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WHAT SHOULD WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

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What indeed? and have we the courage to tell them what we should?

Perhaps we should start by telling the children something about Britain, the country they will soon inherit and be expected to manage. This small island which is almost invisible on an ordinary map of the world, yet with all her faults and mistakes, has given the world so much of its culture and has secured the freedom of so many. Remind the children of to-day that their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents have twice in this century, streamed out of their island fortress, not on package tours in search of fun, but set on a collision course with horror, fear and death, while others, left at home, withstood the pounding and the hardship and the hell of war. For the dead of two world wars, this epitaph could tell the children of the chance they have been given to remain free if they choose freedom:-

"When you go home, tell them of us and say,
'For your to-morrow we gave our to-day' "

Perhaps we should tell them that they were born free, but that it will be up to them to remain free. Remind them that 1984 is only ten short years away and that freedom and democracy are hard to govern. With ever-increasing pressures on the governors, freedom of the governed can be hard to handle. A policy, then, of "what they dont know, they wont grieve" develops into a syndrome of official secrecy, of government by decree and Big Brother is born. It can happen here.

We should warn the children against the proliferating questionnaires; the market research projects; the people who approach you in the street or on railway stations, pencils and forms at the ready and ask impertinent

questions in order to record the answers for some damn fool research scheme or other. Tell the children to beware the next national census and to answer only those questions which could conceivably be of use to future planners. "Dont know" the answers to those which are prying and useless. No great planning miracle has emerged as a result of previous census-taking; all the information gathered has not assisted the planners to catch up with the needs of the people. But it may well add to the data-bank bureaucracy with which our children will have to contend. There are those who are prepared to fight against the approach of Big Brother, right now; who are prepared to accept that Dad and Mum are sometimes right, but Big Brother never. Tell the children that the generation gap of protest is narrow indeed.

Advise the children to question every official statement they hear and that "Why?" is one of the most effective words in the English language. That just because Mr. Big says something, it is not necessarily true. Beware the man in the official suit; he is just another person with no monopoly of good sense or good taste.

Let us tell the children to beware the handful of instant pundits who appear with such mind-bending regularity in every branch of the communications media, determined to refute any criticism of themselves or their particular department of government or interest and to assure us that we only have to trust their judgment and we shall all reach the promised land.

Reject the self-appointed censor and guardian of morality, whose waking hours appear to be spent searching out smut which might well pass unnoticed but for the publicity given to their personal outrage. Who are these people who can, apparently, remain uncorrupted and undepraved by their assiduous attention to what they regard as indecent, while claiming that the rest of the population is in moral danger?

Poverty, starvation, cruelty, disease, race-hatred, torture, warfare and greed are the obscenities of the modern world; a battered baby a more degrading national spectacle than displays of human nakedness.

Let us tell the children to use their eyes, their ears and their legs; to look at this much-threatened island with all its variety of beauty and ugliness and to fight for the beauty, while repudiating the ugliness. Let them use their ears that they may hear the slightest sound in the wind - the birds, the insects and the trees. Tell them to turn off their transistors occasionally and listen to their own thoughts, before their hearing is so impaired that only high-decibel noise can penetrate the damaged delicacy of the gift of hearing.

Tell them to appreciate their legs and to thank God that they have them to walk, to run and to climb. To get out of their parents' cars and off their motor-bikes and discover the earth through the soles of their feet. Their elders, who vote for greed at every general and local election, are gobbling up the earth's resources at such a frenzied speed that to-day's car borne children may well find that walk they must, on legs incapable of carrying them further than the nearest coffee bar. We should take our children to the eyesores, to the scrap heaps, to the slums, to the endless miles of destruction in the wake of the road-builders and the tasteless property developers and tell them that they are looking at a throw-away society and its built-in obsolescence. Should we tell them not to take to the streets in protest against the seven-league boots of "progress" which are stamping our country flat? Unless our governors stem the tide of greed and their own secrecy, the streets may become the only public platform where protest will be heeded. When every constitutional means has been tried, only to be met with paternalistic stone-walling, what is left for the outraged citizen to do?

Should we tell the children to beware of conformity? To recognise conformity for what it is - the flock instinct to huddle as protection against the encircling wolves? Only those in the centre of the huddled group will find protection - those who can run the fastest and get there first. Assert your individuality; be eccentric if you wish, but make it your own eccentricity, not that of the group. The group is so often a bore and - worse - a dictator. There can be no dictators without slaves.

We should certainly tell the children that every human being is the centre of his own world, looking out from behind his eyes and seeing the world and the people in it in his own way. Each is as important as another; each ones problem is important to him, though it may seem trivial compared with ones own.

Dont let the children run away with the idea that they have a monopoly of protest and dissatisfaction; that they are unique in a problem-spattered world. Ask them to give a thought to the struggling adult and the hard-pressed old, who have fought the good fight and are now past fighting; who have helped to produce the goods and services the children expect and who are so often scoffed at for failing to make a better job of things. Time passes and the children will grow up, as we did. We should tell them that we, too, knew so much better than our parents how to build a just and happy society, but what we built was what we have to-day. Our children may do better, but they should be warned that the task will not be easy.