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### How should we educate the class of 1984?

Nicholas S. Thompson

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# How Should We Educate the Class of 1984?

By Nicholas S. Thompson

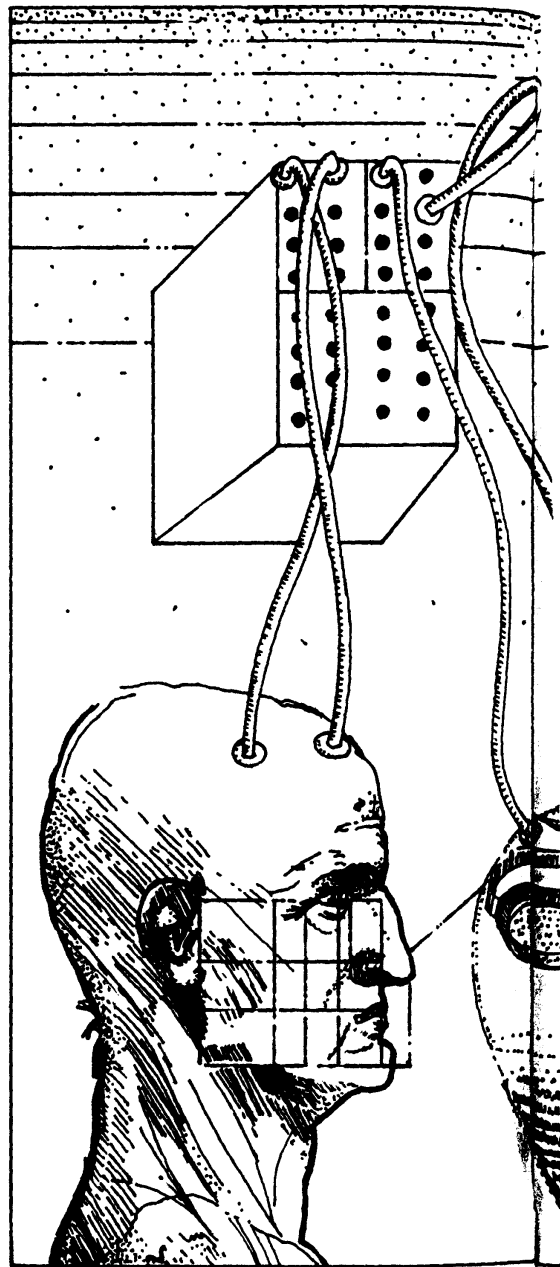
*Clark professor says a top priority in the age of "Big Brother" is to teach Little Brother to be curious.*

The class of 1984 is among us. They are not denizens of some futuristic fiction, they are home right now, watching "Happy Days" on the tube. They were born in 1962, they were carried in backpacks or wheeled in strollers to peace demonstrations. They rocked their cribs to "Hard Day's Night" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand." They are 16 years old. Not long ago they were the grubby little sisters and brothers of our present college students, and in only two years they will be our freshpeople.

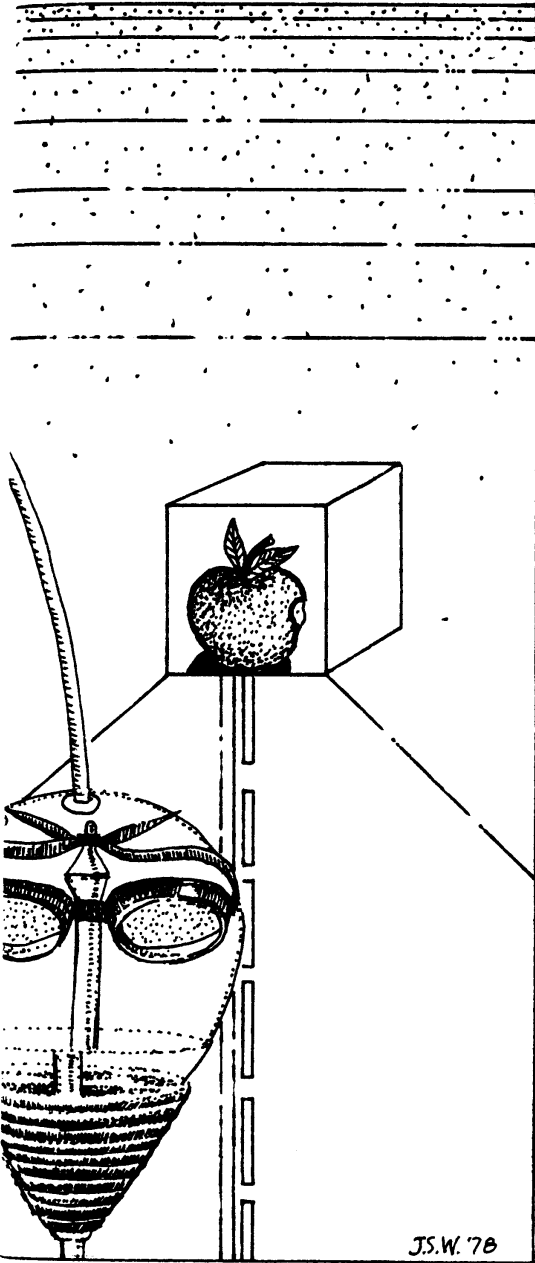
In the age of Big Brother, shall we send Little Brother to college? Shall we educate the class of 1984? Why bother? All those people who trained themselves to be aerospace technicians during the early Sixties — where are they now? All those people who trained themselves to be teachers during the late Sixties — where are they now? All those people who are now being trained to be college professors — where will they be? Will the crest of the postwar baby boom pass them by and leave them beached and splintered on the shoals of unemployment? What good is education if even educators are out of work? Once upon a time, an A.B. would buy you a job; nowadays, you can't sell a Ph.D. for a pound of coffee.

How shall we educate them? Shall we prepare them for the age of transcontinental urban sprawl? Teach them courses like: "Ecology 803: Decontaminating Residential Water Supplies. This course will be a review of the 700 lethal contaminants now found in water supplies and the modern methods by which some of them may be removed. Meets Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays at 9, with field trips to local reservoirs."

But where will they be if the industrial society collapses, urbanization is reversed, and population levels fall? Perhaps we could teach them courses like: "Home Economics 202: The Art and Science of Subsistence Agriculture. This course reviews some of the marvelous new ways of living off the land. Featured are



*"If educating people for particular futures isn't such a good idea, why educate them at all?"*



methods of harvesting and preparing hay so that with a minimum of effort it is quite palatable. Also, methods for making a tempting gruel from those little scraps your dog won't eat. Meets Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Lab 1-4 Friday, on the playing fields."

But what if the industrial society *doesn't* collapse? What will they do then? Scratch out a living in Central Park? Grow legumes in the cemeteries? Shall we prepare them for the totalitarian state? Perhaps we could offer them courses like: "*Psychology Ahf: The Psychology of Adjustment: Getting on with Big Brother*. This course reviews the principles of adjusting to the unique demands of our age. Meets in Room 101, Monday-Sunday, midnight to midnight, until all students have passed the course. Unlimited enrollment."

What if the totalitarian state never came about? Worse, what if by preparing a bunch of people to live in such a state we *made* it come about?

If educating people for particular futures isn't such a good idea, why educate them at all? To answer this question, I have to borrow a little bit from Abraham Maslow. Abraham Maslow was a famous American humanist and psychologist who divided human needs into various kinds. People had basic biological needs, he said, such as food, water, sleep, adequate oxygen, and so forth. Until these basic needs are satisfied, human life is a very simple proposition. But once these basic needs are satisfied, other needs emerge. Among those everyday needs are some that I see as structure needs. People need ways of organizing their time, structuring their lives so that they have a reason to get up in the morning and to be active during the day.

We Americans often talk as if people had only one kind of need. We tend to treat life as a set of practical problems. We talk as if life would finally fall into place if we had more and better ways to satisfy our basic biological needs. If we only had less cholesterol in our food, we would be more healthy, and then we would be happy. If we had more money, we could take longer vacations and get more rest and relaxation, and then we would be happy. If we had more appliances and bigger, more comfortable cars, we could do things more easily and get to places faster, and then



*Nicholas S. Thompson is associate professor of psychology and ethology at Clark.*

we would be happy. If we only could read the perfect marriage manual we would have perfect marriages, and then we would be happy.

The curious aspect of this American phenomenon is that we — more, perhaps, than any other people on earth — are protected from basic biological needs of the kind Maslow specified. American needs are really mostly structure needs. As a people, most of us have been so long without basic biological needs that we confuse structure needs with biological needs. Our quest for the low-cholesterol egg, the high-protein bread, the fast detergent, the organic vegetable, the sweetest corn, the most bountiful garden, the best car, and the most harmonious marriage are ways of organizing our life, not responses to basic biological needs. They are answers to the question "What do

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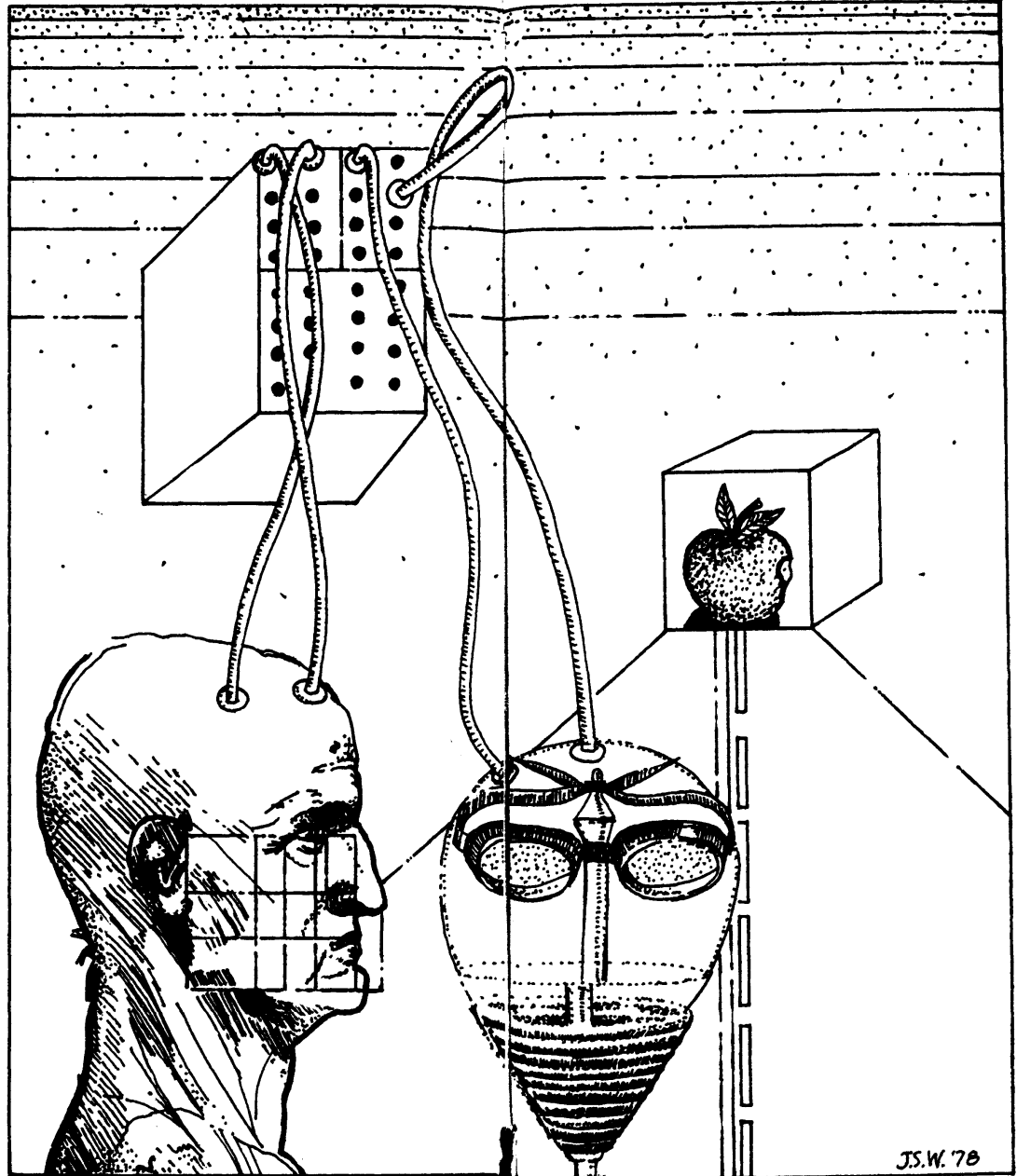
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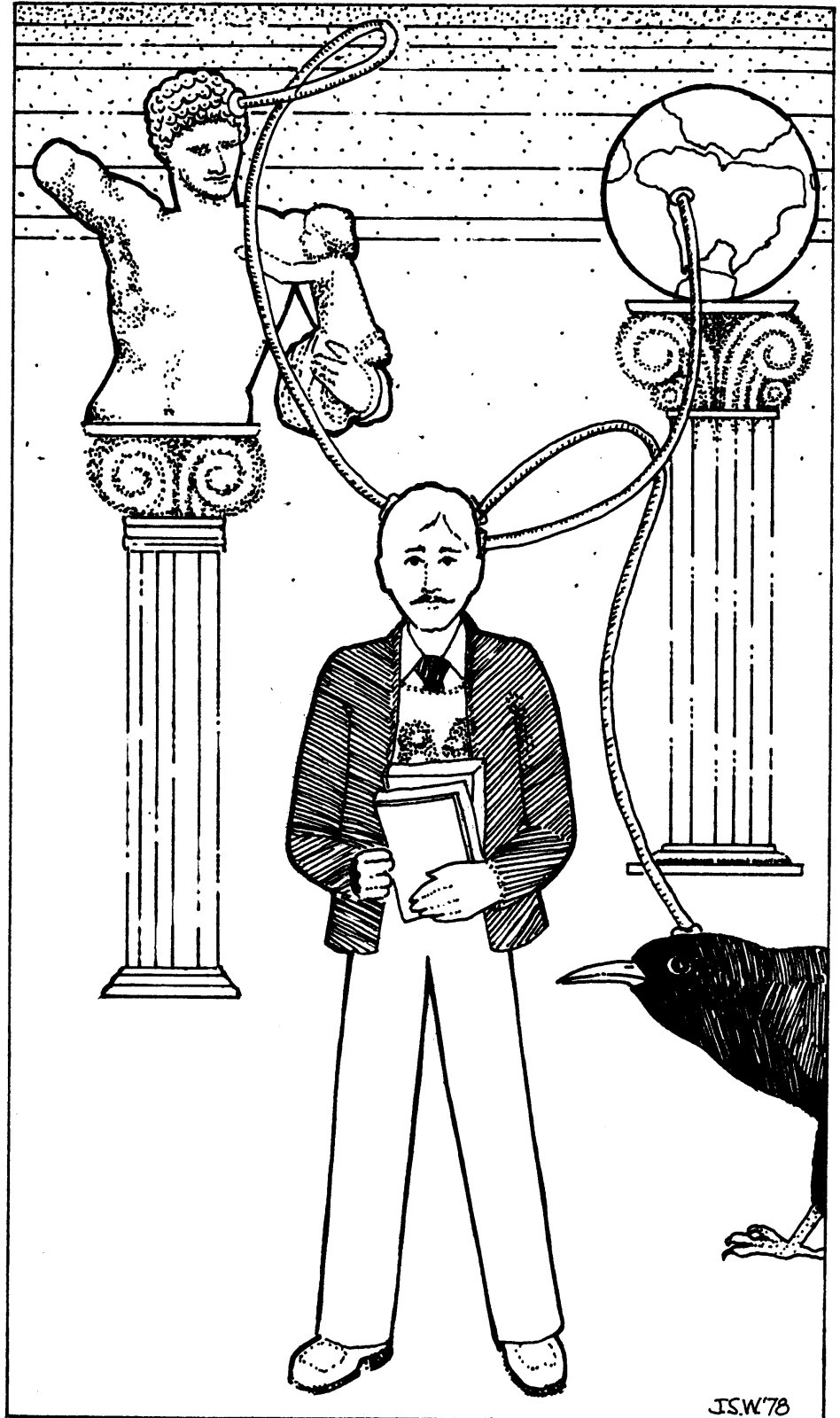


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I do with my time?" We no longer have to ask, "How will I live another week?"

Confusing the two kinds of needs can be very dangerous. A people that has unmet biological needs and confuses them with structure needs can be easily led to political excesses — imperialism and totalitarianism. Equally dangerous is a people whose biological needs are met but whose structure needs are unmet. Such a people can be persuaded to squander away precious biological resources in a harried search for life structure. They can be induced to put their lives in biological jeopardy for the sake of ill-defined and ill-thought-out principles.

We Americans have been a people that risks biological necessities in a hectic search for structure. Self-defense is a valid biological need, and we as a nation have lived for the last two decades in a virtually impregnable fortress. Yet we have turned self-defense into a fulfillment of a structure need. We have organized basic economic resources and human energies to control peoples and events that have little bearing on our self-defense. In so doing we have threatened the basic economic structure on which our national security is based. Had we put in the bank all the money we spent in Southeast Asia in the last seventeen years, we could have diminished our personal income tax to an amount equal to the rebate we received last year, and done so every year for the next thousand. Hunger is a valid biological need, but we Americans have lived for three decades in a potentially hungerless society. Yet in turning the search for food into a structure need, we have become beset with food fads and food-processing excesses that in fact threaten our basic nutrition and health. The need for love and human physical contact is a valid biological need, yet in turning sex into a structure need, we have overburdened the human social contracts that make such love possible and physical contact rewarding. Energy fulfills many basic biological needs, but in elevating our demands for energy to the level of a structure need, we have squandered in a



*“Curiosity, like coffee, is an acquired need. Just a titillation at the beginning, it becomes with training a raging passion.”*

decade the energy resources of a century and cast into doubt our ability to keep ourselves warm in the decades to come. In short, the foremost social, political, economic, ecological problem of our age is the unmet structure needs of the American people. Can anyone name one single global problem that would not be significantly ameliorated if Americans found less costly ways of organizing their time?

Americans have gotten into this position not because they are evil, but because they are particularly able and lucky. By historical accident we are perhaps the first nation-state on earth to put the basic biological needs behind us and so to have to cope fully with structural needs. The very skills, the very pragmatism, the very ingenuity that make us such sophisticated conquerors of biological needs ill adapt us for dealing with the profound structure needs we are facing. But other nations, too, as they come along our route, are experiencing disruptions as the biological needs of their citizens are gradually fulfilled and the structure needs take over.

A top priority of our age is therefore to discover ways to fulfill our structure needs, ways that do not put the fulfillment of our biological needs in jeopardy.

What does all of this have to do with educating Little Brother? Simply this. The best liberal-arts education is training in how to be curious. Curious about history, curious about how people work, curious about how nature works, curious about everything. The satisfying of curiosity is the most benign and innocent way to fulfill structure needs.

Curiosity, like coffee, is an acquired need. Just a titillation at the beginning, it becomes with training a raging passion. A liberal-arts education is, among other things, development of curiosity. People think of an educated person as a person with the answers. That's wrong. An educated person is a person with the questions. An answered question is like a pregnant rabbit: it just seems to make more and more questions. The more one explains about the world, the more the world cries out for explanation.

This principle can best be elucidated with a demonstration in which you, the reader, will be the guinea pig. I'm going to tell you just a few facts, and I predict the curiosity those facts arouse will keep you awake in the mornings. I have been studying the American crow for almost twelve years, trying to figure out what its cawing means. I have compared it with the communication system of every known animal or bird, and yet I have not been able to find any that is like it. Science still does not know what the crow is saying when it caws. We think that to some extent each crow is identifying itself, but that's only part of the story, because sometimes two crows say the same "name" and sometimes a single crow appears to have two "names." Crows come near dwellings in the early morning when people are asleep and are not much of a threat. People don't usually hear crows cawing outside their window because most people have no reason to be curious about crows. What usually happens when I tell people about crows is that the crows start keeping them awake in the morning. People call me up and say, "Ever since you told me about crows, the crows have started coming around my house." But the crows have always been coming around their houses; what has changed is not the crows, but the people. The more a human being knows, the more he is curious. The fulfillment of curiosity is thus an infinite resource for fulfilling structure needs.

For many readers this discussion may seem very odd. During the Sixties we were taught by our government and, alas, by many educators, that education was the way for a person and for a nation to get ahead. Every state had its state university, every town its community college, every city its city university — not because education was pleasurable in itself, but because education was going to make the nation prosperous and individuals wealthy. Well, we were sold a load of goods. Education can't do those things. The 1960's were billed as the decade in which education finally came into its own in America, the decade in which professors were finally paid like doctors and universities funded like factories. In fact, the 1960's were the years in which the fundamental

anti-intellectualism of American society finally overran, conquered, and pillaged the American university. Government began to see the university as the place to train soldiers and bomb makers. Industry began to see the university as the place to train industrial chemists and laboratory technicians. Political groups began to see the university as the place to train revolutionaries and rabble-rousers. Of course, the university served none of these functions very well, and now society is systematically dismantling it.

So let us return to the question of whether we should send Little Brother to college or not. I say we should. Not to prepare him for a particular future or a particular job, but to provide him with a limitless resource for fulfilling his structure needs — a developed sense of curiosity. But what will Little Brother eat? say you. I don't worry about that. Curious people, if they have a good education, have a way of making out in the world. Curious people are valuable people: they are flexible, openminded, and perceptive. Because they want to check their perceptions of the world with others, they often communicate clearly. And because they want to understand what others have to tell them, they listen carefully. I am fairly certain that if Little Brother follows his curiosity, he will probably never be led to great wealth; but he will probably never be led into great poverty, either.

So how shall we educate the class of 1984? The same way we educated the class of 1934. Give them a good, solid liberal-arts education. Teach them how to ask questions, how to think, and how to communicate. If they are well taught, I know that they will never lack for structure in their lives, and I wager that they will never suffer basic biological want, either.

