

FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN ABUSE

Burton Blatt  
Professor and Chairman  
Special Education Department  
Boston University

I have recently completed a study of children in state institutions for the mentally retarded (Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1969). The purpose of that study was to present to the American people a description of the treatment of the severely retarded of all ages and the very young residing in state institutions. The first section of this book represents conditions existing in too many institutions for the retarded. The second section of the book is devoted to the heartening conditions we found at The Seaside, a State of Connecticut Regional Center for the Mentally Retarded. Our optimism for the betterment of state institutions is based on the evidence of the forward strides that have been made there. To us, the Seaside represents what can be done with intelligent administration, sufficient funds, and an adequate, sensitive, and well-trained staff.

With Fred Kaplan, a professional photographer who is a close personal friend of mine, meetings were arranged with each of several key administrative persons in a variety of public institutions for the mentally retarded. Through the efforts of courageous and humanitarian colleagues at these institutions, including two Superintendents who put their professional positions in jeopardy, we were able to visit the darkest corridors and vestibules known to mankind and, without being detected by ward personnel and professional staff, Fred Kaplan was able to take hundreds of photographs. Although our pictures cannot even begin to capture the total and overwhelming horror we saw, smelled, and felt,

they represent a side of America that has rarely, if ever, been shown to the general public and is little understood by most of the rest of us.

I do not believe it is necessary to disclose the names of the institutions we visited. First, to reveal ~~to~~ those names is, assuredly, an invitation to the dismissal of those who arranged for us to photograph their deepest and most embarrassing "secrets". However, involved is not only a matter of promises made to altruistic people but avoidance of the impression that the problems we have exposed are local rather than national ones. I am completely convinced that in numerous other institutions across America one can observe similar conditions -- some, I am sure, even more frightening than those we had seen. Nor do I believe the conditions we observed were due to evil people or incompetent administrators. As Seymour Sarason, Professor of Psychology at Yale University, wrote in the Preface of our book, "These conditions are due " . . . to a conception of human potential and an attitude toward innovation which when applied to the mentally defective, result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, if one thinks that defective children are almost beyond help, one acts toward them in a way which then confirms one's assumptions."

I have learned a great deal during my visits to these institutions about the treatment of <sup>the</sup> severely mentally retarded. I have learned about programs, standards, admission policies, personnel, budgets, philosophies, and objectives. I have even gone so far as to make very explicit recommendations in our book, recommendations that I believe may prevent some of the problems we observed and ameliorate others. But, essentially, I have learned something about the dominating factor that influences Man in his treatment of other human beings. And this is a concept worth striving to understand. It has always intrigued me to think about why anti-vivisectionists are so passionate in their beliefs concerning the use of animals for scientific experimentation. To me, animals have always been creatures to enjoy, to act kindly toward, and not to inflict

any unnecessary punishment on. I believe this is the way most thoughtful human beings view the animal kingdom, and I think of myself as a reasonable man. However, I would be less than candid if I did not admit that stories about carefully controlled, and apparently necessary animal experimentation never offend me. On the other hand, there are people, some of our closest friends, who cry real tears and display deep emotions when confronted with cruelty to animals. During my study of institutions, I began to understand, finally, why anti-vivisectionists are the way they are and why I am so different. Further, I began to understand how certain human beings can be treated so dispassionately and cruelly in institutions while others are treated with thoughtfulness and kindness. Anti-vivisectionists must conceive of animals in ways other people conceive of human beings. If one looks at the anti-vivisectionist in this light, it is not difficult to understand his anguish in observing inhuman behavior to animals. Certain other human beings have been taught or trained -- or this is part of their natures -- to conceive of other human beings in ways that most of us think of animals. If this is so, it is not difficult to understand why too many institutional attendants -- or for that matter too many public school teachers -- treat the mentally retarded, the emotionally disturbed, the incompetent scholar, and others who "don't fit the mold," in the ways they do. It isn't that these attendants and teachers are cruel or incompetent people -- although some times they are -- but they have come to believe that those in their charge are not either really or equally human.

I believe that in whatever ways we implement programs and reconstruct philosophies and practices for our institutions, our most forceful thrust must be in our attempts to reconceptualize our understanding of the nature and prerogatives of Man. More important than the desperately needed increased per capita expenditure for institutional care, more important than the obvious



necessity to reduce the crowdedness of most institutions, even more important than offering more adequate curricula at our Schools of Education and Schools of Medicine and Schools of Social Work and, thus, making our university students more competent special education teachers and more highly trained scientists, is the necessity for infusing a fundamental belief among all who work with children that each of these individuals is equally human. Most beginning teachers and other workers associated with the care and education of the mentally retarded enter this noblest of all callings with compassion for human beings and a dedication to help them grow and learn. However, I am despondent by the notion that the humanistic convictions of these young people become tarnished during the years of their training and, especially, during their beginning occupational experiences. I am distressed by the cynicism among some of our colleagues that begrudges the humanism necessary for any productive human interaction, such as the teacher-learner affair. I am appalled by the obvious fact that one is rarely blessed today unless he sneezes.

To my regret, I do not have any valuable insights to contribute toward the programming of humanism in our state institutions. However, maybe we will have made some progress when we admit that the teacher, the attendant, the superintendent, is, first and foremost, a human interactor whose major purpose is in influencing other human beings. In a remarkable recent book, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. developed what I believe is a beautiful and profound insight, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." Maybe the first step is to teach ourselves to pretend to be interested in all children and to pretend to treat all of those in our charge with equal compassion and thoughtfulness, if not wisdom. Maybe, as Vonnegut suggests, in pretending we will become as we behave.

I have undertaken the study of institutions and written the truth about

them as plainly and as simply as I see it -- not for money or fame -- for there has been precious little of either connected with this assignment and there has been a good deal of grief. I would be surprised if our book changes radically the nature of institutions. On the other hand, Camus wrote further, "Perhaps we can't stop the world from being one in which children are tortured but we can reduce the number of tortured children."

In spite of some who may protest the publication and illumination of the conditions we observed, there will be no turning back; the truth can no longer be concealed. Some good must come from all this pain and anguish to so many institutionalized residents and their families. Once seeds are sown, one only has to wait for the crop to harvest. It has also been said that, when the bellman is dead, the wind will toll the bell.

So hurry wind! or revive yourselves noble bellringers.