

# The Faith That Removes Mountains

Reply to a Disheartened Idealist

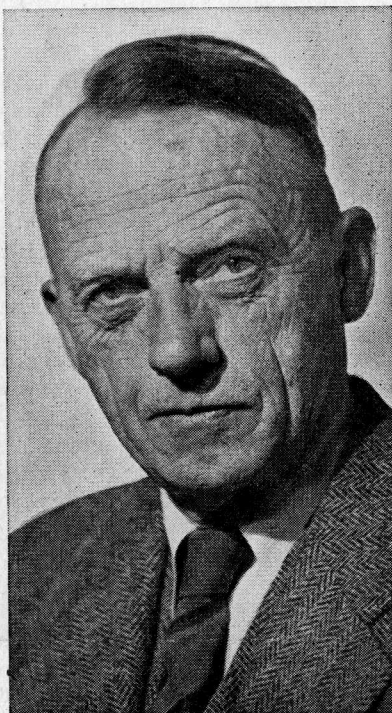
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**W**ORLD EVENTS IS FORTUNATE in having the support of a number of active, enthusiastic folk who believe in a sounder, saner, kindlier social order and who work for it. Now and again one of these friends becomes discouraged and writes a letter like the following:

"I SEEM to have lost my bearings—only momentarily, I hope—but God knows the going is not too good just now. Three points more or less confirm my scepticism:

1. The social reform movement is divided on policy—e.g., S.P. and C.P.
2. The leaders of every party want power.
3. I am disillusioned with the quality of the average industrial worker as I have come to know him in personal and intimate association.

"You said it's a challenge, and I was glad to take up the challenge but, when you hear workers calmly announce that their street is signing a petition to prevent a Negro family being given the lease of a vacant house on the street—and yet they work with a Negro woman on the same assembly job and joke and gossip with her—to all appearances they like her and haven't a shred of prejudice against her—and then they do such a beastly, insulting thing to unknown persons of her



race—!!! I called them Nazis and told them they had been on the wrong side in the war. They just laughed and said, 'It's all very well with you, but you wouldn't like a street full of noisy Negro kids.' I told them that I'd a sight sooner have someone intelligent like Annie and her family as neighbors than a good many whites I know.

"We're digging away at such a mountain of ignorance and prejudice and insensitivity—with a little trowel . . . Must humanity's aim always go wide of the mark? If so, one can't help wondering if a lifetime dedicated to the unattainable makes sense or can be fundamentally satisfying."

Here is my answer:

**I.** You cite division, unreliable leadership and the backwardness of the individual worker. Then you go on to protest against mass race prejudice. Later you ask, "Must humanity always go wide of the mark?"

2. "Humanity" consists of individuals who have reached various levels in the course of race and individual evolution. The simplest aspect of this variation is in physical characters, such as height, shape of head, etc.—less tangibly, in the capacity to perform music or to solve abstract problems in mathematics. The variation between the tallest and the shortest man is considerable, but it is nothing when compared to the difference between the ablest and the least able American violinist.

3. Height and musical aptitude are hereditary characteristics. The color prejudice about which you write is acquired. The easiest way to test the source of color prejudice is to go to the West Indies or Brazil, where there is little or none of it, and compare behavior there with behavior in the U.S.A.—North as well as South. In the U.S.A. the white man's clincher in every argument on the subject of race is, "But you wouldn't have your sister marry a Negro, would you?" In the West Indies and Brazil the answer would be, "And why not?" There marriages across the color line are as commonplace as marriages in the U.S.A. between people of different religious faiths or people of different European nationalities.

4. Your average worker in Boston or Chicago has no way of knowing such facts. He is taught race prejudice in the same way that he is taught to speak English—at home, in school, on the street, at his work place. He is taught race prejudice because race prejudice is one of the means by which the business elements that run the country, being a tiny minority, hope to rule the majority by keeping it divided. One of the most effective lines of cleavage is the color line.

5. You write, "We're digging away at such a mountain of ignorance and prejudice and insensitivity—with a little trowel." True enough. That is precisely what the agitators for manhood suffrage said in England around 1832. That is what the Rochdale pioneers found when they attempted to start a co-operative movement a few years later. That is what the suffragettes encountered in the last generation. All innovators face the same situation. You are for racial equality, eco-

nomie cooperation and a world commonwealth, and you live in a generation trained and steeped in race prejudice, competition and nationalism. You can no more blame the masses in the U. S. or England for race prejudice than you can blame them for speaking English, wearing leather shoes and eating with fork and spoon. They are trained to do all these things. Had they been differently conditioned, they would have behaved differently.

6. Yes, it is true that we are not all the creatures or victims of our training. Here and there a man like Tolstoi or Marx, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, breaks away from the life-pattern of his class and does what he can to improve conditions that seem to him intolerable. Now and then a situation arises, as in 1917 Russia, 1931 Spain, 1946 India, that pushes masses of people out of their accustomed ways of life into a new and very different path. You happen to be living in a situation that is not yet revolutionary and in which only a few have broken with the all-but-universally-accepted social pattern.

7. Consequently you face three possibilities. The first is to put your conscience to sleep with the cheap and abundant stimulants and depressants so generously and profitably provided by the U.S.A. ruling class. Having drugged your finer senses, do as everyone else does, say what everyone else says and wait dumbly for the deluge.

The second possibility is to join the liberals, yap at the Soviet Union, at social planning, collective action, the working masses, talk endlessly and grow bitter and cynical as a result of the frustrations which aspiration without fulfillment and talk without action always bring.

The third possibility is to keep tight hold of your little trowel, persuade those near and dear to beg, borrow or buy similar trowels, join with them in building a big, collective trowel (a power shovel) and, no matter what others may or may not do, work a little each day at the mountains of ignorance and prejudice which surround you. If your courage falters, recollect the poor weavers of Rochdale, or turn your mind back to the mountains of ignorance and prejudice behind which Russian Tsarism was entrenched before 1917, or picture to yourself



the revolutionary situation that will sweep away U.S.A. ignorance and prejudice as a spring flood rushes the accumulations of winter's ice and refuse toward the sea.

8. You and I live in a difficult, discouraging and yet hopeful period. Old landmarks are going or gone. Anxiety and fear are all but universal. Western culture is breaking up in an orgy of destruction and a flood of suffering, as must every culture built on greed and violence. You and I, no matter what our pretensions, rely on the old landmarks. We may even love them, as we all love the familiar. We also live in a period of unprecedented invention and discovery in both natural and social sciences. These innovations provide the foundations for a new way of life. That new way will surely come, whether you and I live to see it or not. It will come as surely as paved roads came with the automobile.

9. If we are wise, we will not sit down and wait for the social changes that follow each alteration in technology. You and I can begin living a better life this morning—a life free of prejudice, wisely cleared of the darkest ignorance. We can go on living that way every day this week and next month. All the power of the State of Ohio and of the federal government in Washington could not force Eugene Debs to support the war of 1914. They could arrest him and send him to Atlanta Penitentiary, but Debs proclaimed, "I go to prison a flaming revolutionist." Wealth is imposing to those who desire it. Government is formidable to those who fear it. But, if you neither seek wealth nor fear power, you can do your little bit every hour. That little, joined to the littles of your fellow workers, will rear a new social order above the present chaos as surely as the bodies of coral builders raise islands above the surface of the ocean. No, humanity need not always "go wide of the mark." On the contrary, mankind, through the millennia, has

built a magnificent monument consisting of the philosophies, the arts and the sciences. Today men are building and rebuilding that monument faster than at any time in recent history. How fortunate you and I are, that we can lend a hand.

10. Finally, a word in reply to your query as to whether a lifetime dedicated to the unattainable makes sense or can be fundamentally satisfying. What is the unattainable? I am in New England. I want to be in Mexico City. At the moment, Mexico City is unattainable, except in imagination. I can reach Mexico City by air in a few hours, by train or auto in a few days, but I can get there on foot, if need be, as our forebears trekked across the continent alongside their covered wagons. Every step taken in a southwesterly direction brings me one step nearer Mexico City. When Ben Franklin played with electricity on a kite string, the modern internal combustion engine was unattainable, but the sparks he got on his key now drive the engine. You are devoted to the establishment of a world cooperative commonwealth. Every trowel-full of ignorance and prejudice that you remove from the mountains surrounding you brings all of us nearer the goal toward which you and I are aiming. What could be more satisfying than doing the spade work preparatory to unifying mankind in a world community? The establishment of one world will be a landmark in social history. It will mark a turning point in man's long, gruelling climb from unconscious impotence to conscious power wielded for social and cosmic ends. This is the very core and essence of life individual and life universal. Could anything be more worth while?

*Scott Nearing.*

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