

LEARNED INATTENTION

As you can see for yourself, Snoopy's not hearing the music is not something he had to do nothing about. Not to hear it, he had to open & erect his umbrella. You could say, in a metaphor other than "being rained on," that he "tuned out" the music. (Remember Tim Leary & the hippies' "Turn on, tune in, drop out" [and the variants of the countercultural command]? You're always listening to something, & the choice is always yours.)

"Seek and ye shall find," wise as this saying of Jesus is, has two downsides: (1) You're apt to find it because you're predisposed to find it rather than some something else it would be better for you to find; & (2) In addition to having its own shape, what you find will be somewhat misshapen by the force of your pre-ception as to what you were seeking.

PEANUTS

by Charles M. Schulz



The case in point: Robert Coles' THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN (Houghton Mifflin/90) & the author's personal story of prior learned inattention.

1 In church today I was struck by two instances of the liberal church's learned inattention to Jesus, who's a double embarrassment (to feminists, that God's incarnation was male only; & to "interfaith"-oriented liberal Christians, who see Jesus as a liability to "true dialog," especially with Jews). We used a "Litany of Celebration: UCC College Heritage Sunday 1991," sent out from our national denominational office. Making no mention of Jesus, the litany would have been as appropriate in synagogue or mosque as in church--indeed, moreso. Then we sang hymn #149 in the United Church Hymnal, a hymn based on the UCC Statement of Faith, whose first line includes "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father." But the hymn does not mention "Father," or "Lord," or "Jesus," or "Christ"! Because it is my church, it pains me to say this: For such a church there is no future. The sell-out to bland "pluralism" is almost total. The Christian specifics that explain the *raison d'être* of the Church & the triumphant joy of its saints have eroded into near illegibility. (I speak of the national office & its products: many of our congregations are more faithful to the Faith.)....I repeat: From this morning's worship in our church, two instances of the UCC national office's teaching inattention to Jesus, the reverse of the NT's central purpose, viz to call attention to Jesus.

2 **Modernity** and **relevance** are keynotes of the UCC & (even moreso) the UUF (Unitarian Universalist Association, the only traditional church to the left of the UCC). Relevance to what? Transformation. Transformation of what? Society. Into what? "A justice and peace society," to which "justice and peace churches" now witness in being, among other things, "open and affirming" of homosexuals. In national church offices, slogans become sacred, especially slogans generated in those offices. Then ecclesiastical bureaucracies hope to drone the sacralized slogans into clergy & congregations. So much for relevance.

What about modernity? It's come upon hard times. Major critics of it have arisen in every field. Five days ago at Jewish Theological Seminary, Christopher Lasch, distinguished U. of Rochester historian, delivered a devastating lecture, "The

Soul of Man Under Secularism" (extensively reported in yesterday's N.Y. TIMES). The last century worked hard at developing "a substitute for religious faiths...regarded as offensive to the modern mind." For leading segments of the "educated classes," surrendering one's traditional faith was a rite of passage, culturally, from childhood to maturity (the individual's development metaphored onto society under the assumption of progress, the ideal he blasts in his latest book, THE TRUE AND ONLY HEAVEN [Norton]). But the self-proclaimed mature have become disillusioned with "this mental habit of playing off our disillusionment against the innocence of our ancestors," from whose deep and nourishing religions the self-important pride of the descendants has blocked the latter off. Freud, Weber, Jung, Mannheim, Krutch deceived themselves into thinking that religion, as (they thought) a left-over from the childhood of the race, was simple: "Religion is consistently treated as a source of intellectual and emotional security, not as a challenge to complacency and pride. Its ethical teachings are misconstrued as a body of simple commandments leaving no room for ambiguity or doubt." On the contrary, religion has always wrestled with mature & maturing issues. CL cited Wm. James' belief that the deepest forms of religion arose out of despair and an awareness of evil.

As for Freud's THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION (viz, religion), there's not much future for that illusion, ie the illusion that religion is illusion. Religion deals with the profundities, & without it life remains superficial. Eg, "the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy." And "the illusion of mastery," that we need nothing beyond ourselves as individuals or as a species, must be surrendered, though it's at the heart of modernity...."Beliefs" columnist Peter Steinfelds concludes with this: CL "set question marks dancing around many of the intellectual assumptions of our age." I may suggest an irony here: Those who thought themselves mature in their secularism are coming into the real maturity of doubting one's doubts.

3 At Loree's birthday party in N.Y. yesterday, a DCR reminded me of a shock I'd given her many years ago. I presented a full pitcher & an empty glass & told the class that I was going to pour all the water into the glass. Nobody thought I could, but I did. All the water went into the glass. Of course not all of it stayed there, most of it flowed off the table & onto a beautiful rug. There were gasps as folks realized I wasn't going to stop pouring, & all eyes were upon the spillover....Culturally, almost no eyes are on the overflow when reality is poured into a paradigm inadequate to hold it. For thirty years working as a psychoanalytic (Freud through Eriksen) interviewer of children, Robert Coles didn't notice that their spiritual reality was overflowing his ideological cup.

After his magnificent five-volume CHILDREN OF CRISIS (including interviews of the poorest & richest children, of many races & cultures), his THE POLITICAL LIFE OF CHILDREN, and THE MORAL LIFE OF CHILDREN (which [xvii] "overlaps" with spiritual life), he asked Freud's daughter Anna what to do next. Said she, look over all you've done to see if you've missed anything. He forgot about her saying that, but some time later relistened to the tape to check out his assumption that she was asking only within the psychoanalytic paradigm: had he overlooked anything Freud would have noticed? But when he listened to the tape, he realized that her question was open, innocent, non-ideological. And the more he & wife Jane looked over their thirty years of labor, including rehearing innumerable tapes, the more he realized that he'd missed the spiritual dimension (in my metaphoric action, he hadn't noticed the overflow). He had learned to be inattentive to the spiritual.

The more he thought of this, the more astonishing his blindness seemed. Had it not been profoundly religious Ruby Bridges, the black first-grader who integrated a school 33 years ago, who convinced him to change from academic & clinical work to become a "field-worker" with children? Answering his question as to how she could be so calm with all those people screaming hate at her, she quoted Jesus' "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"--which, on further questioning, she explained that she'd learned at home & in church....At Union Seminary yesterday, he said Ruby & he still visit each other. She's a college graduate with a family of her own....Without her, "I might have pursued a different life. I had planned until then to enter the profession of psychoanalytic child psychiatry."

Instead, I became a 'field-worker' with children" (xi).

3 Not that religious interest was entirely absent in his life. During medical school he'd taken some courses at Union Theological Seminary & worked in the Catholic Worker soup kitchen (& remembers Dorothy Day's saying that children privately & passionately "reach out to eternity"). But this reinforces the point of this Thinksheet: It was specifically when he was in action in his sphere of learning & expertise that he brushed religion aside. There the psychoanalyst's inattention to religion was **learned**.

4 Coles had some **unlearning** to do, & it could be done only by listening to children without imposing his paradigmatic cookie-cutter on what they said. The new, opening listening was both to children yesterday (his notes, tapes, books of reportage) & to new children: "Children are soulful in ways they themselves reveal: young human beings, profane as can be one minute, but the next, spiritual" (xvii).

Then he could **learn** "how children sift and sort spiritual matters" (xvii, an accurate description of the book's contents).

5 The children he had most reason to listen to were his own, with wife Jane his three sons. She took them to an Episcopal Sunday school. He poignantly remembers the Sunday he asked a small son of his what he'd learned in church, & the boy said he'd learned from St. Paul the difference between mere religion ("the letter") & real spirituality ("the Spirit"): some people have one & some the other, but the ideal is to combine both religion & spirituality in your life--an answer startling to the professor for its clarity & profundity. The son had learned to pay attention to what was important in Sunday school, but the father had not yet learned to pay attention to what was most important in what children said to him.

6 Reviewing all that interview material impressed him ever more deeply with his "lost opportunities, hints [from children] not pursued" (xv). It had been "a shrug of my shoulders" when a child brought up religion or spirituality, then "a remark of mine that moved us into quite another realm of discourse--such are the fateful turns in what later gets called 'research.'"

I remember, from my brief exposure to the book, a black boy from whom Coles was trying, in 1962, to elicit how it feels to be a black boy in America. Said the boy, I never think about it, except after I've been to church. There I learn of God's suffering for me in Jesus; & as long as I keep thinking about that, I can accept how I feel, how my people feel--& sometimes it lasts all week till next Sunday....But even such a bugles-blowing religious-spiritual utterance was, at the time, of no use to the interviewer!

7 As I think of Coles' life, not just this book, I notice women's influence on him to widen his perception & deepen his feeling. Dorothy Day. Anna Freud. And of course Jane, whom he thanks "for long ago prodding me to recognize the ideological underpinnings of much secular thought, and for making me aware of a great deal that I chose for a long time not to recognize" (xviii).

8 Peter Gay's A GODLESS JEW: FREUD, ATHEISM, AND THE MAKING OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS (Yale/87) is excellent for understanding (Coles, 340) "the modern agnosticism of contemporary psychoanalysis, familiar to me throughout my working life."

9 Coles selects the four nouns wisely in describing, 9-12 seriatim, the major religious options in America (so, the major religious worlds his child-interviewees inhabit): Christian **salvation**, Islamic **surrender**, Jewish **righteousness**, secular **soul-searching**. The chapters would make excellent basic material for a church study-group on religion in America. Perhaps also, before or after these chapters, Coles' HARVARD DIARY, on his own growing spiritual awareness & its private & public implications.

10 Grid "attention" & "inattention" on the x axis, then "learned" & "unlearned" on the y axis. What comes to mind to put in each of the four boxes? Where would you put the characters in the Iran-Contra cover-up, where (Moyers on "Frontline") "not knowing became a virtue"?