a revitalized view of those methods and practices this journal subsumes under the term "natural inquiry," I'd like to summarize Roszak's essay and discuss the parallels I find with naturalistic research.

The driving intellectual force of Western society for the last three centuries has been, for Roszak, the establishment of a science-based reality principle which now reigns supreme: skeptical, empirical, and demonstrable. But it is the principle of the austere high ground, and it looks down on the plains of a culture which is still "deeply entangled with piety, mystery, miracle, the search for personal salvation." In the popular culture, this search is manifested by a growing interest in such phenomena as UFOs, reincarnation, ESP, and the various cults; among the academic elite, it underlies current enthusiasms for Zen, Kundalini yoga, the noetic sciences, transpersonal/humanistic psychology, and parapsychology. All of these interests and enthusiasms constitute, for Roszak, an attempt to solve the problem of alienation and spiritual crisis endemic in the 20th century, an attempt which shows "a restless spiritual need," a "hunger for wonders," for the miraculous.

One can explain this need in negative terms, that it is a symptom of human weakness that has yet to be outgrown, but Roszak prefers a second explanation: that there is, in the human organism, a constant and enduring need for the transcendent which cannot be denied.

There is, then, a secret psychological war between what he defines as the secular humanistic intellect and the human need for transcendence. This war he finds explicitly portrayed in the work of the romantic poet William Blake, whose mythic figure Urizen (Your Reason) turns against the sensuous and visionary elements

of the human psyche, enforcing the claims of a "single vision" and cruelly censoring human experience to a reductionistic objectivity. This battle between single vision and spiritual need occurs, for Roszak, over "the place of experience in the life of the mind."

This is, in brief, his thesis, and he is obviously speaking of a multi-faceted phenomena which exists both on a large scale and with tremendous variety. I will not be suggesting here that a particular method of educational inquiry will heal the cultural dichotomy he has identified, but I do believe that the methods and products of natural inquiry are directly related to his concerns about the place of experience in the life of the mind.

Roszak does not attempt a solution to the problem, but he does identify three key elements that could resolve the split between experience and mind: (1) keeping personal experience at the center of one's discussion, (2) using "deep introspection" as a tool of inquiry, (3) in order to arrive at a transcendent knowledge. I believe that each of these three elements relate directly to the practice and products of natural inquiry considered in its highest potentiality.

"Where do we turn," Roszak asks, "to find the experience...on which the books and reports must finally be based?" The answer, in this context, is obvious. When we speak of the importance of living in the life being studied, of immersion, of a naturalistic methodology, we are close to what Roszak defines as experience: "immediate contact, direct impact, knowledge at its most personal level as it is lived." People who are directly and deeply involved in natural inquiry have found that source of lived experience in the actual children or teachers or classrooms in which they live and think.

Many readers of this essay are familiar with the slighting or patronizing way in which experiential research may be regarded. Its methods are seen as time-consuming, its short-range results as tainted with subjectivity, and its long-term results as limited. "Lived knowledge" can be seen as just a catch-phrase by those who live by catch-phrases, and disregarded as a suspect fad. This type of knowledge, however, is our strength, the focus of our inquiry that assures us of reality. This immediate contact with life-as-it-is-lived is the foundation of our work.

Not only are we privileged to begin with human experience for the subject of our thought, but we are reassured by its continuing existence. After all our words, we have not exhausted or drained it, nor have we substituted a set of words or figures for that reality. Other types of research present us with--to take the National Assessment of Educational Progress as only an example--an elusive set of 13-year-olds across the nation who cannot organize their thoughts in an essay, a group that can be dealt with only symbolically, at one remove, since we cannot approach or touch them as actual 13-year-olds. In a naturalistic paradigm, the

objects and subjects of our speculation remain in reality, as solid after our research as before. The child writes another story the next day; the teacher comes up the sidewalk of the school on Monday; the system of the school begins again as someone makes coffee in the teachers' lounge. The natural inquirer is assured of dealing with reality, with experience, and is always brought to realize the continuing existence of that experience.

The method of "deep introspection" admired by Roszak suggests a second connection with natural inquiry. Other research paradigms may begin with "thought" and seem to require thought, or at least speculation, about the final results, but natural inquiry demands thought before, after, and during the research. Its primary tool is the reflective thought of the researcher, or of groups of joint-researchers, a type of deep thinking which endeavors to understand rather than merely explain. This kind of thinking is not some instrument remote from human experience; it is a primary tool embedded in our experience. Through the deep introspection of joint or individual criticism, analysis, description, and reflection, we seek, find, and deal with our discoveries.

Roszak suggests that the important discoveries are a type of transcendent knowledge, an arrival at a place of "redeeming silence where the mysteries hold sway" which will thus connect human experience to spiritual need. This third point is the most troublesome part of my comparison between Roszak's essay and the paradigm of natural inquiry, but it is also the most important. Why, of course, would one <u>want</u> to undertake a knowledge-seeking inquiry which will result in mystery and silence? And what could possibly be "redeeming" about such apparently ethereal results? Roszak's language is so fraught with such words--extraordinary, miraculous, transcendent--that the reader is granted the right to be suspicious or even alarmed. Yet I believe that the sense of these words can be applied to the results of natural inquiry.

Let me use "transcendent knowledge" as my phrase for this quality, and let me acknowledge that "transcendent" carries a variety of meanings in philosophical discourse including a minimalization or de-emphasis of direct experience. I use the word in what I consider to be its purest etymological sense: a knowledge arrived at by the process of <u>climbing over</u> or <u>across</u> and thus a process which involves what it <u>is</u> one climbs over or across, a reaching toward some summit that includes the activity of climbing the hill itself. This type of transcendence, in other words, occurs through interaction with experience. It is the transcendence of a Walt Whitman, a knowledge gained through enumeration and detail, dependent on that material, rather than an airy leap into pre-existing transcendent abstraction.

There are two ways in which we experience this quality of transcendent knowledge in the results of natural inquiry, one having to do with the results of a study, what we have discovered, and the second having to do with what is left after the study, what we have not discovered completely. First, the results or

conclusions of a natural inquiry study, gained through reflection and introspection on direct experience, are mysterious and transcendent because they point toward greater and greater interaction between the various parts. Such conclusions do not result in the identification of one discrete element in a system or room or child that is responsible for the whole or which needs remediation in isolation. Such conclusions necessarily point to the mysteriously complex ecology of human experience and life, and a sense of the existence of this ecology is a type of transcendent knowledge in the way I am using this phrase.

Secondly, what we are left with afterwards, and after words, is likewise mysterious and transcendent: we have both the realization that we have tapped into some vital force and the realization that we cannot articulate it completely. Hence there must be an element of post-research "silence," of being "mute" (from which "mystery" derives its stem), of a thrilling incompleteness. This is not, let me point out, the incompleteness of quantitative research which all will recognize: that there is always more to discover, another study that can be done. Having quantitatively discovered one thing and waiting for further research to produce another thing is far different from the incompleteness of natural inquiry, a recognition that we have touched the one thing of human experience and expression in its entirety through the study of a single individual or relationship of individuals: the unified transcendent mystery that is life.

Along with the silence that occurs when we have touched the whole and not encompassed it, another silence is introduced by what I have mentioned earlier, the enduring existence of the subjects of our speculation. This is the mysterious continuing-to-exist quality of a painting after the tour-guide or art-historian has finished speaking. It is the continuation of the pine trees around the lake shore after we have had a surfeit of beauty in our own minds and bodies, and turn to go indoors at night. It is the mysterious continuing of Kevin or Amy bouncing into a classroom on Monday morning after we have completed our thoughts on their interactions last week. They have not been symbolized out of existence or re-represented by some abstract measurement. They are here, again, always, alive.

These then are the advantages of being involved in natural inquiry. Our observations and interviews and descriptions cannot become "more remote from the senses, the lived life," as Roszak points out the tools of contemporary science have become; they are, by their nature, grounded in the experience they deal with. They are also connected inextricably to a type of transcendent knowledge, and all of this is "redeeming" in a very real sense of the word. Through the processes of natural inquiry we recover ownership of human life, both setting it free and reclaiming it for ourselves. By discovering and affirming the greater organic complexities of human experience and expression, we have discovered and affirmed our own. Because experience and thought have been held together, interacting in the process of inquiry, our own thoughts and experience are simultaneously enriched; touching our subjects, we are touched ourselves.

I have worried, at times, about the use of the adjective "natural" to modify "inquiry" as my general phrase for a number of related research-endeavor, but I think the word is appropriate. We experience the naturalness of our subject, lived experience and expression; the naturalness of our methodology, deep human reflection on the phenomena of life; and the naturalness of our conclusions, a glimpse into that mysterious place where, to use Blake's categories, the reasoning, the sensuous, the compassionate, and the visionary powers merge with each other to form that transcendent ecology which is human experience.