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Second Childhood in Brazil

—Karl M. Lorenz—

I have always been proud of the fact that I am an educated man. At each rung of the scholastic ladder, each degree was a prize to be coveted. Not only did the degrees offer prestige; they also, and more importantly, marked me as an individual who was making himself useful, who had something to say.

Unfortunately, this type of assurance doesn't carry into the real world. At least, that is what I found out. This awareness—which I liken to a second birth—began when I arrived in Brazil. I accepted a position as Visiting Professor of Science Education at the Federal University of Bahia in Salvador, Brazil. Leaving New York, touching down in Rio de Janeiro, and then later in Salvador, I believed that my professional training would help me contribute to Brazilian science education. I soon discovered, however, this was not going to happen until I passed through a second childhood.

I am not going senile in this second childhood. I am discovering that childhood never ends. Childhood is not so much a stage in one's chronological history as it is a condition of the mind that can be experienced at any point in our lives.

My second childhood happened when I found myself in a strange world of people and events I did not understand. When I arrived in Salvador my Portuguese was minimal. I spoke Spanish rather well and I naively assumed I would learn Portuguese quickly. The truth was that I understood Portuguese not at all. When I tried to speak, I could only muster a few halting words. I spent most of my conversations searching for words which might better express what I was thinking. I tried

vainly to match the images in my head to the words supposed to represent them.

More than once my language deficiency forced me into situations such as occurred recently. I visited a local restaurant and asked for a hard-boiled egg in my salad. But—how do you say hard-boiled? With an intuitive flash I asked the waiter to bring me a “strong egg.” The waiter was puzzled with my makeshift translation. With his patience and my continuing gestures showing an egg getting stronger, he soon smiled, nodded his head, and brought me coffee and a basket of bread! Another time, walking with a colleague along one of the beaches, I noticed how beautifully the sun sparkled on the surface of the water. I pointed this out to my friend and told him how magnificent the sea looked, that it looked like—how do you say—like the water was dancing. He fortunately caught my meaning. We walked on. I suddenly realized why children sometimes make creative observations.

My reinitiation into the world of childhood has left me nonplussed. It is easy for an adult to understand what other adults are talking about. The words they use are familiar. With a few shrewd observations, emotions they embody are transparent. Slowly one learns literal and tacit meanings of what others are saying. But in the world of childhood into which I have been thrust, these understandings do not exist. My inadequacies in Portuguese communication have left me ignorant of what is going on around me. I understand perhaps 25 percent of any given communication; about 75 percent of the time what I hear is gibberish. This experience might be likened to driving over a smooth road for a few minutes. Suddenly you hit a long stretch of corrugated pavement. Similarly, when I am speaking with people

I have moments of lucidity which are soon followed by longer moments of complete confusion. When I find I am missing too much of what is being said, I revert to a practice I found useful in grade school—I nod my head as though I understand everything. Out of courtesy I adopted this ruse so as not to make a pest of myself by asking others to rephrase what they said. (Incidentally, my six-year-old son uses this behavior when I ask him if he understands my explanations about natural phenomena. Can it be that he is humoring me?)

At a social gathering some of my colleagues asked me what I thought of Brazilians. I answered they appeared as “people in white,” without color or texture. When they spoke, when they laughed and raised and lowered their voices, when they smiled and frowned, I really wasn't sure why. Sometimes I thought I knew, but this feeling was always tempered by the agonizing realization that I really didn't know anything about them. Somehow I was again like a child, seeing everything for the first time, straining to understand, trying to make sense out of a world of grown-ups.

Yet I do have the advantage of being an adult. Recently I paused and reflected on the world of the child in the classroom. I am reading the laws the Brazilian Ministry of Education has passed about schooling at the primary level. I picked up a hefty compendium of these laws and began to read the Ministry's directives. I got bogged down. I found I hardly understood a thing I read. Then, with the book resting on my lap, I realized that part of growing up and being an adult is not getting bogged down. One can then read through books such as my hefty paperback and understand most of what is written. For me, “growing up” means that one slowly fills in the

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spaces of one's life with meaning, until people are colored and textured, until there are no more gaps in one's understanding of what is read. To be an adult is to know what others are talking about.

In the science classroom, growing into adulthood means you understand what others are saying when they speak science. It means that the child learns the language of science so he or she is able to communicate thoughts in this language. The child understands others when they communicate—about biology, chemistry, and physics. Gradually he or she becomes a biologist, a chemist, a physicist, not in the sense that the scientist's work is duplicated in the school laboratory. Rather, the child can talk intelligently about related science topics. It is filling in the white world of childhood with color, gradually entering the meaningful world of the adult scientist. Adulthood makes that 25 percent lucidity a 100 percent certainty.

During one of the many excruciating nights of self-inflicted homework I lamented that I did not have a teacher. Not a teacher who would answer my questions with ruthless dispatch, but a confidante who would sit patiently as I revealed my ignorance in waves. I needed direction and perspective. I needed someone who would help me fill in the gaps of understanding that my flagging energy and limited talent left. I needed someone who was kind and sympathetic—it is painful being ignorant. No one wants to be a bore and it is so easy to become one to a person who does not have the patience to listen and answer questions.

These last months in Brazil have left me more aware and exhilarated than I have been for a long time. They have left me more frustrated than I ever thought possible. Being a child and trying to grow up is not easy.

Filling in the white world of childhood with color.

