

The Discovery of Roots

by Nigel Altman

If you hand a city-dweller a pencil and a piece of paper and ask him to draw a tree it is a pretty safe bet that he will start at the bottom of the paper as representing ground level and draw upwards, delineating trunk, branches and leaves and nothing more. The resulting half-picture represents, in a way, the sickness of our age. For power-grabbing impulses can in large measure be found to have their origin in an attitude of mind that takes cognizance only of appearances.

The malady of power gives people afflicted with it the desire to demonstrate their putative greatness outwardly in spectacular clothes, vast buildings or in wall-maps showing their continent in monochrome. This mania is given free rein by the millions whose thoughts also are rootless and who in addition lack the drive of will of the dictatorial ones. They are blown into well-ordered drifts.

If on the other hand an individual thinks of or directs his thoughts towards origins and aims that exist in nature in the world and the universe he becomes stable; if an individual is stable he is not easily blown by the wind of emotions; if a nation is composed largely of such stably-thinking individuals a dictator can never get a foothold—his breath promising rehabilitated pride or increased territory is wasted.

The world will eventually house such free people but this state will not be brought by counterplot and wars—although these seem to be at present necessary—but by the gradual changing of the thoughts of the individual. One by one people will put down tap-roots into the reality on which they at present rest unconnected, a prey to the winds of passion and other people's fancy.

For different people this change of direction begins in different ways. For some a major catastrophe is necessary. One cannot help thinking that Helen Keller, for example, might have lacked a vivid inner life but for the loss of faculties in her childhood. For others a chance phrase overheard turns their minds below the surface. One naturally hopes for a decrease in the number of disasters necessary to jolt people into awareness of matters beyond the apparent. But on the other hand we can increase the number of phrases uttered that contain ideas which germinate when dropped into the expectant loam of fallow minds.

It was the hearing of a few such phrases that made me change from city existence to country life. This case history may be of some slight interest.

The transposition into what I think is a more fundamentally enriching way of life came about through a gradual shifting of the direction of my thoughts with certain phrases, you might say, marking the major deflections. Of course one must assume that the forces in my fate that led me into an urban life contained in them the elements that were to lead me out. But within that fate these influential sentences were operative.

About eight years ago I was constructing and painting scenery for a theatrical company that was trying out on Long Island plays destined, it was hoped, for Broadway. The company lived in one large house with a couple of acres and a Jersey cow. Shortly after we had moved down from town Mrs. Potter, who ran the house for us, was describing Della, "She gives twenty-five quarts of milk a day," she said. It was a stunning statement to me. I looked at the cow with a changed attitude and took a new sort of interest in her various escapades, such as when she broke loose and wrecked the flower garden, and subsequently when she licked the paint off one of the flats we had set in a stall to dry. I think I felt to some extent that such behavior was excusable in the light of her phenomenal production, that she should be regarded as in a way a privileged beast. At any rate from that time on there was more of farm animals in my thoughts.

Now the theatre is a fine, cultural art form as well as lots of fun; but among the soils in which a person can achieve an all-round development of his nature this world of make-believe, existing in the already over-intellectualized and glossy mental atmosphere of cities, must rank among the least fertile. Except, of course, in the negative sense, and then it comes under the head of disasters. Famine can make an unthinking palate find a new world of gustatory delight in a simple slice of bread. So a developing person existing in an atmosphere that lacks reality will cast about internally, even if not consciously, for satisfaction of his human craving for mental union with the forces of nature.

In my case another crumb of reality in verbal form came when I was working in a pageant at the New York World's Fair. One member of the cast of two hundred—which was an amazing conglomeration of different types of people—was a man unclassifiable as to occupation. His interests were physics, medicine and the occult, among others. He was speaking one day about the insect pests that were devouring the trees and shrubs of the fair grounds, and he said: "Nature sends these insects to get rid of weak vegetation." Then he went on to explain that the inorganic fertilizers used on the soil of the grounds made the plants susceptible to diseases and described an experiment he had made of growing two identical plants, pole beans perhaps, so that they twined about each other as they climbed, but planted in separate pots. Both pots contained the same soil but one of them had an inorganic fertilizer added. Both plants grew well, but the inorganically fertilized one was attacked in its prime and eaten, while the other—with stalk and leaves in close contact with it—was left untouched.

This sort of statement raises a lot of questions, and with these accumulating in my mind it needed but a slight push of the right sort finally to precipitate me into action. This push came in a talk I heard Dr. Pfeiffer give in New York. One thing he said that impressed me was, as near as I remember it: "A country man has to change his plans more than the city fellow because his program of activity depends on the weather; this gives him a certain flexibility of mind." I bought "Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening" and as I read it it occurred to me that at the back of my mind I had been holding as an aim in all my work in town the ultimate possession

of a "country place." I feel sure that this is true of multitudes of urban people. How, I now questioned, am I going to run it when I get it? I decided that I should act at once to find out, and with the decision came a hazy perception of the soil as man's birthright, and an inkling of the vast and fascinating field of enquiry offered by its cultivation.

After Dr. Pfeiffer's next lecture I asked him for a job.

The other day, after seven months of farm labor and study, I was amusing myself by idly making a picture in color of the first thing that came into my head — or rather, my hand, for I wasn't thinking very hard. It turned out to be two trees. They appeared more or less as normally seen from the ground up, but they continued on down into a transparent earth where their roots were shown ramifying animatedly in all directions and surrounded and interpenetrated by what looked like a colorful representation of bio-chemical activity.

I feel that Fate has been kind to me.