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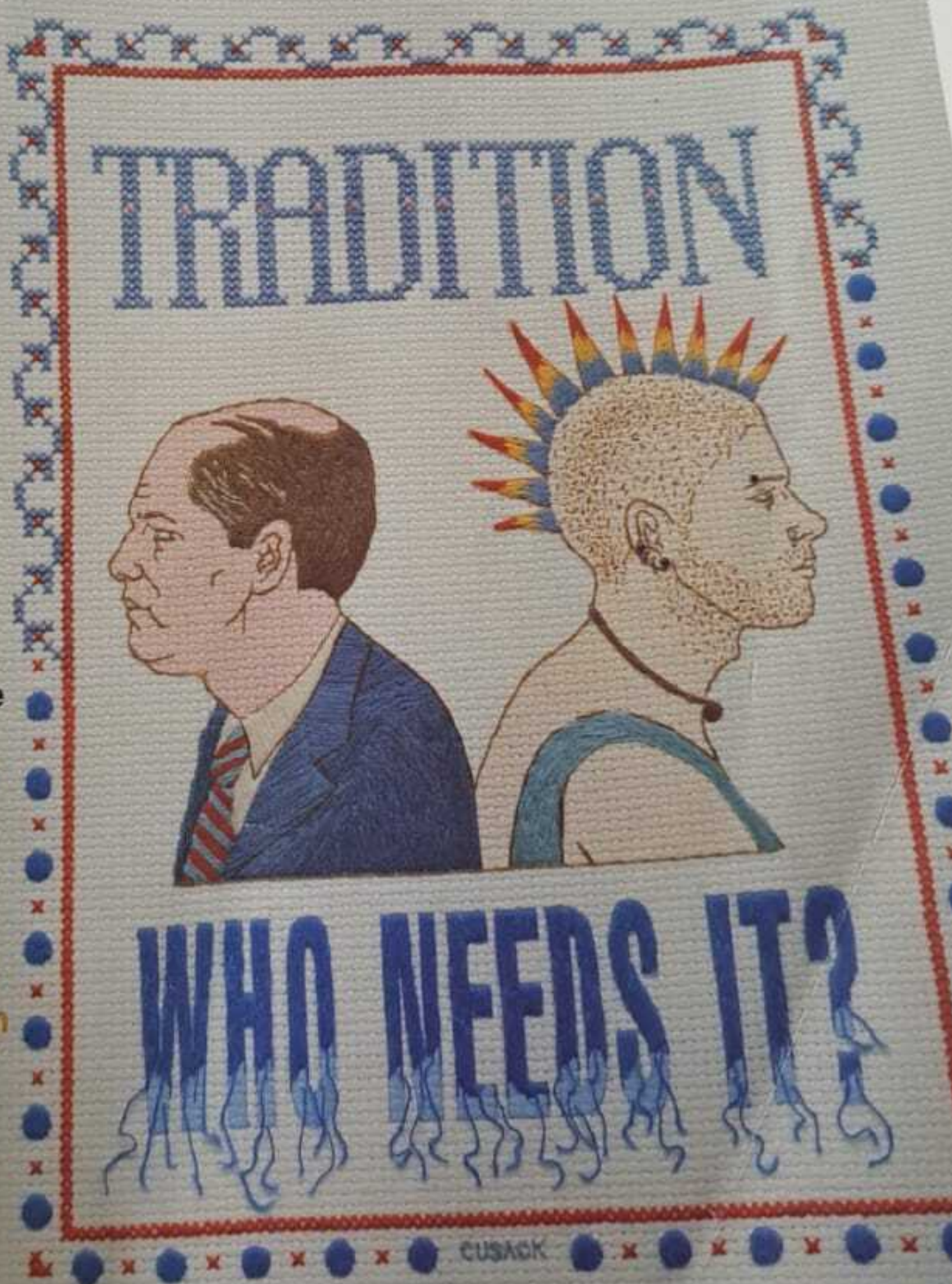
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Glimpses **OF A** Traditionalist Counterculture

BY **MAYER
SCHILLER**

Rearing adolescents today, amidst the decadence and distractions of the late-twentieth century, is not easy. Is it realistic to expect that typical young Americans can still be convinced in large numbers to respect their ancestral faiths, to adopt old-fashioned virtues and manners, to respect elders and authority, to seek civility and practice self-restraint? Or are the competing values of the shopping mall, MTV, and the dubious "morality" bequeathed by the '60s too tempting a siren song for average teenagers to resist?

In particular, can high schools help lead teenagers through this difficult task—a combination of education and resistance? It is precisely in high school, when the child has emerged from the natural obedience of his early years but has yet to form mature convictions, when the allures of modern bliss are most tempting. This is when parents need help in keeping the value of old wisdoms alive in their children's minds, and in keeping the worst of the new seductions fenced out. One critical question for many parents today is whether they can reasonably expect to have their children's schools on their side in carrying out this complicated process of filtering and affirming.

To answer that question, I recently spent time with the faculty and students of four schools that have made the transmission of healthy traditions to adolescents the central part of their teaching mission. Two of the schools are Catholic, two are Jewish. All of them are passionately devoted to timeless,

orthodox visions of their faiths. Do these remnants pledged to eternal verities have any prospect of succeeding with contemporary children? Of surviving as institutions? Or are they fossils—relics of a time dead and gone?

IN MOSCOW, PENNSYLVANIA, IN A LARGE BRICK BUILDING ATOP A HILL, surrounded by broad lawns, the world-gone-mad is locked out. As the student guide of St. Gregory's Academy notes, "It is expected that students will strive to live a sincere Catholic life and act accordingly." The sense of reverence, so necessary for a life of faith, and so difficult today, is demanded. "Students must show respect in word and deed for holy places, holy persons, and holy things." This extends to all authority. They must "show courtesy and respect to adults" and "obey orders and assignments."

This boys-only high school is attended by young men from steadfast Catholic homes. Co-education is frowned upon because "it is an evident fact that the education proper to masculine nature and that proper to feminine nature are different." Also, the wisdom of the past must be respected: "The Church...has always strongly preferred separate schools."

At St. Gregory's, it is assumed that there's a connection between a student's inner life and his outer appearance. Dark trousers, white shirt, and tie (as well as a sport jacket or sweater when the weather is not too hot), black shoes, and dark socks are required. Even while students are relaxing in dormitory rooms, there are rules pro-

hibiting the wearing of crude T-shirts, and "rock posters, advertising, and other material deemed objectionable" are not allowed. The idea is that a person's leisure pursuits help shape his personality.

Yet for all its regulations, St. Gregory's is anything but a grim, tight-lipped bastion. Headmaster Alan Hicks sees his students as "gradually coming to the realization that happiness is the result of a well-ordered and virtuous life." The school's task is to break the boy's attachment to "banal and sensational things and entertainment." This is done not merely by forbidding the bad but by "providing an alternative." Students are fed a steady diet of art and music, both popular and profound, drawn broadly from the best of human creation, not just from the narrow ghetto of modernity.

Once, a fairly stable set of moral norms permeated American life in the classroom, on the ball field, and at home. Today, though, St. Gregory's must deprogram. The virtues of sportsmanship, discipline, and loyalty are emphasized. According to Hicks, the Christian gentleman is "strong, virtuous, and courageous," but will "never cause pain and is always kind and polite." The ultimate goal is, of course, man's supernatural relationship with God. But St. Gregory's believes this must be pursued through everyday living, because when "a human being's emotions and imagination are sound, he will be better disposed to grace."

Parents are an important part of a St. Gregory's education. A recent letter they received from Hicks shortly before Christmas vacation urged them to keep their children away from "television, unwhole-

some teenage music, hanging out with questionable companions. We see the effects, good or bad, of the boys' home lives when they return."

Although not every student at St. Gregory's succeeds—and occasionally some are asked or opt to leave—the vast majority seem to be prospering. Robin Ekeya, a sophomore, finds the school "one big happy family, where the teachers want to help us." John Clark, a junior, sees the dress code and discipline of the school as "good training for life." He doesn't think the rules are excessive. They "have good reasons, which are always explained to us." He adds that "no one dislikes the teachers, because we see they care about us."

"All this white shirt, 'yes sir,' getting up when the teacher comes in—do you find it annoying?" I ask one student.

"No, it trains us to behave properly. What annoys me is how other kids live. No respect or purpose in life."

THE YESHIVA UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL FOR BOYS IN UPTOWN Manhattan doesn't have the full dress code of St. Gregory's, but by the standards of contemporary public schools it is still quite demanding. No jeans, polo shirts, sneakers, or long hair are allowed. What might most strike outsiders about YUHS is the length of its academic day and the detailed demands of Jewish Orthodoxy to which the school is pledged.

The school, numbering some 400 boys, is part of the Yeshiva University complex located in the Washington Heights section of New York City. Limited dormitory facil-



ities result in a student body that is largely based in from throughout the tri-state area. The school is what is commonly referred to as "modern Orthodox," which means that unlike the strictest Orthodox practice, students dress like contemporary Americans and pursue secular studies. Among the more traditional Orthodox, ancient patterns of dress (black coats, hats, and so forth) are normal, and knowledge other than the purely religious is only grudgingly pursued.

Students at YUHS travel considerable distances to attend the school, often commuting over an hour each way. The sense of parents is that the school is rare in offering a rigorous Talmudic curriculum alongside a top-notch array of general studies. The long day begins at 8:00 with morning prayers that last until 9:00, followed by breakfast. Eating is not permitted before the services. At 9:30, religious studies begin, continuing until 12:30. After a 40-minute break for lunch the standard high school courses are offered. The day concludes with dismissal at 6:20 P.M. Classes are held on Sunday but not on Friday, in deference to the approaching Jewish Sabbath.

YUHS is a community school in the truest sense. It caters to students of varied academic accomplishment and religious commitment (although all are Orthodox). The school does not have the luxury of selectivity and of a total atmosphere like at St. Gregory's. Accordingly, YUHS's attempts at imparting the basics of Judaism to its students are not without tension. The vast majority of students, however, seem to accept the school's ways, without shying from criticism of what they see as its faults.

A conversation with a cross-section of seniors showed broad satisfaction. "I don't feel that I'm missing anything being here," said Srullee Hercman. Jeremy Wimpfheimer sees the school's religious environment as crucial. "We're able to live Judaism here. All the school's demands are proper. They are just demanding what the Torah demands."

According to many students, YUHS allows them the best of two worlds. They can study and practice their faith while also experiencing the outside world, albeit in a

filtered form. According to Adam Mermelstein, "the school takes things from the outside world and makes them Jewish." Public school is simply not an option because, in the words of Eric Distenfeld, "If you go there you can forget about God."

"Would you send your children to a yeshiva like this?" I queried a student. "Definitely. This is the only way you can really learn about Judaism. Plus you can learn about God. In public school they can't even mention Him."

There were more dissenting voices in YUHS than in the other schools I visited. Some students would prefer that the school be either more or less religious. This is probably due to the greater diversity among the student body. Yet the school seems to have mostly succeeded at keeping modern society's vices at arm's length, while giving its students a solid grounding for life.

NOT ALL CATHOLICS SEE THE CURRENT POPE AS THE CONSERVATIVE FIGURE the mass media depict. Many traditional Catholics view him as the leader of a process, begun in the 1960s by Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, that has jettisoned and distorted basic aspects of their faith. To these critics, the decline in Catholic practice over the past four decades is a direct result of this process of betrayal. Perhaps the best known of these traditionalists is the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre.

An American hardliner of this type is Bishop Clarence Kelley, who heads the St. Pius V. Academy in Oyster Bay on Long Island. The school is quite clear as to its orientation: "Doctrine, morals, and worship are all practiced and taught according to the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church, as they were practiced and taught before Vatican II."

Begun in 1972 as an outgrowth of the chapel of the same name, the school runs from kindergarten through twelfth grade and enrolls about 100 students. Housed in a rented facility, the academy is co-ed by financial necessity. The children are well-behaved and classroom walls are covered with posters, maps,

and charts drawn from the kinds of "basic knowledge" curricula that were standard in public schools until fairly recently. Christmas decorations are everywhere, and in that too I was reminded of the public school I attended in New York City in the 1950s.

Many of the staff are nuns, and I was ushered upstairs by one of them to meet the principal, Mother Mary Bosco. She was in the middle of running the elementary students through rehearsal of a play to be presented to parents before Christmas vacation. There was no misbehaving on the children's part, despite the fact that more than 25 of them who constituted the chorus were sitting around with little to do between infrequent singing parts. Mother Bosco exhorted her young actors to face the audience and speak up. She brooked no nonsense.

Her stern stage demeanor was a far cry from the warmth, grace, and humor she exhibited later when we met in her office. She related with humility, but clear conviction, her estrangement from the public schools and the Vatican II revisions of her youth. It was a long odyssey, but eventually both she and her mother became Catholic traditionalists. She patiently explained to me the school's approach to the present pope. "We teach the basics of the faith in the younger grades, and by the time the students are older they are capable of drawing their own conclusions about Rome today. When they reach the older grades we discuss the crisis in the Church with them."

The school has a fairly selective admissions policy, and those who get in but are not committed to its spiritual vision have generally left before high school. As at St. Gregory's, the students are uniformly respectful in their demeanor. White shirts and ties are required for the boys, and the girls wear uniform dresses designed, they say, by their well-liked bishop himself. To

an outsider, the combination of manners and traditional formal attire is stunning. One is transported back across the decades to the 1950s.

Mother Bosco suggests to me that most of the students



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will tell me they like the school despite its discipline—which I saw firsthand when I walked in on a tongue-lashing she was giving a high school boy who “answered back” a lay teacher. The criticism was withering. In a lengthy, private meeting I had with the eleventh and twelfth grades, the principal’s prediction proved true. The good-humored students say they would like to have more classmates, and the boys want better athletic facilities. The complaining, however, is good-spirited. When the conversation turns serious, they unanimously say the academy is where they would like to be. James Caratello, who formerly attended public high school, says that there, “no one cares about you. Here all the teachers care about us.” He sees the dress code as relieving students of the pressure to keep up with fashion styles. Jessica and Lorraine Pirozzi feel only sorrow towards those who are not exposed to the high standards of the academy.

I ask one student, “Do you feel isolated?” He answers, “No, we don’t feel isolated. Who would want to be in public school? You know what goes on there.”

Some will see a Catholic school that rejects Vatican II as extreme. The students I met, however, were fun-loving and robust. And after reading two issues of the school’s yearbook, it’s clear that despite their firm loyalty to eternal things, they are as capable of jokes and foolishness as any adolescent.

IN THE WINTER OF 1956, HASIDIC JEWISH RABBI JACOB JOSEPH TWERSKY led a small band of his followers out of New York City to found New Square, the first all-Orthodox Jewish village in the world, in southern New York state. Today, due to large families and the attraction of his experiment to outsiders, the little village has grown into a small city numbering some 6,000 souls. Residents tend to see the contemporary world as a place full of negative influences, from which they attempt to shield their children in their formative years.

In order to achieve this, New Square bans television, movies, and non-religious music of any sort. The students who attend the village’s high school are generally unaware of the culture running wild just outside New Square’s borders. The school system serves 2,000, with high school students representing about a third of that number.

The boys at the Yeshiva Avir Yakov school, which I visited, all dress in the long black suits favored by Hasidic Jews, and sport beards and peyos (side curls). Their daily schedule is, by American standards, painfully long. With the exception of two one-week periods of religious

holidays, there are no vacations in New Square. Studies begin at 7:00 in the morning with two hours of Talmud study. Morning prayers commence at 9:00 and last till 10:00. Breakfast concludes at 10:45 and another study session runs till 2:00 PM. This is followed at 4:00 with yet another session until 7:00. The day concludes with evening classes till 10:00 p.m. For much of the day, students pour over their books with study partners in a huge, well-stocked library. The system seems to work. When I visited late one winter afternoon, they were almost uniformly engrossed in their books and oblivious to my presence.

New Square’s total divorce from contemporary America has created a cadre of young men who view outside society with a combination of detachment and pity. For them, the lively prayer and joyous song and dance of their holy events is all they desire in the way of “recreation.” In fact, they see the regimen of their lives as ideal. In the words of 17-year-old Samuel Stern, “It is better to spend less time idle. Even if it’s hard to study all day at the beginning, eventually it becomes easy and a source of pleasure.”

New Square students are constantly taught that the blemishes of modern society should not cause them to dislike those culturally trapped in it. But the school’s isolation from the outside is something the students I spoke to saw as positive. “Here a person’s life has purpose,” says Yitzchak Sofer. “You know why you are alive. There, everyone is running about, but no one knows where they want to get to.”

“But you have a very long day in yeshiva,” I said to one student. “Do you feel that you’re missing something?” “Missing? I

only feel sorry for those Jews that don’t have what we have. Our day is too short.”

Unlike the other schools I visited, Avir Yakov does not seek to integrate broad cultural learning into its curriculum. This is foremost a religious school. That and the community’s physical isolation eases the task of keeping alive the traditional Jewish faith. Although it also limits the relevance of this school’s experience to other Americans, its purity provides a model that inspires.



MODERN MAN NOT ONLY THINKS DIFFERENTLY FROM HIS FOREBEARS. He walks, talks, sings, and plays in new ways that separate him from his ancestors. One hallmark of much modern thinking and playing, and of much modern education as well, is a rejection of God, universal morality, and truth. Another is the belief that there is no possible identity larger than the self. Other symptoms include the lack of dignity in demeanor and dress, the spurning of eloquence in speech, and the prevalence of violence and perversion in public expression and art. Our lack of connection to the past and the best it has to offer made it easy for all this ugliness to take root in our communities.

The men and women who are running the schools I’ve profiled above, and the parents who are sending their children to

“HERE A PERSON’S LIFE HAS PURPOSE. THERE, EVERYONE IS RUNNING ABOUT, BUT NO ONE KNOWS WHERE THEY WANT TO GET TO.”

them, have in many cases concluded that the only way to rescue souls from today’s cultural barbarism (there is no better word) is to set up a *counterculture*. This is a difficult, often artificial undertaking with some clear trade-offs. But many Americans, and especially (though definitely not only) religious parents, now feel they *have* to flee the public schools. So they home school, or send their children to an assort-

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elementary schools to make the arduous shift to a solid, knowledge-based curriculum. The education press now calls our school reform effort the Core Knowledge Movement. It has been fully adopted in more than 350 public schools in 40 states, and a much larger number of schools are successfully using the foundation's principles and materials.

The fact that so many energetic principals and teachers have been willing and even eager to break out of "progressive" education and return to more effective traditional methods is our best hope for America's educational future.

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High Standards Sparse Resources Big Results

It is instructive, and a bit shocking, to look at what average American schoolchildren were being taught in their schools just a couple generations back.

About 15 years ago a woman named Avis Carlson published a short book describing her upbringing in a typical small farm town in Kansas in the early 1900s. At that time, all eighth graders in the state had to take a standardized achievement test to complete their schooling. Carlson writes:

"Recently I ran onto the questions which qualified me for my eighth grade diploma. The questions on that examination in that primitive, one-room school, taught by a person who never attended a high school, positively daze me.

"The orthography quiz...asked us to spell 20 words, including 'abbreviated,' 'obscene,' 'elucidation,' 'assassination,' and 'animosity.' We were also required to 'make a table' showing the different sounds of all the vowels....

Among the other eight questions (each subject had ten questions) was one which asked us to 'divide into syllables and mark diacritically the words profuse, retrieve, rigidity, defiance, priority, remittance and propagate.'

"Two of arithmetic's ten questions asked us to find the interest on an 8-percent note for \$900 running two years, two months, six days; and also to reduce three pecks, five quarts, one pint to bushels.

"In reading we were required to tell what we knew of the writings of Thomas Jefferson, and for another of the ten questions to indicate the pronunciation and give the meanings of the following words: zenith, deviated, misconception, panegyric, Spartan, talisman....

"Among geography's ten were these: 'Name three important rivers of the U.S., three of Europe, three of Asia, three of South America and three of Africa.'

"As one of physiology's ten we were asked to 'write 200 words on the evil effects of alcoholic beverages.'

"In history we were to 'give a brief account of the colleges, printing, and religion in the colonies prior to the American Revolution,' to 'name the principal campaigns and military leaders of the Civil War,' and to 'name the principal political questions which have been advocated since the Civil War and the party which advocated each.'

Avis Carlson passed this exam in 1907 when she was 11 years and eight months old.

Certainly there were problems in one-room schoolhouses. Low standards, however, was not one of them.

—The editors

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ment of parochial schools. A wide range of educational options and institutions now offer Protestants, Catholics, and Jews a refuge from the deluge. While the ways of life these sanctuaries provide may appear wildly reactionary to some, the fact is a mere 30 years ago they would have seemed perfectly mainstream. Such has been the speed with which our wider society has jettisoned its cultural inheritance.

The loss of innocence, respect, and purpose among children today is stark. Never mind today's loss of the traditions that give us a dignified place in a larger world. Many children are not even getting the basic tools they need to navigate the world, understand themselves, and communicate with others. And the dominant modernism that has created all these disasters increasingly

tolerates no dissent. Speech codes, sensitivity training, anti-religious lawsuits, book bans, and the like make traditionalist cultural remnants feel like criminals.

And unlike the French decadents of the late nineteenth century (or the American cultural radicals of a generation ago, like rock musician Lou Reed), today's cultural decadence has no grace, style, or other hint of a search for transcendence. The decadence which envelopes us now is dull, habitual, and thoughtless.

The schools I visited for this article are part of a countercultural protest against all that. They are fairly pure versions of a movement that includes many thousands of other places and people acting on the same impulses. In many ways, these Americans represent a beacon of hope in our darkness—the hope that it is still possible to choose and follow a life which is not domi-

nated by contemporary fashions and corruptions, which is more in keeping with the faiths, thoughts, and ideals of earlier generations of European civilization.

The individuals I interviewed at these schools all acknowledged a moral responsibility to care about their societies and fellow citizens. But before attending to that difficult task, at this late hour, most have concluded that they must first solidify their faith and deep traditions—within themselves and their children. This they have decided to accomplish within deeply orthodox schools for the young.

And in these places I found young people experiencing the robust joys of youth, in combination with an exalted pursuit of traditional faith.

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