An Approach to Child Rearing

A few years ago I would have said that my approach to child rearing could be called a "common sense" approach. The phrase, which is widely used, stuck with me for a long time until I finally figured out what's wrong with it. Another characterization that I thought might apply was the "natural" approach to child rearing, but that was not an apt title, as I finally came to see. I am starting by telling you what my approach *isn't* because understanding what it isn't played a large role in my figuring out what it *is*. Often you think you know where you are headed, and you make progress when you finally figure out why you are not headed where you thought you were.

My approach to child rearing isn't "common sense" because common sense, by the very meaning of the words, is something that is determined by the culture. There is nothing innate about common sense. This is a notion that many philosophers have struggled with, because they would like to believe that common sense is something that you are born with and is characteristic of the human mind. But when you realize that different people have called many different things "common sense," you come to understand that the word "common" does not mean "common to humanity," but rather "common to a certain sub-group or people, who happen to belong to the same culture." Indeed, when a person says, "This is just common sense,"

or when he tells you that he has used his common sense, what he is really referring to is an approach that is generally accepted by people in his culture. So when you see an approach to anything – child rearing, for instance – that calls itself a "common sense" approach, you soon find out that what you are in fact getting is an approach that is widely accepted in the culture as a whole. So it is quite right to call Spock a "common sense approach to child rearing," because his approach does reflect views accepted widely in our culture.

Now one of the things that I came to realize is that the kind of approach toward education, child rearing, and family life that I was interested in didn't reflect the surrounding culture to any great extent. On the contrary, it represented a break with the culture. I used to have a terrible time talking to people about child rearing. I found out that it was a subject that I couldn't talk to almost anybody else about, precisely because I *didn't* share a common language with many other people in this area. It is very upsetting to recollect this, because this was tied up with a process of alienation from friends and acquaintances that I underwent personally. And it all started because I was so sure that all the things I stood for were just plain common sense, that they all simply "made sense" – only to discover that none of them are common sense because they don't represent the generally accepted approach.

So then I asked myself, how could I characterize what I am doing? And I thought, "Well, I am raising my children *naturally*; I am going back to a state of nature," which seemed an appropriate way to see things, since I felt that the culture had alienated itself from nature, and what we have to do is go back to nature. This view was quite fashionable. It went with natural food, natural living, natural this and that. So I started saying my approach to child rearing was "natural." Until I began to study nature more closely, and found out that time and time again I was not doing the natural thing at all.

Actually, this should come as no surprise. We are not living in the woods wandering about in some kind of a primitive, primordial state. We are very far removed from that, and there are all sorts of things that we simply are not willing to do in a natural way, if by "natural" we refer to the original state of nature. So when I realized that I can't live with either of these two characterizations, I spent a long time wondering what it is that I really did represent. It took a while to get it clear, but I think that I am now able to characterize my approach in a positive manner.

I think that the key idea informing the whole approach is something that a former friend of mine once said to me as we were walking together, just before I left New York for good. We were both bemoaning our life in New York, wishing there was a way to have all the things we were enjoying and still lead a "good life." My friend, an inveterate pessimist, turned to me and said, "You know how it goes: you can't have your cake and eat it too." And I guess that trite saying, turned around by 180 degrees, really symbolizes what my approach to education, to child rearing, and to life is – that you *can* have your cake and eat it too. We have finally reached the stage in history in which, for the first time ever, this is possible. Our present situation enables us to enjoy the fruits of all the technological and cultural achievements of mankind throughout history, without having to pay the price that once had to be paid for these fruits in the past. We are able to choose and keep what we like out of the culture *and* out of our former natural state.

Let me elaborate a little more. Broadly speaking, what characterizes man's departure from the original state of nature is technology. In fact, nowadays you can't find any surviving examples of early man. We can try to project, however, from what we can see in the animal kingdom. In particular, it is fairly certain that in the early natural state of things, man was integrally related to the rest of nature. He

might have had ingenuity, and a good brain, and he might have been able to use tools, but basically he had to come to terms with nature, and most of the time nature was the determining factor in his life. There he was, evolved into a certain state of being, with his inherited instincts and behavior patterns and with a certain amount of intelligence, and he somehow worked out a relationship with the world around him in which natural forces were the predominant feature.

From this perspective, the history of man is the story of how man used his brain to conquer nature, and how he developed the technical skills to rule the world. I think this is very eloquently stated in Chapter One of the Book of Genesis, where we are told how man was made the ruler of nature, and how he had to pay a price for partaking of the tree of Knowledge – namely, banishment from the Garden of Eden. In other words, to fulfill his destiny man had to break with his initial state of nature. You can sum it up simply, by saying that for the first hundred thousand years or so of human existence after emerging from an initial natural state, mankind concentrated hard on developing a technology that would give freedom of action in the world, independent of nature.

Now, what eventually happened is that Western culture – and I think this is what characterizes Western culture as a distinct cultural trend from about the sixteenth century on – got totally absorbed in this love of technology. Suddenly people in the West felt that with a little more of a push they could really make it, they could finish the job and become masters of their environment, of their physical destiny. Think back on all the things you know about the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries in the West and they all fit in with this exciting feeling that man is just about to conquer everything. For example, there is the passion for exploration. People were not going to let any corner of the world go unexplored. Earlier, the drive was missing. Travelers like Marco Polo came back and told

what they saw on the other side of the world, and people yawned. To be sure, they may have told their children about the trip as an extra bedtime story, but it didn't excite anybody, it didn't trigger a wave of exploration. Then all of a sudden you get explorers going out all the time, it becomes exciting, and challenging. You get the same thing happening in natural philosophy (which we know better as "science" today). People are no longer content to have the steady progress of science characteristic of the culture up to that time. New discoveries abound, new theories of an entirely revolutionary and spectacular nature are proposed. In the political realm, the habits of centuries are cast aside. All of a sudden national states form, something that is very, very Western; and with the concept of a nation comes the idea of pulling together to realize some national destiny.

The driving motivating factors in Western culture in modern times have been material. Everything else has been secondary – in particular, the "humane" elements. The culture as a whole puts aside the delicate human and ethical considerations that characterize the ancient world and the middle ages. All the long discourses on subjects like the right way to work, the right way to behave to your neighbor, the right way to act, how to talk to a person – all these elegant fine points of man's behavior seem to modern man to be quaint, terribly quaint. Modern documents focus more on grand schemes that transform the environment at every level.

What this means as far as child rearing is concerned is that all the tendencies that were present throughout history to subordinate nature to technology, all those tendencies get magnified in the modern West. It becomes a prime consideration of Western culture to raise children *in order to fit right into the technological mainstream.* You've got to make sure that your children are properly conditioned to fit into the technological culture. That means that they cannot be allowed to develop the instincts, inherited characteristics, or natural

tendencies that would run counter to technological society.

Western culture is devoted above all to doing a thorough job. What this means in child rearing is that you don't leave any loose ends if you can help it. The only difference that you get from one generation to the next is one of technique – how you do this best. Generations ago people believed in strongarm tactics; more recently, with the development of the social sciences, you find your methods of molding children to be more subtle.

I believe that we are lucky we were born into this generation, because it just happens to be a time when Western culture has "made it." You couldn't have said this even one generation ago, and a generation or two from now it will be so commonplace that nobody will even be excited about it. We happen to be living in a generation during which a transition is taking place right before our eyes. The main component of this transformation has to do with what is broadly called the "communications revolution." It has to do with the invention of qualitatively new means of processing enormous amounts of information, relaying them from one place to another, controlling them, and using them. It means you can run a large factory with three people. It means you can plan an economy. It means you can tabulate the kind of nationwide statistics that the U.S. Bureau of Statistics handles, for two hundred million people. It means you can produce nine million cars a year, a hundred million tons of steel, and on and on. All these things simply couldn't be done, you could never run anything on such a scale before. The ability to do this now has given the West, and in particular our country, a tremendous excess of wealth and of leisure. I know this may seem a bit odd to say, because there is still so much poverty, but I contend that the problems are fundamentally a matter of over-prosperity. Unemployment, inflation, plants not working at full capacity – these and other symptoms of economic illness are the results of excess, and they are going

to stay with us until we figure out a way to keep everybody doing something when you *really* don't need most people doing anything. The relevance of all this to child rearing and education is just beginning to be understood, and it is going to take a long time to work it out, since we are the first generation of this new reality and we can't expect to find stable solutions quickly. But we know that we're at a place where we not only don't have to raise children to fit into a well defined technological mold, we *mustn't* do so. It is absolutely wrong to do that to our children, because it's not the world they are being born into. Their world will not require that anymore, and to persist in outmoded ways is to produce misfits for the future – people who are perfectly trained to do nothing really relevant. The point is that we have reached a place in the history of Western culture where we've got to raise children to be prepared for a situation which is no longer sharply defined in terms of functions and tasks. We have got to raise children who can deal with the unknown.

I want to relate this to the concept of the "natural state" of man. Up to now, much of life had a set pattern. People could look in a book and find out what to do, because the goals were clear, and each generation had its own sets of methods for attaining them. People knew they wanted children who would behave in a certain way, who would obey orders, who would fit into certain slots, who weren't "over-attached" to their mothers or to their families. People knew exactly what they were called upon to do, and it was always a question of finding the best technique to do it. Now we don't know exactly where we are headed any more, so what is there to rely on? *This is the problem in child rearing today.*

The question is, what can we use as a starting point? That's where nature comes in. What nature has given to man, as to all other living beings, is the *starting point*. It's something that evolution has provided. It's a set of instincts, of behavior patterns, of inherited ten-

dencies that direct man as an animal in the matrix of biological evolution. The hard part is to find out how we can benefit from what we have learned through man's long span of history. This is what I mean when I say, "Having your cake and eating it too." It's an approach which is based on a big question mark, but *knows* what it is avoiding, has an idea of what it wants to take as a starting point, and is ready to use all means currently available to tackle each individual problem as it comes along. That's what I am going to be doing, subject by subject, in the chapters ahead. I will be looking at each subject from the point of view of what program we have to undo, what clues we may get from the natural state, how we may benefit from man's historical experience and scientific skill, and what options we have for action.

So far, all we have is a general framework. We must still decide which specific world view we want to plug into that framework, because we can plug in any number of them, any of which will fit, but each of which will have its own unique set of consequences. For example we can work with a world view that is totally community oriented, where communal values are primary, and there will be certain consequences of taking that specific philosophical point of departure. There's no need to list all the other possibilities. Instead I want to present the world view that will underlie all of the following chapters – namely, the democratic ethos. This philosophy of life stresses a kind of "balance of powers" between the individual and society, between individual rights that are sacred, and community decisions that are made through a democratic procedure. This point of view starts by placing primary importance on the *sacredness of the individual*, while social organization is viewed as something essential but secondary. Now this means, for example, that I am going to be stressing over and over again the primary importance of expressing each individual child's full potential, rather than the primary impor-

tance of preparing children for service to a nation, or for service to God or to an ideal. I will always view social encroachments on individual expression as an evil that is to be minimized, unless it can clearly be shown to enhance individual expression. There will be many examples of this.

This focus on individuality within a democratic ethos is my specific starting point. Much of the literature in child rearing, and education, invokes the idea of individual expression and maximizing individual potential like a ritual incantation. But always some qualifiers are added immediately after-wards which make it very clear that individuality is to be tolerated only within fixed limits which are governed by the needs of society. The primary considerations turn out to be the qualifiers, and individual expression soon get subordinated to the primary restrictions. I want to do it the other way around. My primary focus is the expression of the individual, and although that will be qualified from time to time, it is the qualifiers that will be subject to severe scrutiny and not the expression of the individual. Wherever some social stricture comes to limit individual freedom, it's the social stricture which is going to be under fire, and will have to prove itself, and not the other way around.