

# *Women and Ecology*

*Photo by Alan Pearlman*

Prepared for the Social Ecology Course at  
Goddard College

I have long had in mind the idea of writing something on women and ecology. Such a project had its beginnings in two causes that have been very important to me. After several years in the peace movement, crowned with the rather hollow triumph of replacing Johnson with Nixon, I had become discouraged with the prospect of reform within the system and began, to borrow a phrase from biology, to look more closely at the microcosm — meaning my more immediate environment. Talk of pollution and ecology was everywhere, and surrounded (as I was at the time) by biologists engaged in issuing gloomy prophesies, the concepts and implications of ecology seemed well worth exploring.

My interest in the state of women is self-explanatory.

The link between the two subjects was originally rather intuitive and vague, based on two tentative, hopeful assumptions. The first was something that continually distressed me in the fastness of southern California suburbia, and that was the amount of wasted energy in a physical, psychic and economic sense that

*We women went from there into wider fields. A dozen or so of us organized a "March 8th"\*\* tree-planting team. We had no saplings, as we had not yet a tree nursery, so we would walk for miles in a day collecting tree seeds. In three years we had over 110,000 trees planted on more than 20 hectares of sandy wasteland. By 1971, we women, whose labour force was augmented by that of the poor and lower-middle peasants of our village, had planted more than a million timber and fruit trees, covering 220 hectares of sandy land with green. This checked wind and shifting sand, and we began to have good harvests every year. Our grain yields increased in some cases by as much as 650 per cent. The old view of women's "place" underwent a change, and people were saying, "The women are really doing their share of the collective work!"*

\*International Working Women's Day, established in 1910.

— from "New Women in  
New China"  
(Foreign Languages Press  
Peking 1972)





I saw in the lives of so many women. Particularly among the privileged, so many hours are spent in front of the television, shopping, having hair done, in short on an enormous variety of empty activities and meaningless busyness. Yet beneath the vacuousness, I felt, were untapped resources of brain and energy, which could surely be put to use for the common good. The second assumption, even more conjectural, was that women with their life-giving powers, could they be made to understand the desperateness of our ecological plight, would never permit the world to gutter to a smoggy and ignoble end. Not for this do we bear children!

The ideas kept nagging at me, but when it actually came to putting pen to paper I procrastinated — successfully-knowing that I was afraid that all the ideas that bubbled about so satisfyingly in my head might fade to little or nothing on the impersonal medium of the blank page.

Help came unexpectedly via Gregory Bateson. According to an article in *Harper's*, Bateson is reported to have said, "My complaint with the kids I teach nowadays — graduate students and such — is that they don't really believe anything enough to get the tension between the data and the hypothesis. What they may find out doesn't really impact on theory, because they don't have any theory they're willing to hold tight enough to get an impact. It slides all the time." I understood this to mean a certain stick-to-it-iveness in riding the current of one's thoughts without being sure of the destination or endpoint. This is what I decided to do.

On the one hand we have slightly more than half of humanity operating well below its potential. On the other, we have a world threatening collapse and disaster for much or all of humanity. What I hope to do in this paper is to describe my own exploration of these two ideas and the tension of their relation to each other.

I begin with the assumption that there is some agreement on the status of women, although my own path toward liberation has been hindered by the fact that I was, for a long time, either too thick-skinned or too dim-witted to realize fully the limitations placed on women by virtue of their sex. I am, perhaps, a case of reverse programming. As a child, I had no brothers to envy either their penises or the greater favours bestowed on them in the way of freedom or education. In our family, there was a great deal of laughter shared between the women and the children. We told rambling family tales and talked endlessly as we worked in the kitchen. The men, my father or my uncle, came home from the office, almost always tired, sometimes irritable. Occasionally they joined us in the kitchen. More often they did not. From time to time I thought, but perhaps I was wrong, that there was an aura of wistfulness emanating from behind the newspaper. They would have liked to have joined in our laughter.



but were not sure how. Whatever they felt, my childhood memories of home are that it was for all of us a refuge, with the kitchen at the heart, cheerful and warm. Women, I understood, stayed and tended this heart and men went off to offices that had ugly desks and chairs and a few interesting machines. This to me was WORK, the OFFICE. It had much the same significance to me as is attached to Mr. Banks' work in *Mary Poppins*. "Now the City was a place where Mr. Banks went every day — except Sundays, of course, and Bank Holidays — and while he was there he sat on a large chair in front of a large desk and made money. All day long he worked, cutting out pennies and shillings, and half-crowns and three-penny bits. And he brought them home with him in his little black bag."

And my feelings as a child and on through my teens — even now — were that rather than face work that seemed so dull and unrewarding, yet so tiring, I would choose the bright kitchen even if it meant attendant chores of housekeeping and laundry. The smells of baking, the companionship and the chatter seemed more tangible and capable of producing results that were directly and observably useful.

Then through my childhood echoed the guns of World War II. The radio was an oracle, around which the grown-ups hovered anxiously. It brought news of air raids, bombings, invasions. The name my sister and I gave to evil and fear that is so often nameless for children was Hitler. He used to visit us in the night. He lived in a drawer in Barbie's dresser and curved around the top of my mirror. Stories of children whose fathers would never come home were whispered among the adults and we overheard them with dread. War meant, never drums and trumpets and brass buttons and dashing young soldiers, but destruction, fear, loss, death — valiant young men lost over Germany. And in my mind, then, and perhaps still, war joined dreary offices in my comprehension of the world of men. So it took me an awfully long time to realize that I was barred from this world because, in the main, I didn't want any part of it.

This has been my own peculiarity. I do entirely accept the fact that women have been dominated and exploited far beyond recorded history.

#### WHY?

The why is very important to me. I have never felt inferior to men. I am not. We are not, as a sex,



inferior. Different yes, but not inferior. Why then, have we not painted sistine chapels, erected monuments and cathedrals, moved millions with our poems and our symphonies and touched the stars with our instruments? Why have we never made a discernible impact on human affairs? Why for one Madam Curie are there hundreds of men of greater fame? Why can we point so readily to Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale and all the well-worn heroines as exceptions to the rule of our commonplace lot? The argument that child-bearing and child-rearing are at once profoundly creative and exhausting is valid but insufficient. Let's go on with the whys.

I found what has been for me the most subtle yet satisfying answer from Simone de Beauvoir. In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, she refers to "the idea of the Other" which is as primordial as consciousness itself. She goes on to say, "In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies one finds the expression of a duality — that of Self and Other." This duality did not refer solely to the division of the sexes, but was basic to concepts of Sun and Moon, Day and Night, Good and Evil, Lucky and Unlucky. Otherness is a fundamental aspect of human thought. No individual or group becomes aware of itself, or sets itself up as the One without setting up the Other against itself. Hegel stated that in every consciousness there is a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness. In other words, the subject can be posed only in being opposed to the other, the inessential — the object.

This seems to me to be basically true, yet men are as Other to us as we are to them. We still have not answered the question as to why, in the mists of pre-recorded time did we, as women, become Object, the Other of the human species, while men became Subject, Absolute, Man, Mankind. As de Beauvoir says, "There has come to be an absolute human type and it is masculine." Aristotle stated that the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities. "We should," he said, "regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness." And de Beauvoir describes her own experience. "In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say 'You think thus and so because you are a women', but I know my only defense is to reply, 'I think thus and so because it is true', thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply, 'and you think the contrary because you are a man', for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity."

In searching for an answer as to why duality came to mean inequality and inferiority for women, I think we must accept that, until the present, biology largely has been destiny. Women are, with the odd exception, less strong physically than men. In primitive societies, this handicap was reinforced by the debilitating effects of menstruation, pregnancy and child-bearing. These,





while vital to the survival of the species or group are natural functions, providing little affirmation of individual existence as such. They happen, as we know only too well, in spite of ourselves. They also made the woman the logical choice for domestic labours that would have been more stationary and less demanding in strength. The contribution of the male was to support the group, which meant as far as we can tell, hunting. In doing so, he faced a challenge outside or beyond himself. When he was victorious, he found a new sense of self-realization and identity. So that, whereas it has been the lot of the female to repeat life in order that it may continue, the male in his activities came to experience transcendence and in doing so created values. In de Beauvoir's words, "Man's design is not to repeat himself in time — it is to take hold of the instant and mold the future. It is male activity that in creating values has made of existence itself a value; this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman." The essence of the male, then, has come to mean transcendence, while the essence of the female, permanently embedded in the natural world, has come to mean immanence. Here for me are the glimmerings of a comprehensible explanation as to how duality and difference expanded to mean subjugation. From here it is easy to construct a

theory — or a variety of them. Another of de Beauvoir's important supportive points of the above theory is that as the female became aware of her inferior status she tended toward complicity. It is easy, even pleasant, to be cared for and thereby avoid the struggle of undertaking an authentic existence. Then the way to passive acceptance of dependence is straight.

The order of things thus established is speculated to have endured for the nomadic period and strengthened with the beginnings of agriculture. With land to work and settle, more value was placed on children as workers and heirs. Woman's fecundity was likened to the earth itself and revered. Still woman remained Other, often feared as she was worshipped, but as her power was mysterious — beyond human control — she remained outside the realm of human affairs. Levi-Strauss has said that "Public or simply social authority has always belonged to men." So, even when the great goddesses Ishtar, Astarte and Isis ruled lesser male deities, women never set up a group on their own account against the male grouping. They have never entered into a direct and autonomous relation with men. When men learned to fashion tools, they were able further to transcend experience and the male principle was more firmly entrenched. Man, the tool-maker, could begin to dominate and even-

## MUTATION

Brand-new  
one katydid adds  
its leaf to a branch  
unfolds its green deception  
and floors its neighbors with its find:  
a perfect dewdrop  
etched on each wing  
illusory and dry  
as a dead painter's  
canvas.

Framed.  
Sure to be famous

as peacocks  
lungfish  
or the child  
emerging from our dark yard  
holding a lightning bug  
to feel the explosion  
in her hand.

—Meredith Fuller-Luyton

tually control Nature. Needless to add, his awe of woman, at the same time, was correspondingly lessened, "and the great god Pan begins to fade when the first hammer blows resound and the reign of man begins."

While we are still immersed in prehistory and in the solely speculative stage of the evolution of the race, I should like to introduce the subject of one of my favorite books. It was written by Elaine Morgan and is called *The Descent of Woman*. It could be described as a rerun of some of the evolutionary tours of the last decade or so, in which social historians have cast an appalled look at the present human situation and fumbled for an explanation. Like Desmond Morris and Robert Ardrey, she returns us to the trees and tries to trace it all from there.

I shall try to resist too much of a detour which, although fascinating, is off the main track. No woman can help but be drawn to such a statement as, "The longer I went on reading his (i. e., Men's) books about himself, the more I longed to find a volume that would read: When the first ancestor of the human race descended from the trees, she had not yet developed the mighty brain that was to distinguish her from all other species." As Ms. Morgan goes on to say, "Of course, she was no more the first ancestor than he was — but she was no less either."

Her theories on human evolution are based on those of Sir Alister Hardy F. R. S. and very briefly go like this. There lived long ago, back in the mild Miocene, a generalized vegetarian, prehomnid, hairy ape. She got her food from the trees and slept in their branches. When the scorching heat of the Pliocene reduced the forests, she was forced to try life on the ground, and it is here that Ms. Morgan inserts her own chapter in our evolutionary history. A four-legged vegetarian was ill-adapted to life on an open plain. The generally accepted theory goes that in this crisis, our ape rose to its feet the better to flee an attacker or pursue a quarry, thereby freeing a foreleg for carrying a weapon, which it rapidly learned to aim and to hurl with efficiency at passing game. Thus we learned to survive on the treeless savannah.

Ms. Morgan would not dispute that this indeed probably did happen, but not without an intermediate phase. It is likely that the dwindling forests remained longest along riverbeds and that our forebears remained as long as possible in their arboreal homes. Their reluctant descent was most likely to have been in the vicinity of a riverbed which would have led eventually to the sea. And so, between our final descent from the trees and the millennia on the savannah which gave rise to man-the-hunter, woman-the-subordinate and all that that entails, she postulates ten million or so years — on the beach. I guess, for readers of T. S. Eliot or Neville Shute, there is a grim bit of irony here, but anyone who has spent as many shamelessly idle and happy summer days on the beach with her children as I have is at once drawn to the idea. Ms. Morgan offers considerable evidence in support of her thesis, including a long list of physical features from our hairless hides to our layer of subcutaneous fat. To go on would involve wandering well off the main topic. The point of this diversion has been to offer the happy thought that there may have been a ten million or so year period when humanity lived on the beaches, inlets and lagoons, and women, having less need for physical protection and some access to their own food, enjoyed something of a reprieve from domination and subordination.

I'm not sure how much any of this matters now. No matter how or why, we have for all history been "other", "object", and "secondary." All that is beginning to change now. Not fast enough or far-reaching enough, but with an increasing momentum and, in comparison to the ages of oppression, with breath-taking speed, a revolution in feminine consciousness is taking place.

Of primary importance to me is the question of the direction of change. Elaine Morgan deals with the issue of what women want with typical largesse. "Freud, toward the end of his life," she says, "bewailed the fact that even after spending years trying to pinpoint it, he had never succeeded in finding

out 'what women want.' " She goes on "It's a rather silly question. If anyone had assembled a string of names of well-known human beings — say, Albert Schweitzer, Attila the Hun, Casanova, Gandhi, Al Capone, Einstein, Henry Ford, Peter the Hermit, Gauguin, Elvis Presley — and asked him to encapsulate an answer to the question, "What do men want?", he would not have found that too easy, either. Any answer that he came up with that holds true for that list would be so abstract and general that it would also hold true for all women.

"But many people have a subconscious idea that women are an altogether less complex species, more like, shall we say, rhododendrons, or beans, so that somewhere just around the corner is a simple answer on the lines of 'they need plenty of phosphates', and that once this secret has been discovered, life will be simpler. Women can be given what they want and they will then keep quiet, thus enabling the time and attention of real (i. e., male) people to be devoted to the important and difficult business of conducting their relations with other real people."

The answer may not be phosphates but the idea of women as other with different parameters for their lives than men seems almost universal.

I want to turn later to the changes that must come about and the demands we must make if we are to achieve equality. Fundamental to our liberation as a sex, and beyond that, to human liberation is that we begin to exist for ourselves — to cease to be other and to become, for ourselves, subject. Perhaps this is self-evident, but it is still not the norm of popular consciousness or myth. In my childhood, the old maid was pitied, the object of mild derision. Not so the bachelor. He chose freely. When I was in university, it was felt to be a humiliation not to be engaged by graduation. The chorus of a popular song which went:

"A man without a woman  
Is like a rag upon the sand.  
There's only one thing worse in the universe  
And that's a woman without a man."

seemed to reflect a certain tacit understanding that was prevalent at least then in society. I know that many women, mostly younger than I, are far less hampered by such vestigial assumptions, but they haunt us as a sex yet — one look at the popular culture from television to magazines tells you that to live at all you must please a man.

Our goal for every woman must be a sense of completion; of destiny as a person, not as wife, mother or mistress, but as herself first, all other roles being secondary. This, of necessity, would include liberation from the feelings of guilt and inadequacy admitted or concealed that have been chronic to our history. With an end to our age-old crisis in confidence, we might well be ready for anything.





I am not naive enough to think that our freedom will be given us. We must take it. That is what the lib movement is all about. As de Beauvoir says, "the fact is that oppressors cannot be expected to make a move of gratuitous generosity." But I have every confidence that we are indeed coming closer to the self-realization we seek and that is why I want to turn now to the subject of women in relation to society, by which I mean western technological society, and hesitate for long enough to scan the horizon before deciding where to go from here.

In deliberating along a similar vein, many years ago Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* wrote "We are here on the bridge to ask ourselves certain questions and they are very important questions and we have very little time in which to answer them. The questions we have to ask and answer about that procession during this moment of transition are so important that they may well change the lives of all men and women forever. For we have to ask ourselves here and now, do we wish to join that procession or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all where is it taking us, the procession of educated men?"

Perhaps we should enlarge the meaning of "procession of educated men" to that of western technological society (I hesitate to call it civilization) and take a critical look at it before answering that question.

The liberation of women is beginning, but it is, as yet, embryonic. Apart from political, social and economic inequalities, there remain the industries whose lives depend upon keeping woman as object. Where would they be if we ceased to deodorize our bodies, brighten our teeth, soften our hands, give body to our hair, remove inches from our hips and thighs and add glow to our lips? And what if we didn't spray/clean everything from our carpets to our hair? Perhaps most maddening are the slick Madison Avenue-types who co-opt the language of the movement and give us bra-less bra and "natural" make-up.

An article by John Kenneth Galbraith in a recent issue of *MS.* for me added an interesting dimension to our economic exploitation. He states that the decisive contribution of women in the developed industrial society is straightforward. "It is overwhelmingly to facilitate a continuing and more or less unlimited increase in consumption." A crowning insult really. For uninformed and uneducated women to be manipulated unwittingly is one thing. Surely the so-called educated woman could show less complicity. Galbraith continues "the lifework of such women is still, in the main, husband, home and family. A high income family sets the consumption patterns to which others aspire. That such families be supplied with intelligent, well-educated women capable of exceptional managerial competence is important, not only for the consumption involved, but also for its demonstration

effect on the entire economy, making possible its infinite expansion."

All this offers a most unwelcome aspect to the view from the bridge. Looking beyond the consumerism of our own society we are confronted with a world threatened by terrifying dark shadows; over-population, famine, a heedless scramble for the last of the world's finite energy sources, the threat of war, possibly nuclear, from countries who have suffered our affluence too long, and the development of nuclear plants with the age-long radioactive wastes they will produce. Howard Odum, the well-known ecologist, postulates the return of chronic disease and epidemic as modern medicine based largely upon cheap, readily available fuels fails us. At best then, the view affords a future that is bleak, at worst, utterly hopeless. From our vantage point on the bridge that is beginning to crack beneath us, asking again the question, do we wish to join the procession of Armageddon-bound western technocracy? The answer can be, I think, only if we are highly resolved to try to alter its course.

This seems to lead to another question, equally difficult. Should we make the decision to join the mainstream of human affairs, is there any reason to believe that we could effect any change for the better? De Beauvoir says, "in truth, women have never set up female values in opposition to male values." And further, that "women have never as a sex sought to play a historic role." If this is the case then it would seem that the triumph of scientific rationalism could be attributed to the dominance of male thinking. So that, with regard to the question as to whether women might conceivably alter the path we are on, there is, as yet, no way of knowing. One wonders, though, if man with his transcendent quality has dominated nature and brought us to this point in history, is it possible that the immanent essence of women, rooted more firmly in the processes of nature, might find a way to shape a better world? Could we be more capable of a better understanding of what might be called human ecology?

We are about to reach the point where the tension between the subjects of women and ecology will be felt, but, prior to that, it would probably be useful to look very briefly at the concept of ecology *per se*. A common understanding of ecology is to consider that it is the study of the natural web of life. Paul Shepard, in his introduction to "*The Subversive Science, Essays Toward an Ecology of Man*" says, "The image of the web is too meagre and simple for the reality. A web is flat and finished and has the mortal frailty of the individual spider. Although elastic, it has insufficient depth. Ecology deals with organisms in an environment and with the processes that link organism and place. It must be a scope and a way of seeing." He goes on to say (and the use of the word man for all of us is his, not mine),

"Man is in the world and his ecology is the nature of that inness. He is in the world as in a room, and in transience, as in the belly of a tiger or in love. What does he do there in nature and what does nature do in him?" And he concludes, "affirmation of its own organic essence will be the ultimate test of the human mind."

This is the point at which the tenuous bridge between the subjects begins to suggest itself. Is it possible that the female mind might have less difficulty in making such an affirmation – in seeing through the glass a little less darkly? Since time began, our bodies have been rhythmically bonded to the moon. Unlike men, who at times have felt that they have transcended Nature, we are bound in her. Perhaps the time has come when women, by virtue of their immanence or "inness", albeit involuntary, will learn to listen to and trust themselves, and from there accept their responsibility in sharing in the guiding of the course of human history.

One thing I am very sure of is that the only way we can hope to rise to such a role is as liberated and self-actualized human beings. Diffident, inadequate or apologetic, no one will listen to us. We won't even listen to each other. This may well be the biggest hurdle – and we don't have much time.

Before formulating tentative first steps, it might be useful to inquire as to whether there is hope that even as free women we can hope to improve the world situation. It might be noted that at least three states which have granted equal or close to equal rights to women have not been known for their beneficent ways. These were Ancient Sparta, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. With women in many influential and professional fields, these states have been hostile, aggressive and warlike. Yet, for all their apparent equality in these states, women lived or are living in a masculine society, in a masculine-run state, and have adopted or been instilled with masculine values. From this we cannot judge conclusively that women cannot or will not make an impact upon the society in which they live. I find that I have assumed, rather smugly, in regarding the question of women's increased participation that it will, of course, be for the better. This, no doubt, stems from echoes of such outworn clichés as "behind every great man....." and "the hand that rocks the cradle.....", etc. Beyond a vicarious glow of self satisfaction, is there any basis to foresee potential improvement?

Lionel Tiger in "*Men in Groups*" states that the real, universal and indisputable difference between cohorts of males and groups of females is that the males are more aggressive and that this is true, in the main, for most species, particularly the primates. He goes on to say that male bonding is one of the functions of aggression. No doubt, a good deal of the variance in male/female levels of aggression can be







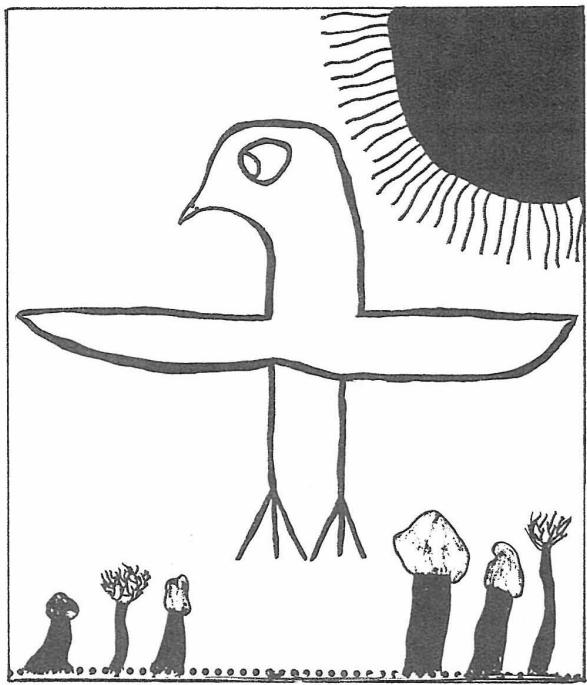
accounted for by conditioning. One of my close friends gives a well-attended course in assertive training for women, and it would be hard to accuse someone of being very aggressive if they are having to be encouraged to assert themselves. Elaine Morgan reports that "if you inject a female monkey with male hormone she will behave more aggressively; and if you inject a male monkey with female hormone he will behave less aggressively." She goes on to say that "anthropologists studying the cultures of different tribes have found almost no occupation which isn't somewhere or another considered to be 'women's work', and somewhere else considered to be 'men's work' whether it's pottery, or weaving, or agriculture, or cooking, or even caring for the children. The one exception is killing people. No one has found a primitive tribe where women are the warriors. War, like aggression, is a function of male bonding." Certainly, in the main, this has remained true, in spite of legends of Amazons and gory tales from the French Revolution and elsewhere, not to mention elements in the feminist movement who would have us demand equal participation in everything, however insane or immoral. If, then, aggression is an attribute found in larger doses in males and the stuff of male bonding, and these are surely two powerful elements current in the management of the business of the world, then it seems possible to postulate, at least, that if women were to have their say there might be less violence, even less war, and that we might be less inclined to wreak havoc upon the living world around us. This remains in the realm of hypothesis.

Murray Bookchin has written that "the very essence of the matricentric world is that it vitiates rule as such." He maintains that polarities cannot be found between patriarchy and matriarchy as two differing forms of rule; the comparison must be between rule and anarchy, between the presence and absence of domination. A world with less of the hierarchy that seems inherent to male society would be a far cry from the very structured one we now inhabit.

In the realm of the concrete, the point has come for us to ask, as John Platt did on contemplating the plight of the world several years ago, "what we must do." In this regard, it seems our approach should be two-pronged. We must keep in mind what must be done to improve the lot of women in particular and humanity in general within the present. At the same time, we must be creating and evolving and learning to make a transition to ways of living that are at one, and not at odds with all other life — towards the day when we shall better understand how, in Gary Snyder's phrase, "to live lightly on the earth."

Within the context of the present and perhaps as a precondition to any fundamental social change, we must continue and intensify the struggle for liberation

*Photo by Fritz Goro*



Sven Atema

and self-actualization for women. I don't mean that this is important only for women. There can be no understanding of ecology, with its underlying wholistic conceptual basis, without people who have begun the search for heightened consciousness and self-awareness. We must find ways of reaching women trapped in their domestic and social rounds, often unaware of their exploitation. This does not imply that they will at once throw off their fetters and abandon home and children, as Germaine Greer has suggested, but that they may begin to know better who they are and to develop a full sense of their own identity. This is not easy to do. So many women are resistant, even hostile, to the idea of liberation. They are, of course, frightened. In these cases, I think the magazine *MS.* is doing an inestimable amount of good with its non-threatening, low-key approach. I think that it has been, so far, the most successful feminist vehicle for reaching more women than any other. After such an introduction, many women become ready for consciousness-raising which can be followed by a more active attitude in shaping the form and directions their lives will take. Subsequent steps within the social framework are best determined by the individual community — another instance of thinking in terms of the microcosm. In my area, as women emerged from consciousness-raising groups several years ago, there was a glaring need for a day care center and for some form of family planning and counselling. Both

have been established since. In other areas, friends of mine have organized community gardens, craft co-ops, investigations of pollution practices, and environmental information centers.

Women interested in careers have a decisive role to play. There is so much useful work to be done and yet, in a society so permeated with false values, it is easy to be misled. We must constantly remind ourselves that the values of the society around us are male values and that we must guard against being tempted to win male recognition and approval. I saw a distressing letter to an editor a while ago. A girl wrote in, complaining about the fact that there had been no women in a certain beer commercial on television. In the same vein, we must refrain from basking in a reflected glow in the accomplishment of women who achieve the pinnacle on Madison Avenue. As the old saw goes, they are part of the problem. It was a blow to me when an acquaintance, a good student in biology, took to selling real estate. Such employment only furthers the status quo and offers nothing that would initiate the process of change.

But we do need doctors. I do not mean to launch into horror stories of indignities suffered by women at the hands of male doctors, but they are countless. The same applies to lawyers. The need for women helping women in law is immediate. The list of fields where the demand is equally urgent is long. We must have women in psychiatry and psychology, in politics and government, in media and communication and in education. With sensitive teachers, little girls could be spared a great deal of confusion and pain in coming to know themselves. In addition to the service that they render directly, professional women provide models for others, particularly children, something that has long been needed. We need thousands more Bella Abzugs and Shirley Chisholms. The same can be said for the arts. The example of an independent — at least spiritually — artist struggling for her own fulfillment is one of the most compelling. We could go on and on. The essential point is that times are far too critical for us not to give our choices of career or occupation the most painstaking evaluation.

One idea that would seem well worth exploring for women with some free time would be the formation of some kind of consumer vigilante groups. These could be useful in a variety of ways, not the least being educational. I find, as a woman, that it is devastatingly insulting to have an economy structured around the fact that I am malleable and stupid enough to be manipulated into buying whatever I am told, in order to keep a small cog in the economic machine turning. Secondly, the machine itself is endlessly wasteful, unaesthetic, immoral and un-ecological. Perhaps study and research groups could be formed which could, among other things, separate



the wheat from the chaff as far as useful and totally superfluous or actually harmful products go. This could be applied to food, cosmetics, cleaning products, appliances and beyond. Based on such studies, committees to establish information services for the public could be set up or similar existing groups expanded. Conceivably this could lead to strong pressure groups which, armed with the threat of boycott, could begin to have some influence. Hopefully, there would be eventually congressional lobbies to voice opinions other than those of large corporations and manufacturing concerns. As women, we have few weapons in the struggle for a less destructive society. In this country, we do have buying power. It seems preposterous not to use it. To be cautioned that such actions could threaten the economy is rather like

telling someone who is dying not to do something because it is bad for him.

I have only touched on practical, tangible steps, conceivable in our society as we know it at the present. There are our other occupations, which, while not political, are in themselves most fulfilling and well-adapted to both the needs and ground-rules of a more ecologically-oriented society. Within this context, motherhood seems well worth a second look. It is worth re-evaluating because it is rapidly becoming, for the first time in human history, largely voluntary. Reliable contraception, giving women the freedom to choose whether or not they will have children, has been called by a Jungian analyst, Irene Claremont de Castillejo, the "second apple." Given woman by technological





man, it offers hitherto undreamed-of possibilities of personal choice in shaping one's life. While not robbing us of our immanence, it offers the freedom that has until now been the prerogative of the male. Such a breakthrough at a time of dangerous over-population might be viewed as little short of providential.

Few occupations or roles, call it what you will, have raised as much ire in recent years as that of motherhood. It is held in the main in low regard in the feminist movement. In this case, Simone de Beauvoir seems typical. She begins her chapter entitled "The Mother" in "*The Second Sex*" with a long discussion of abortion. This hardly seems the most positive initial approach. Irene Claremont de Castillejo presents another pole of opinion when she says, "The woman with a newborn baby by a man she loves is as nearly in tune with nature as she ever can be." My favourite symbol for the feeling having children has had for me is the photograph of a black

woman in "*The Family of Man*." She stands lean and quiet with her children held against her. The caption reads "She is a tree of life to them." Given a society not so completely out of touch with natural rhythms, the role of a mother has too much love and joy and fierce pride to be the draining, demoralizing, second-rate occupation that it is currently considered to be.

Whatever one's inclination, it is cheering to know that we have at last come to the stage where those who want to have children may, and those who do not wish to need not; although, for all of us the spectre of over-population is peering over our shoulders. Even though women who have children do so voluntarily, it does not mean that society should not take greater responsibility for its young. Women should be independent economically. Perhaps this suggests some sort of family allowance during the time she has infants and very small children. There is, in addition, still a wide-spread need for well-run day care centers. Communities in general should take a

*Photo by Fritz Goro*



greater interest and joy in their children. And men should spend more time with them. It would be good for both of them.

As for women who decide against having children, and many splendid women have, the field that is most in need of improvements is that of reliable, safe contraception. This burden must be shared more broadly by men. Perhaps there could be a male pill. Certainly a reversible vasectomy shouldn't be beyond neurosurgery. It would be cheering to see some of the stigma clouding the idea of vasectomy dissipate in cases of men who have had their children or do not plan to have them. Pursuing the subject of reproduction in a slightly different direction, there is one radical feminist idea to which I am unalterably opposed, and

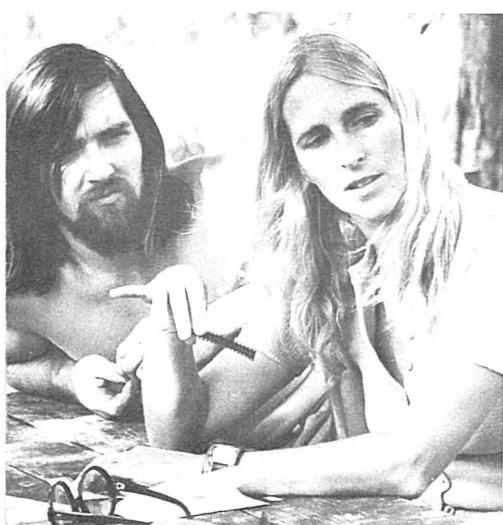
it is that of test tube babies. Besides being totally unecological, the concept with its science-fiction overtones is aberrant and potentially dangerous.

Elaine Morgan characteristically looks on the bright side of the whole child-bearing issue. Women who do not want to have children and would therefore likely have made indifferent mothers will not, thereby selecting themselves out. Those who then choose to raise children might be expected to make a better job of it. They might be inclined to be more selective in choosing father material as well. Ms. Morgan postulates that this for the first time could give woman "her finger on the genetic trigger." What will happen we cannot foresee, but Ms. Morgan expresses the hope that, in considering men to father their children, "extreme manifestations of the behaviour patterns of dominance and aggression will be evolutionarily at a discount."

Aside from, and often harmonious with, child-rearing, there exists the possibility of a host of earth-kindly skills. Some of these can provide for one's needs directly, others used for a source of income. Either way they are good for the soul. Gardening is high on this list. Apart from its obvious usefulness, it is endlessly interesting and rewarding. It is, perhaps, one of the most direct ways to study and form a bond with the earth, establishing a relationship that is profound, instructive, changing and changeless. Much of the drudgery and hard work, and admittedly it is hard work, can be relieved by working with friends — or is it that gardening together makes people friends? Pottery, carpentry, spinning, weaving, and making hand-crafted jewelry are other types of work that are at once satisfying and non-destructive. The study of herbal medicine, nutrition, and the care of animals are rewarding in themselves and engender a heightened awareness of the environment.

One possibility for exploring human potentialities, both male and female, is within the context of the small group. Countless communities, communes, co-ops and guilds have been and are being formed, perhaps to replace a sense of place and community

*Photos by Fritz Goro*



that has been lost in the impersonal mobility of society at large. People in them may be bound by a common idealism, a need to share their work or craft, or more simply a desire for companionship. Generally, they offer an accepting framework for personal change and transition. One such group, having a primarily ecological orientation, is the one with which I work, called New Alchemy.

It has been through working with New Alchemy that my understanding of ecology has moved from the theoretical toward some inkling of how the world works, in a biological sense. The philosophy behind the work of the group is holistic, yet small-scale — to see only a small part of the world perhaps, but to view it in the complexity of its entirety. When one's primary sources of energy are the sun and wind, they play a greater part in one's life and one's awareness of them is markedly increased. To become involved in process develops a sense of stewardship, of interdependence between oneself and the land and its creatures, and wind and sun and water. The most concrete embodiment of our work that I can give is the greenhouse-aquaculture complex we call the Ark. Within the same structure, fish for food are grown in pools flanked by beds for the production of vegetables. The sun and the wind are the exclusive sources of energy and are transformed through biological processes into food. Living space will be the next concept to be incorporated. The fish feed mainly on algae which grows with them in the pond, and pond water irrigates and fertilizes the vegetable beds. It is a small, largely self-contained world in itself, and one cannot work with it without becoming a part of it.

When we first began working together as a group, there was considerable resentment on the part of the women over the housekeeping and more domestic work which necessarily accompanies almost every effort. When we articulated our feelings, we discovered in our case, and this may not be in any way typical, that our domestic orientation had been largely the result of

long-ingrained habits on our part as well as that of the men. As the men came to understand how we felt, the transition to sharing equally the work that we found to be most oppressive psychically was immediate. Group clean-ups usually resemble a brawl more closely than housework, but the results are adequate and the karma fine. Our other work is still somewhat divided along traditional sex lines. We don't have with us, at the moment, women with mechanical aptitude or engineering training, so our windmills and energy systems are largely in the hands of the men. But women do carpentry and rototilling and heavy garden work and carry their share of the physical burden. We still do more of the cooking, but the men do their share and like it. The kitchen staff is always bisexual and both sexes clean up.

The major advantage to working or living in something akin to a small group is the experience, being shared alike by both sexes, hopefully with minimal antagonism, of outgrowing and casting off sexist conditioning, and of learning that neither sex is bound by the limitations or inhibitions of traditional roles. This offers an unusually free and affectionate environment where immanent feminine qualities and the transcendent aspects of the male can grow toward each other and toward a more androgynous type of mind. Such a possibility, like the alchemists' gold or the holy grail, has long been the object of human longing.

In 1928 Virginia Woolf told a story based on her fantasy of a sister of Shakespeare who apparently died very young and never wrote a word. Virginia Woolf goes on to say, "Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, is now coming within your



power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so — I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often lain down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before, she will be born. As for her coming without that preparation, without that effort on our part, without that determination that when she is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry, that we cannot expect, for that would be impossible. But I maintain that she would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while."

I find this among the most moving statements of feminism, perhaps the more effective for the fact that it is in the form of a metaphor. With regard to women's hopes for personal fulfillment there is little one can add. But in relation to the potential influence women possess for the possibilities for drastic change in the course of human history, I found an encouraging statement from Irene Claremont de Castillejo. She wrote, "The deeply buried feminine in us whose concern is the unbroken connection of all things is in passionate revolt against the stultifying, life-destroying anonymous machine of the civilization we have built. She is consumed by an inner rage which

is buried in a layer of the unconscious often too deep for us to recognize. She becomes destructive of anything and everything, sometimes violently but often by subtle passive obstruction.

"I believe it is often this inner protest which breaks out in neurotic illness in sensitive men as well as women, or turns destructive in places where it was not intended. With more consciousness feminine anger could be harnessed, to a creative end."

The reference to "more consciousness" surely justifies the countless hours so many of us have spent, in these times of rapid transition, in the search for identity and self definition. And surely "the deeply buried feminine in us whose concern is the unbroken connection of all things" is another way of defining feminine immanence and brings us back full circle to the question of our place in nature — to our own organic essence. For it would be a truly bitter irony were we to inherit the world just in time for its death throes. And it would be a poor world without dolphins and butterflies.

I should like to end with a story about women and ecology that took place around New Alchemy's compost pile, which seems a suitably earthy and symbolic place to close. A while ago, a group of us were turning the compost late one Saturday afternoon, an activity that has acquired the status of near ritual. As we shovelled, someone commented on the smell which was at that moment, as I remember, largely vintage cabbage. "Smell", said Hilde, who is our chief gardener and thinks well of compost. "That's the new perfume." To which one of the men, who has a voice which has been described accurately as stentorian tones, thundered, "If this is the new perfume, then women's liberation has gone far enough."

And Hilde said, "It's just beginning."

— Nancy Jack Todd

Photo by Alan Pearlman

