

The American Obsession with FUN

In John Barth's *The End of the Road*, Jacob Horner describes a dream he once had in which, after several futile attempts to find out the weather forecast, he learns from the chief meteorologist that there simply will not be any weather the next day. He tells us about the dream in order to explain a particular state of mind that he often experiences, a state he has come to call "weatherless." Though analogies between moods and weather are commonplace, Horner questions their appropriateness in his case because a day without weather is almost impossible to imagine, and yet he frequently has days without any mood at all. At such times Horner is without a personality, is nonexistent in his own mind, except in the purely physical sense. He compares himself to those microscopic specimens that must be dyed before they can be seen: Horner needs to be colored by some mood or other in order to recognize himself. On his weatherless days he sits blankly in his rocking chair, rocking sometimes for hours until some external event colors him back into being.

Throughout the book Horner suffers from varying degrees of weatherlessness, the most extreme being a trance-like state of complete immobility. His standard device for warding off emptiness of mind is to repeat over and over an advertising jingle from the 1950s: "Pepsi-Cola hits the spot./Twelve full ounces—that's a lot." This jingle serves as the test pattern of his consciousness: As long as he can say it, he knows he still exists. Once, when the jingle failed him, he sat frozen on a bench in Penn Station all night long. By the end of the book the jingle has lost its effectiveness because Horner cannot even remember to say it at the right times. In the final scene he sits in his rocking chair, totally weatherless. When he gets in a cab and says, "Terminal," we know he will take the bus to the nameless "Doctor," recognizing himself to be a spiritual terminal case.

Ann Nietzsche, who lives in Normal, Illinois, is a housewife and freelance writer with a special interest in psychology.

The way we stress the importance of being "alive," says the author, betrays "a diminution in the sense of the self." Too often we discover our identity in the products we buy.

BY ANN NIETZKE

I have a friend, a teacher at a junior college in a large midwestern city, who sometimes suffers similar periods of weatherlessness. Her attacks are less severe and less pervasive than Jacob Horner's; I think they are, in part, just a defense against being overwhelmed by modern urban living. When things become a bit too much, she simply tunes out temporarily while her strength, the strength necessary for living a feeling life, gets replenished. Nevertheless, finding yourself in the company of someone who is in no mood at all, whatever the reasons behind it, is an unsettling experience. You just plain don't know how to act, since nothing you say or do seems to matter. There is nothing to interact with, no mood, emotion, or viewpoint to oppose or complement. You can't cheer your friend up, because she's not sad; you can't convince her of anything, because she's all too agreeable; and you can't make her feel better, because she doesn't feel bad. A few years ago, when I was visiting my friend during one of her weatherless bouts, I became exasperated and then saddened by my own helplessness in the situation. But as the weekend wore on, my sadness, interestingly enough, dissolved itself into moodlessness, too, so that finally the two of us sat there staring vacantly into space and feeling quite at home with each other. The only thing to do on such a weatherless Saturday night,

of course, was to look at television.

At that time Pepsi had just begun a new series of commercials, which must have proved very successful since it is still being used almost three years later. The main theme, familiar to everyone by now, is in the refrain: "You've got a lot to live,/And Pepsi's got a lot to give." That night, after hearing those words, my friend turned to me with the first spark of life I had seen in her eyes all weekend. "Don't you just love that?" she said. And I had to admit that I did. The tune and the words together conveyed a spirit of vivacity and affirmation that was somehow irresistibly appealing. The rest of the evening and all the next day we couldn't get the song out of our minds. We sang it aloud, together or solo, and, like Jacob Horner, we found ourselves intoning it under our breath, tapping a foot or waving a hand breezily through the air to mark the time. The thing had gotten through to us and in some mysterious way filled the emotional vacuum we were in.

Well, the coincidental relationship among my friends and me and Jacob Horner and weatherlessness and Pepsi-Cola ads all came together in an intriguing way when I recently reread Barth's *The End of the Road*. I began to listen carefully to Pepsi ads and then to Coke ads, and, as is usually the case when advertising is analyzed, I learned much less about the products than about the public for which the ads are designed. As almost any American can tell you, "Pepsi helps you come alive" and "Coke is the real thing." These slogans seem simple enough, but a close look at what they imply leads us into some sociopsychological considerations that are not simple.

When I was trying to help my friend that weekend, I didn't yet understand that moodlessness is a kind of death, that "aliveness" of some sort might be just the thing required to dispel it. Of course, even if I had realized this, I don't know specifically what I might have done for her, but I think it helps explain our response to the Pepsi commercial. In its various ads on radio and TV, Pepsi uses two main stanzas, al-

ways followed by the refrain, "You've got a lot to live,/And Pepsi's got a lot to give."

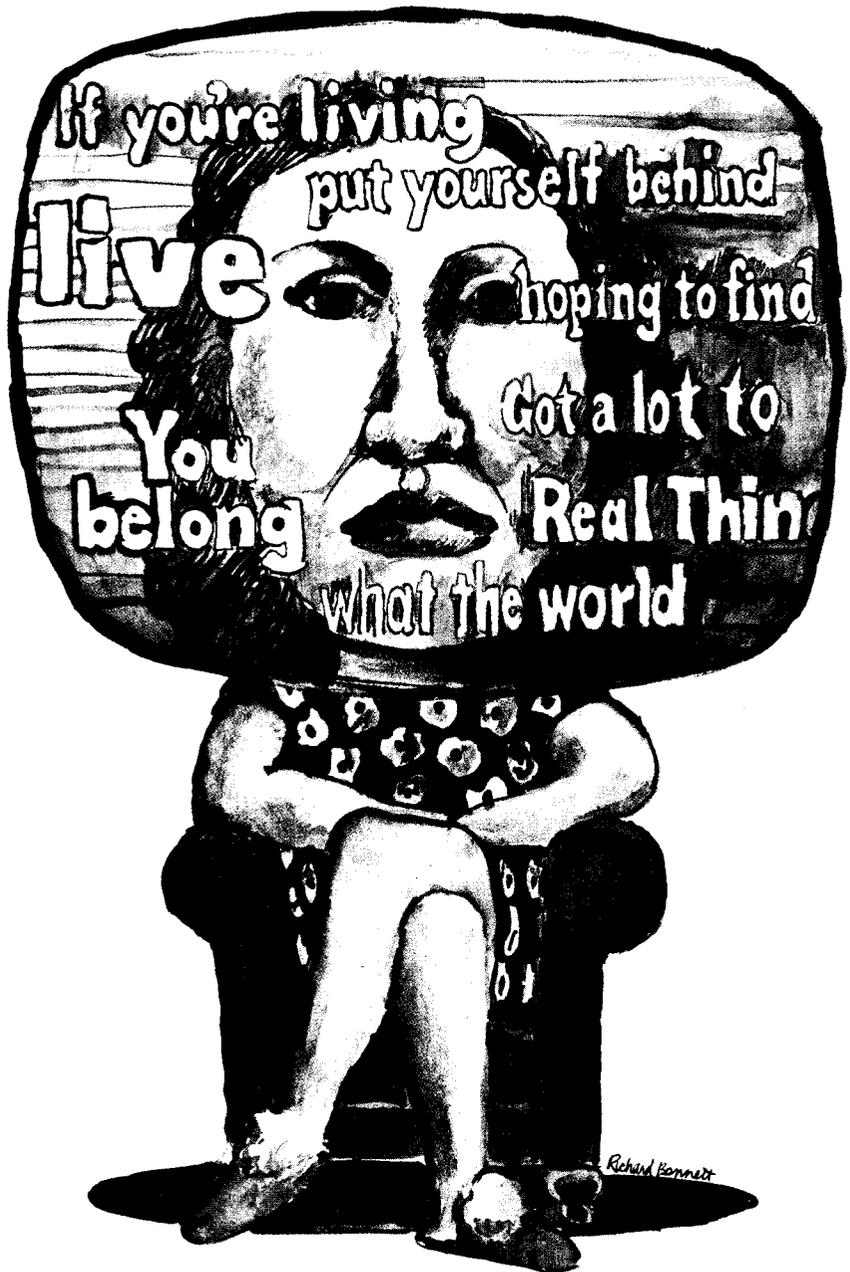
It's the Pepsi generation
Comin' at ya, goin' strong.
Put yourself behind a Pepsi—
If you're livin', you belong.

There's a whole new way of livin'—
Pepsi helps supply the drive.
It's got a lot to give for those who like
to live,
'Cause it helps 'em come alive.

On television the music accompanies scenes of people having good times. Not all the people look young, but we're made to realize that they all are "young in heart," that they are "living" and so are members of the Pepsi generation. On radio rock-'n'-roll stations various well-known recording stars sing the lyrics. I was particularly struck by the idea of deadness that underlies "coming alive" when I heard Johnny Cash sing about it in his most spiritless style.

The relationship depicted in the ads between being "alive" and having fun is psychologically a sound one, and it is in the sexual experience, of course, that the two are most closely related. Alexander Lowen, a medical doctor who has written a book on the subject of pleasure, believes that "the foundation for a joyful life is the pleasure we feel in our bodies, and that, without this bodily pleasure of aliveness, living becomes the grim necessity of survival." Every imaginable kind of product is advertised as holding the key to fun, good times, and sexual fulfillment. But, as Dr. Lowen points out, the American obsession with fun probably betrays a lack of true pleasure in our lives. Similarly, one reason the advertising business relies so heavily on sexual appeals is, not that America has become sexually liberated, but rather that many people are so out of touch with their own bodies that they derive little pleasure from them and will therefore seek the missing pleasure through the use of products which, in one way or another, promise to replace it.

Lowen suggests that the common element in all neurotic-behavior patterns is a diminution in the sense of self, which includes "a loss of the feeling of identity, a reduced awareness of one's individuality, a decrease in self-expression, and a diminished capacity for pleasure." Certainly Jake Horner and my friend exhibited all of these symptoms in their states of weatherlessness, though they were chronic for him and temporary for her. What is frightening to contemplate is that anyone who spends as much time watching television as the average American does must, almost by definition, exhibit these symptoms to some degree.



"The price we pay for avoiding the pain of being fully alive is that we are excluded from the pleasure as well."

For, if he were fully aware of himself as an individual, he would not constantly want to be treated as part of an audience. If he felt the need for self-expression, he would want to put himself in a situation that would give him a chance to fulfill it. And if he had a real capacity for pleasure, he would engage in pleasurable activities himself, not watch others so engaged on television. This is not to say, of course, that TV causes neuroses, but only that the neurotic as described by Lowen would naturally be drawn to watching it. And advertisers, to be sure, take full advantage of this fact.

My friend and I knew instinctively to

turn on the television that weatherless Saturday night, although neither of us is an avid viewer. I would venture to guess that the difference between us and many full-time TV addicts is that we were quite conscious of our moodlessness because, for us, it is a sometime thing. Those who lack the strength to live lives of feeling, and in whom the sense of self is always ill-defined, are no doubt much less conscious of that state, although they may vaguely sense that something is missing from their lives. The price they pay for avoiding the pain of being fully alive is that they are excluded from the pleasure of it as well. They are, therefore, always

tempted by any promise of pleasure, hoping that perhaps this time it will not elude them.

I understood the most sinister aspect of the phenomenon Vance Packard termed "hidden persuasion" when I began to consider what it might mean to be weatherless most of the time and not even realize it. There is nothing obviously "hidden" about what the Pepsi ad is saying; in fact, upon close examination it is hard to believe how straightforward the words are. But the psychological success of the commercial depends upon a lack of self-awareness in the viewer. For while it gives the impression of appealing to the "living" and those with a "zest for life," the ad is actually aimed at the "dead" who experience so little pleasure that they need something to help them "come alive." Thus, on the conscious level the ad provides support for the viewer's illusion that he is "alive" and capable of enjoying things and himself, while at the same time, on a deeper level, it is touching that vague sense of deadness that so many people experience. Even if the "dead" viewer were to take part in all the fun-filled activities shown in the ads, he still would not be capable of having any real fun. That is too terrible a thing for him to face consciously; it is easier to accept the notion, however irrational, that Pepsi might make a difference ("Put yourself behind a Pepsi—/If you're livin', you belong"). The point is that the persuasion depends, not on something hidden in the commercial, but on something the viewer has hidden from himself.

The neurotic, with his diminished sense of self-identity, has no way of really knowing when he is fooling himself. Because he feels that at the center of his being there is only emptiness rather than an integrated personality, he lives with a permanent sense of unreality. It is this realization that brings many neurotics to the analyst's couch, and, of course, the realization itself is a step in the right direction. For most, however, the realization probably never crystallizes; they go on existing with their weatherlessness and a vague awareness that their lives are unfulfilled.

At its deepest level the Coca-Cola pitch for "the real thing" appeals to this neurotic sense of unreality:

It's the real thing, Coke is.
That's the way it should be.
What the world wants to see
Is the real thing.

It's the real thing, Coke is.
In the back of your mind
What you're hoping to find
Is the real thing.

On one level of interpretation, Coke is held up as something genuine in a

world of automation and imitation. (Interestingly enough, Coke became "the real thing" only after 7-Up billed itself as the "Uncola"—apparently in an attempt to imply that 7-Up is not a genuine soft drink.) It becomes associated in our minds with a nostalgia for the superior products of the past—"real" bread, "real" ice cream, "real" cars, "real" wood, etc. And, of course, people who are living imitation lives will be doubly attracted by the idea of "authentic" products.

The other meaning of "the real thing" is *love*, and this association is conveyed partly through the pleasant, soft-rock style of the song in the commercials. In the back of our minds we are all looking for the real thing—genuine affection—and would be ready and willing to buy any products that might help us find it.

A more complex and subtle use of the concept of love lies behind the familiar Coca-Cola commercial in which young people from all over the world are brought together on a hill-top in Italy, where they sing (in perfect harmony):

I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony.
I'd like to buy the world a Coke
And keep it company.

I find the appeal of this ad, the music combined with the idea of buying the world a Coke, almost irresistible, a fact that disturbs me when I consider its implications. For one thing, the ad embodies the all too American theory and practice of *buying* good will, friendship, or even love. This notion is so pervasive at every level of our society that it is pretty much taken for granted—and for some reason has always been neatly associated with Coca-Cola. I remember that when I was in junior high school, if a guy bought me a Coke it was the first sign he was "interested" in me; later, if the relationship turned out to be "the real thing," he might ask you to go steady with him. The ad illustrates perfectly, if unintentionally, how this economic aspect of courtship is projected onto the global plane in American foreign relations. We are always happy to buy the world a Coke if we believe that this will keep it in our "company" rather than the Soviet Union's or China's. (I am incidentally reminded of that outrageous scene in *Dr. Strange-love* in which Peter Sellers is begging Keenan Wynn to shoot open the coin box of a Coke machine so he can get a dime to call the President and explain why the world may be about to end. Keenan Wynn reluctantly complies with the request, saying, "Okay, but you're gonna have to answer to the Coca-Cola Company for this.")

Of course, this kind of sociological

analysis is somewhat remote from the ad's ability to touch people emotionally. On a more personal level, I think it appeals to that sense of community that many of us long for but so rarely experience in contemporary urban life—in fact, may have lost the knack to experience. The irony about an idea like buying the world a Coke and keeping it company, though, is that it is so abstract it can be employed only in the mind, which means everyone has to experience it alone.

Still, the ad always puts me in a mood of buoyancy and good will, although then I don't quite know what to *do* with these feelings. The words and music inevitably make me smile and think any day now I will begin to show the world all the love I have in my heart, but, needless to say, I never do. Unfortunately, the "world" is made up of individual people, any one of whom is much more difficult to love than is mankind in general. I can sit alone and respond to that ad with a sense of joy; but later that same day, if I see an acquaintance who doesn't see me in the supermarket, I may still duck down some aisle and linger behind the shelves until he or she is out of sight. It is not that I dislike the person but that I wish to avoid the degree of involvement required for even the most casual conversation. What makes the jingle in the Coke ad so appealing is that it allows you to participate momentarily in a kind of love that is *not dangerous or painful* to you, a kind that makes no demands. Actually, loving another individual (the *real* "real thing") always involves the terrible risk of being hurt, which simply does not enter into the notion of buying the world a Coke and keeping it company.

The other day I noticed in a magazine advertisement that the Pepsi-Cola Company has come up with a new slogan: "Pepsi people—the smilin' majority." My first reaction was to connect the slogan with those signs and buttons and bumper stickers cropping up all over that remind people to smile, as if it were something to be done on cue. That in itself is a little scary. Then I remembered a couple of people I've known who smiled almost constantly, even when they didn't mean to or perhaps even when a smile was most inappropriate. The thought of them led me to recall a theory about the development of the human smile that some cultural anthropologists have expounded—that a smile actually represents a passive defense against the threat of aggression, a symbolic baring of the teeth to demonstrate that they will not be used in hostility. Like the smile, a lot more than meets the eyes lies behind those seemingly innocent soft-drink ads. □

THE ACTION LAWYERS

In the long history of public education in the United States one seemingly inevitable fact of life has been that rich communities get much better schools than poor communities do, even though all public schools fall under statewide education systems. Inequalities in public education have existed largely because school budgets are supported by local taxes, usually property taxes, and the budgets are therefore likely to reflect the affluence or poverty of any school's particular locality.

The days of wide disparities in public education, however, appear to be numbered in the face of a judicial siege that not only may profoundly effect education in America but may also lead to equalizing other public services, such as road building and garbage collecting, within individual states. A suit challenging unequal school financing, *Rodriguez v. San Antonio*, is now before the U.S. Supreme Court (briefs are to be submitted by the end of this month). At last count some forty-one other similarly aimed suits are pending in lower federal courts and state courts. And half a dozen cases have already been decided in favor of the equalizers, including a ruling by the Supreme Court of California, perhaps the most influential state court in the nation, that has overthrown that state's system for financing public schools based on property taxes.

Implications of the attack on inequal-

Gerald C. Lubenow is head of *Newsweek* magazine's bureau in San Francisco.

ity in public education have been widely analyzed and discussed, especially since the California decision was handed down a year ago this month. That decision, *Serrano v. Priest*, is already being compared with the landmark school desegregation decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Yet the nationwide courtroom attack on inequality in education is perhaps ultimately as significant, if less dissected, for what it says about an expanding American institution for achieving reform as it is for the reform itself.

Court decisions, even those that embody vast constitutional principles and dictate wide structural changes, often appear to emerge full-blown from the pens of judges through some arcane and autonomous process. Yet, in fact, the process of social reform through the courts has grown increasingly regularized and institutionalized in recent years and increasingly responsive to the factors that move government in other areas—man-hours and money and no little zeal.

Thus, far from being chance eruptions from the judicial system, *Serrano*, *Rodriguez*, and other ongoing school-equalization cases represent years of deliberate research and planning through a sophisticated, if informal, network of national communication. They represent, in effect, a case study in the refining arts of legal activism of the sort that was pioneered in the civil rights movement and is now a major weapon of consumerists and environmentalists and poverty war-

riors—that indeed has become one of the major avenues for social reform in the United States. Some reformers who view legislative and executive branches as being impotent or corrupt look toward the courts as the only route to reform.

Just how have the school-equalization cases come about, and how have they been directed? I have tried to trace their courses, looking particularly at *Serrano*, the major victory for the legal activists on this battleground so far.

One of the earliest recognitions, perhaps the earliest formal recognition of unequal school budgets as a problem that might be subject to judicial reform came a decade ago. John Coons, a struggling young professor of law at Northwestern, was hired to do a study of discrimination in city spending between various Chicago school districts. After tunneling into the finances of Chicago schools for a year Coons filed in his report a brief reference to the irony of working so laboriously to pin down a \$50 discrepancy in the city schools when the gap between Chicago and the suburbs was immense. The following year, in a report for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Coons again noted wide disparities in the financing of public education and observed that "the rationale protecting such differentials in the provision of a government service is by no means clear." A legal challenge to the rationale, he suggested, might someday be in order.

Coons maintained a continuing interest in unequal school financing, and in

They don't just try
cases or teach law;
they plot social change.
Serrano v. Priest,
a legal case that may
well be as important
as the 1954 school
desegregation case,
is part of a
campaign in point.