

Test Pattern for Living

"How about trying to find out what you would do and be and think and create if there weren't some corporation trying to sell you on doing everything its way."

by NICHOLAS JOHNSON

An FCC Commissioner in the 1970s, sworn to regulate broadcasting "in the public interest," simply cannot content himself with the myopic supervision of antenna tower painting and frequency assignments. He cannot witness the carcening of America without trying to evaluate whether broadcasting is a part of the solution or a part of the problem. At least that is the way I have viewed my job. And so it is that I feel some responsibility to examine the possible role of mass communications in our current malaise.

As I have gone through the process of addressing that question, I have become more and more aware of the extent to which television not only distributes programs and sells products but also preaches a general philosophy of life. The quest has forced me to consider not only television's life-style but my own—in ways I will describe later. Television tells us, hour after grueling hour, that the primary measure of an individual's worth is his consumption of products, his sexuality, his measuring up to ideals found in packages mass-produced and distributed by corporate America. Commercials for many products (and even some programs), but especially the drug commercials, sell the gospel that there are instant solutions to life's most pressing personal problems. You need not think about your own emo-

tional maturity and development of individuality; your discipline, training, and education; your perception of the world; your willingness to cooperate and compromise and work with other people; or about your developing deep and meaningful human relationships and trying to keep them in repair. You pop a pill. "Better living through chemistry" is not just Du Pont's slogan. It is one of the commandments of consumerism.

Television—which Professor John Kenneth Galbraith has characterized as one of the "prime instruments for the manipulation of consumer demand"—educates us away from life and away from our individuality. It drives us to line up at the counters of drugstores and supermarkets, and to shape our needs and wants and, ultimately, ourselves into the molds that are the products. Not only do the programs and commercials explicitly preach materialism, conspicuous consumption, status consciousness, exploitation, and fantasy worlds of quick, shallow solutions, but even the settings and subliminal messages are commercials for the consumption style of life.

The headache remedy commercials are among the most revealing. A headache is often our body's way of telling us something's wrong. What is wrong may have to do with the bad vibes one picks up working in big corporations' office buildings or shopping in their stores. The best answer may be to stay out of such places. Obviously, such a solution would be as bad for the corporate state generally as for the headache remedy business in particular. So the message is made clear: Corporate jobs and shopping trips are as Ameri-

can as chemical additives in apple pie. You just keep driving yourself through both. And when those mysterious headache devils appear for no reason at all, you swallow the magic chemicals.

But what's true of the magic-chemical ads is true of commercials and programs generally. Look at the settings. Auto ads push clothes fashion and vacations. Furniture wax ads push wall-to-wall carpeting and draperies. Breakfast cereal ads push new stoves and refrigerators. Not surprisingly, the programs do the same—after all, they're paid for by the same guys who pay for the commercials. Dean Martin probably sells as many cigarettes just by smoking them on camera as the Marlboro Man did by riding his horse. How many blacks have commented on the misleading life-style of blacks as depicted by such television shows as *Julia*? Eric Barnouw's three-volume history of broadcasting reveals that the disappearance of the early-1950s dramatists from television was due to advertisers' revulsion at the dramatists' message that happiness could be found by ordinary people in lower-class settings.

You have probably thought about television's phony values and their impact on society. But reflect: How many people do *you* know whom you think of as "fully functioning personalities"? How many are there in whose daily lives there is a measure of beauty, contact with nature, artistic creativity, some philosophical contemplation or religion, love, self-fulfilling productivity of some kind, participation in life-support activities, physical well-being, a spirit of joy, and individual growth? That's what the world's great theo-

NICHOLAS JOHNSON is Commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission and author of the book *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set* (published last year by Little, Brown and Bantam).

The author en route to his office—"I find this time especially good for doing some of my best thinking."

gians, psychiatrists, poets, and philosophers have been telling us human life is all about. But few of us have come close to realizing our potential.

"OK," you say, "I don't dig the hollow values preached in the temple of television. But what's the alternative?"

"How about life?" I respond. "How about trying to find out what you would do and be and think and create if there weren't some corporation trying to sell you on doing everything its way."

But just how would you go about that? It's heady stuff to gaze at the clouds while lying on the campus of a small and exclusive Eastern college. It's a great place for students to grow for four years of their lives, and for Professor Charles Reich to write *The Greening of America*. But how about the 99.99 per cent of the American people who *aren't* at Yale? Suppose you don't want to drop out or camp out. Maybe you want to step in, try to make things a little better, or just earn a living. What then? How can we make life *in* the corporate state more livable and more human?

It soon became obvious that if I was going to criticize television for not offering alternative life-styles I was going to have to be able to find the answer to that question. So I set about it.

I think experience is useful to understanding. When I was trying to understand the problems of creative artists in television, I got an 8 mm camera and tried to make some films, and tried writing some poetry and songs and playing the guitar. When the FCC was involved in evaluating questions of journalistic freedom, I watched and talked to the radio and television re-

porters themselves as well as listened to the formal presentations of their lawyers.

As with any inquiry, a search for alternative life-styles can best be begun by identifying, segregating, examining, and experiencing the most basic components of the subject. In this case, the subject was life. Whether or not you end up permanently leaving the city to live in the woods, a natural environment is a good place to sort out the basics of living. I have always enjoyed hiking and camping anyway, and the West Virginia mountains seemed the best setting for my new odyssey. Let me tell you a little about it.

For two weeks last August my boys—Sherman, age nine, and Gregory, age six—and I lived on some isolated forested land in the mountains of West Virginia. The only radio station we could hear was WELD in Fisher, West Virginia—a town about ten miles away with a population of twenty-five or thirty. Bordering the land was the somewhat larger community of Moorefield, where we did our shopping. But we were five miles down a state highway from Moorefield and another five miles up a barely passable rocky mountain road that forded a stream twenty times on its way to our wilderness campsite. So we were pretty much on our own.

Because we had never owned much in the way of elaborate camping gear, and because it had been a while since we had done this kind of camping, and because I have never really been leisurely or organized enough to plan carefully what I am going to take, we wound up starting life from scratch in a number of respects. For example, we

began getting water by dipping tin cups into the stream and pouring the water into an old gallon milk container. When one day I saw a wash basin and bucket in the Moorefield hardware store and suddenly realized the wash basin could be used for dipping water much more efficiently into the bucket, it was almost as if I had invented both objects then and there.

We did a lot of our own food gathering (including the discovery of a very friendly and generous Farmer Mathias on the top of our mountain), cooking, washing, minor mending, health care, fire building, and so forth, and also constructed a very grand outhouse (a tangible token of our appreciation to our friends, the Inmans, whose land it was). We walked through the mountains and played in the streams and watched the sky and talked a lot.

Out of the West Virginia experience came a number of somewhat significant philosophical insights for me. I took the time to relax, and think, and write in a journal—especially at night, when the moon was full and my boys were asleep. Most of my professional life has been just that, a professional life—using such skills as I picked up along the way to do the kinds of things that lawyers, professors, and public officials do. That's an important part of life, I think. Most grown men and women need to have the sense that they are capable of, and are involved in, productivity that is paid for or otherwise generally recognized as of value to society. The problem, of course, is that it is all too easy for such activities to consume virtually all of your intellectual, emotional, and

physical energy—as they had for me. So I began to think about the other basic elements of life. If you were to plan an ideal day, what would it contain?

Most fundamental, I suppose, is love. Each of us has had different feelings and relationships we have thought of as love. Sexuality can be an important part of it. Each of us means something a little different by it. But we would probably all agree that

To be alive
Is very nice
But scarcely half as fine
As with the love
And other stuff
That makes it just divine.

And we would probably also agree that there's very little more I should or need contribute at this point to the thousands of volumes, poems, and songs on that subject.

Contemplation of some kind has been considered fundamental by man throughout the ages. I decided to include it as another basic element. It can be "religion," philosophy, mythology, yoga, or whatever makes sense for you. But we have to have some time when we think beyond our hang-nails and hang-overs and the daily routine to a somewhat more meaningful view of life.

Personal analysis is a related activity. Psychiatrists or counseling services or encounter groups is one way to do it. But thinking to oneself, writing in a journal, or regularly talking with a trusted friend are other ways to achieve related benefits. Most of us could do with a little more knowledge about why we tick the way we do.

Creative expression is especially important in relation to television. The opportunity to *be* creative—personally, not professionally—as well as to be exposed to beauty and the best creativity of others, is essential to individual growth.

Regular contact with nature is a necessary reminder of the whole earth system from which we came, in which we live, and to which we will return. Living in the woods may or may not be the best way to keep in touch with our origins. But it is a decidedly impractical way for that 90 per cent of the American people who live in cities. (I considered, and fairly quickly rejected, the thought of commuting to Washington from West Virginia.) So what are the alternatives? Look around you. Plant something. (I have a pineapple plant in my office and pine trees and dill at home.) Feed some birds, even if they're sparrows. Have a picnic lunch in a downtown park. Look at the sky. Walk in the rain.

Camping in the mountains for two

weeks reaffirmed my latent but basic commitment to the psychic values of simplicity. You not only can "get along with" substantially fewer "things" when camping in the woods, but you actually enjoy life more because it is not so cluttered with objects. The experience gave me a way of thinking about simplicity, objects, and natural living that I had not had before. And it impressed upon me, for perhaps the first time, a sense of the interrelated totality of "life-support activities"—another basic element of life.

By life-support activities I mean the provision of those things that are necessary to sustain our physical life: food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and so forth. These are the kinds of activities that I became most fully aware of in the woods because I had to, and because they can be most easily comprehended when reduced to basics.

In an industrialized urban environment it is easy to forget that human life still is, as it was originally, sustained by certain basic functions. I think *some* participation in the support of your life is essential to a sense of fulfillment. And yet, I used to give almost no attention to these kinds of activities. Food simply appeared on my dinner table ready to be eaten. The house I lived in was purchased. It was warmed or cooled by some equipment in the basement that I knew very little about and that was tended to by repairmen when necessary. Clothing was something that I found in closets and dresser drawers and that was cleaned and mended by my wife, the maid, or a cleaning establishment. Transportation was provided by the municipal bus system for commuting and by FCC drivers during the day. At my office I was surrounded not only by machines—copying machines, electric typewriters, dictating machines, and so forth—but also by people paid to operate them for me, answer my telephone, and bring me coffee.

In short, I had taken very nearly all my life-support activities—"my life"—and cut them up into bits and pieces that I parceled out to individuals, corporations, and machines around me. The upshot was that there was very little left of my life for me to live. This was extraordinarily "efficient" in one sense; that is, I was working at perhaps 98 per cent of the level of professional production of which I am capable. But what I concluded was that it was bad for life, for I was *living* only a small percentage of my ultimate capacity to live.

Now if you follow me so far and see some similarities to your own life—or what your own life is becoming—the question is what to do about it. Do you

do all your life-support activities by yourself? Perhaps. Maybe that's best. But there *are* alternatives short of that which are more consistent with life in the corporate state.

I do not think that you need to do everything for yourself. For one thing, you cannot trace everything back to first elements. You can build your own furniture. But are you going to saw your own boards from your own trees? Are you going to insist upon having planted the trees? Must you make your own nails from your own iron ore? Even the most deeply committed do-it-yourselfers reach some accommodation with civilization.

In the second place, you simply don't have time to do it all. To raise and can all your own fruits and vegetables, for example, would take substantially more time per year than most people are prepared to give to it—especially if you are also personally constructing your own house, weaving your own material, making your own clothes, and walking everywhere.

In the third place, there *are* a lot of conveniences of urbanized life that are there anyway and that you might as well use. They can save you time you might rather spend in other more satisfying ways. There's no point in cooking in your fireplace every night—or on your corporate cookout charcoal grill—if you have a gas or electric range sitting in your kitchen.

So my conclusion is that you ought to try to do a *little bit* of all your life-support activities and a substantial amount of whichever one or two of them appeal to you and make the most practical sense for you. I have taken to tending a simple garden, preparing my own simple foods, doing some modest mending of clothes, and providing my own transportation by bicycle. Undoubtedly, other activities will fit better into your own life-pattern.

If you start looking around for simplification, for ways to make you less possession-bound and give you more chance to participate in your life, the opportunities are endless. Start by searching your house or apartment for things you can throw away. Ask yourself, "If I were living in the woods, would I spend a day going to town to buy this aerosol can?" Look for simple substitutes.

Take bicarbonate of soda, for example. You can substitute it for the following products: toothpaste, gargle and mouthwash, burn ointment, stomach settlers, room freshener, fire extinguisher, icebox cleaner, children's clay, baking powder, and so forth. And it costs only 12 cents a box! Get the idea?

Look for unnecessary appliances or other machinery. Bread can be toasted

in the broiler of the stove. Carving knives and toothbrushes really need not be electrically powered. Put fruit and vegetable waste in a compost heap instead of down an electric disposal. I took up shaving with a blade, brush, and shaving soap instead of with an electric razor. It's kind of bloody, but it's more fun.

You can easily ignore most of the products in your supermarket and do a little more food preparation from basic ingredients yourself. But I'm not into "hobbies." If you are, fine. But I'm not interested in giving cooking or any other of these activities a lot of time. I'll walk up to a mile in dense urban areas because I can move faster that way than in a car—as well as get exercise, not pollute, help fight the automotive life-style, save money, and do a "life thing" (transportation) myself naturally. But I'm not going to walk twenty miles into the suburbs—at least not often. I can make corn bread with baking soda in about the same time it takes to go to the store or to put supper on the table (twenty minutes). But I won't often take the time to make yeast bread, unless there's somebody there to visit with or something else to do at the same time. I make my own *muesli* (rolled oats, wheat germ, raisins, etc.) in less time than it takes to open a box of Captain Crunch. But I don't often take the time to crack and pick walnuts to add to it.

It is often possible to find activities that will provide you more than one element of life at a time. Bicycle riding is perhaps my best example.

As you may have observed, my own motives are almost hedonistic. I ride a bicycle because I enjoy it more than driving a car. It makes me *feel* better.

But look at the other benefits of bicycling. It is good exercise. It gets your lungs to breathing and your heart to pumping. Dr. Paul Dudley White and others have long recommended it as a means of warding off heart attacks. If you can use a bicycle to get to and from work, you can have the added satisfaction of knowing that you are providing a life-support activity for yourself: transportation. In my case, I bicycle through one of Washington's wilderness parks, so that it also provides my daily time in a natural setting with stream, trees, birds, changing seasons, and sky. I find this time especially good for doing some of my best thinking (something I found very difficult to do during an earlier phase when I was jogging). So it also serves as a time to compose little poems and songs, to think of ideas for statements and speeches, and to reflect upon matters philosophical.

On those occasions when I am not able to cycle through the park—because

it is covered with snow or muddy from rain or melting ice—bicycling enables me to keep closer to the street people: folks waiting for buses or to cross streets, street sweepers, policemen, school safety patrols, men unloading trucks, and so forth. Needless to say, you cannot claim any depth of understanding as a result of such momentary and chance encounters, but I do somehow have the sense—by the time I get to the office—that I have a much better feeling for the mood of the city that day than the public officials who have come to their offices in limousines or their own automobiles.

Bicycle riding also has a lot of peripheral benefits. It is cheap. You can buy an entire bicycle, brand-new, for the cost of operating an automobile for a couple of weeks. The costs of operation are negligible—perhaps a penny or two a day. It is a significantly faster means of transportation than automobiles or buses during rush hours, as "races" in numerous cities have demonstrated.

It happens that the bicycle has some significant social advantages over the automobile, too. Cars unnecessarily kill 60,000 people every year, permanently maim another 170,000, and injure three-and-a-half million more. The automobile accounts for at least 60 per cent by tonnage of the total air pollution in the United States—as high as 85 per cent in some urban areas—and 91 per cent of all carbon monoxide. It creates approximately 900 pounds of pollution for every person every year. One million acres of land is paved each year; there is now a mile of road for each square mile of land. The con-

crete used in our interstate highway system would build six sidewalks to the moon. Automobile transportation is the largest single consumer of the resources used in our nation's total annual output of energy. By comparison, the bicycle is a model citizen. It does not kill or maim; it does not pollute; it does not deplete natural resources; it makes no noise; and it takes up a great deal less space.

In short, it seems to *me* that bicycling is just one example of a more satisfying, responsible, fulfilling, and joyful way to live *in* the corporate state. I am sure that you can think of many more.

I find that all the elements of life I have described are served by writing in my journal. The journal should be bound. (I formerly jotted things on sheets of yellow pads.) And it's not a "diary." It's a sketchbook, a workbook for life. It's poems, recipes, love notes, furniture designs, speech drafts, silly thoughts, serious reflections, and drawings, all mixed together, as life is—or should be. It's a tangible record of the balance in your life. It makes you see better, take life with both more seriousness and more whimsy. I like it.

Whether the truths I am dealing with are biological or metaphysical, my own experience supports the lessons of the world's great teachers. If man is to develop the rich individuality and full potential of which he is capable, he needs more than the hollow values and products of materialistic consumerism. He needs not only productive "work" but also love, beauty, creativity, contemplation, contact

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with nature, and participation in the support of his own life. When people live their lives in ways that take them too far from these basic truths, they begin to show up in the rising statistics indicating social disintegration: crimes of violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicide, mental illness, and so forth. And the evidence seems to suggest that as we return to a richer and more natural life, our problems seem to subside. Whether or not that is enough for you, it is enough for me.

Central to all that I suggest is the necessity that you work it out for yourself. You need to discover who *you* are; what feels right and best for you. You not only need to walk to the sound of a different drummer, you need to be that different drummer. You need to write your own music. You need to look inside yourself and see what is there. I think some time in the woods is useful for this purpose. But camping may not make sense for you, for a variety of understandable reasons. That's fine. The purpose of self-discovery is not to stop copying Howard Johnson and to start copying Nick Johnson—or anybody else. The point is to find your own soul and kick it, poke it with a stick, see if it's still alive, and then watch which way it moves.

I think television could—and should—help us understand the alternatives to the conspicuous consumption, chemical, corporate life-style. Not because I'm "right," but because there *are* alternatives; people are entitled to know about them and experience them if they choose. Today's televised theology seems to be contributing very little to life, or liberty, or the pursuit of happiness—concepts Thomas Jefferson once thought *were* the business of government.