

TELLING IT LIKE IT IS ABOUT DOING ONE'S THING

(And Reflections On The Great Pot Festival)

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In their quest for relevance, today's young insist on telling it like it is and doing their own thing. The ever increasing complexity of modern society with its confusions and contradictions, its obvious deficiencies and inequities, offers fertile grounds for youthful protest. As in all generations past, the road to maturity awakens doubts, and the first awareness of sham and hypocrisy kindles disbelief and fuels the challenge to authority. Yet the cynical young of today differ from the cynical young of the past in many subtle ways. Their cynicism is selective. They are uncritical of themselves, they are impressed with their own importance, and they lack a genuine sense of humor.

During the Twenties, the high priest of cynics was H.L. Menken who used to tell it like it was with direct, piercing humor: "Democracy is a form of religion: it is the worship of jackals by jackasses." *Ballyhoo*, the irreverent magazine that "debunked" everything, was the Bible of the high school and college sets to an extent even greater than *Playboy* of today. But both were cynical of their own motivations, and neither presumed to moralize or promote a social philosophy.

Youngsters now, however, seldom view themselves critically or humorously and seem incapable of recognizing their own hypocrisy. They're against all humbug. Yet what they really mean when they say, "Tell it like it is," is "Tell it like we *say* it is." When blunt-speaking people like Eric Hofer, for example, laid it on the line for them, they react like spoiled children and retreat into derisive tantrums of name calling. John W. Aldridge wrote in a recent *Harper's*: "Their life-long exposure to parental over-protectiveness and permissiveness has given them a massive respect for themselves and an absolute faith in their own authority." Their heroes are not the bemused, experienced observers of mankind's follies, but instead the abrasive, immature and impatient voices of their own generation.

In those innocent high school days some forty-odd years ago, the colored citizens of New Orleans in its late Jazz Age were fond of a catchy song called "Shake That Thing." We learned it along with most of our practical knowledge in sex education from close association with the colored caddies on the old Audubon Golf Course. To express elation, Big Time Frazier, our partner in many a mixed foursome during those formative years, would shuffle into a dance step and belt it out in a most engaging manner. "Oh. Shake 'at thing! Shake 'at thing! He gotta hump in 'is back from shaking 'at thing!" Although the thing being shaken was never specifically identified, there was no confusion in the mind of Big Time (or ours) about its meaning.

Today, there is confusion in the minds of young and old alike about what doing one's thing signifies. And if you ask one of this era's "educated" but inarticulate swingers to define his thing, you might be answered in this fashion: "Well, like - you know - it's - you know - like I'm expressing myself. Like - you know - I'm being an individual - like me." You know??

A concrete example of thing doing took place last summer. Some four hundred thousand hairy, beaded, bearded, barefoot individualists assembled in a corner of Southeastern New York State and did it at the Bethel-Woodstock music festival. They were lured into the rural hills by a couple of profit-oriented altruists of their own generation who failed to plan for chaos. This unprecedented gathering of non-conformists—all as completely indistinguishable from one another as the rats in the swarm that followed the piper of Hamelin to a watery doom—has been described by some as inspiring evidence that the youth of today are genuine and possess a collective social consciousness. It was described by others as a return to mass thumb-sucking. But whatever the interpretation, there was no doubt that doing one's thing was in full flower.

Doing one's thing at Bethel consisted of sleeping on the ground, admiring natural cows and naked infants, smoking marijuana, popping amphetamines, scrounging for food, masquerading in the rags of poverty, and fornicating in the open air. The piper's tunes that hypnotized them were the electronically amplified sounds of thirty different but equally conformist and indistinguishable musical groups. They embraced Aquarius, contemplated Yoga, practiced Zen, worshipped Vishnu and chanted Ooom. In the cause of love and world brotherhood they traced peace symbols in the dust. They displayed their liberation from hypocrisy with homemade signs that told it like it is for sanitation: "Please don't shit here. these trenches are for cooking." For most of them, it was a gratifying, soulful experience in relevance. They found it glowing and beautiful. They congratulated themselves on the solidarity of their benign, collective behavior and their beatific attitude toward one another and the adult world.

It seems likely that one of the major causes producing this delusion of difference and self-importance among the young is that of publicity. In all generations before, youth was equally disenchanted and equally cocksure of its opinions. In our day we proclaimed the same newfound wisdom, protested the same deceits and championed the same causes. But we talked and shouted only among ourselves; we were our own audience. The adults, just like today, were bewildered and lacked understanding. But, unlike today, they were not intimidated; they knew we were foolish and ignored us. In time maturity enveloped us and looking back, we came to realize our innocent brashness. Today's publicity perpetuates the youthful arrogance. Each new spasm of the immature rediscovering the

truths of Confucius and Socrates is accorded profundity, greeted with microphones, tape recorders and television cameras, and provided with nationwide exposure by the insatiable demands of competitive news media. New folk heroes and prophets appear weekly. Their antics are often reenacted and replayed for emphasis on the boob tube. The advertising industry, catering to the immensely profitable market of an affluent young, keeps the ball rolling and advances the delusion in psychedelic color and sound. We are all caught up in a dizzying maelstrom of unreason. And there is little likelihood that any return to sanity or reality can occur except through some major catastrophe like depression, revolution, war, famine or pestilence.

We made the mistake of pointing out to one of the Woodstock festival participants the apparent lack of responsibility displayed there. We argued the inconsistency of his generation's hedonistic *Playboy* philosophy in pursuing pleasure, pot, peace and pornography, with spending money, cars, and credit cards supplied by the materialistic adults it so deploras. He merely sighed resignedly and observed tolerantly that the trouble with all adults was that they just couldn't possibly understand.

Sometimes, we wish we didn't.

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