

Helen Perry: The Human Be-In (1970)

Helen Perry: *The Human Be-in*. New York: Basic Books, 1970.

Prologue

For almost a year, from October, 1966 until September, 1967, most of my waking hours were focused on the flower children in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco. Periodically I would tear myself away from this absorption and perform other tasks that were formally required of me. But the other tasks came to be only a backdrop for an ongoing sorting of my own values and of how they were changing under the influence of the flower children, or the “young seekers” as Allen Ginsberg has called them. In the end, I could only come to one conclusion: I, too, was a “hippie.” I did not like the word any more than many of the young people in the Haight-Ashbury; but when I was asked to stand up and be counted, then I had to say that I was a hippie and had always been one, although somewhere I had lost my way so that I wore the protective coloration of a middle-aged, respectable, middle-class American. In that eleven-month period, I had undergone a transformation that affected almost every area of my life, so that it was becoming more and more difficult for me to feel comfortable in the square world.

In September, 1967, I moved from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., and shortly afterwards I found out that the Haight-Ashbury thing was over, that there had been a funeral procession one day for the hippie in the Haight-Ashbury, that this had been followed by a day of mourning, and that on the third day there had been a resurrection; that the hippie would now be the “free man” and that he would spread out from the Haight-Ashbury to the rest of the city and the surrounding countryside. From what I had seen of Haight Street during the summer, this action seemed responsible and inevitable; but it did not lessen my sense of mourning. It was like knowing that a dear friend has cancer in a terminal stage; one knows that death is inevitable, but there

is no adequate preparation for the moment of its coming. I truly think that I was in a state of shocked depression for a short period of time; for I felt that I had witnessed the end of a noble experiment—an attempt at a new kind of Utopia. All of the negative components so that experiment had been emphasized in the press and on national television; but this negative focus could not forever do away with the nobility of the task that was undertaken.

In the nineteenth century there was a moment in time and space when our country had become a kind of Haight-Ashbury for at least the Western world, and that was when the Statue of Liberty was erected in New York Harbor and the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed upon it:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

Some time after that, the apple-sorting process started, and the nation began to use immigration quotas in order to satisfy its need for rejects, culls, in the drive for its self-esteem. From then on, that dream was over, until finally even such public-spirited institutions as hospitals and schools in the Republic had their own apple-sorting machines and their quotas. Some years ago now, I discovered that one of the homes for unwed mothers run by the Salvation Army had a policy of automatically rejecting young women who had already been rejected by the Florence Crittenton Home; otherwise, the social worker told me cheerily, our population would simply be composed of rejects from the Florence Crittenton.

But for one brief year, in the Haight-Ashbury, the upset young people from a nation, and indeed from overseas, were accepted; there were no rejects. Until finally the task became too great; only an enlightened city government in the spring of 1967 could have averted disaster, could have helped the valiant band of St. Francis in the Haight-Ashbury—who called themselves Diggers—plan for the Summer of Love. In that spring there were various informal emergency meetings

throughout the city of San Francisco, in an attempt to avert disaster and to plan for the influx of young people; but the city fathers took the attitude that the young people must be discouraged and that the best way of discouraging them was to make no provision at all, to let nature take its course. In their own cynical way, the city fathers planned well. Mark Twain once said that the coldest winter he ever spent was one summer in San Francisco; and many a young person who went to San Francisco with no visible means of support in the summer of 1967 will remember all his life the cold fog drifting up Haight Street and the smell of garbage and filth; he will remember, too, the despair and the loneliness of other young seekers like himself. But if he was one of the lucky ones, he will remember also the tenderness of strangers, the concern of the more established seekers in the area, the shared food and living quarters, the valiant attempt on the part of those who had been there longer to stop disaster from happening. And this remembered personal concern will be of an intensity that will be cherished for a lifetime; for it emerged from a simple rule of human conduct that had been forgotten in most of America by 1967, and it was not an idle slogan in the Haight-Ashbury: *Love thy neighbor*.

Since the Haight-Ashbury had no eligibility requirement—no barriers of age or color of skin, no written creed, no rigid rules for dress or language—it also had no rules for the degree of emotional stability. By the winter of 1966-1967, the Republic had reached a new peak in the proportion of young people, many of whom were in considerable distress; thousands of these young people in distress found their way to the Haight-Ashbury. No one was turned aside; and even the most disruptive were led gently toward the Utopian ideas of the flower children. There were of course many young people who had disastrous experiences there. In the beginning, I myself was consumed by the distress that I witnessed in the faces and the actions of many of them; but at the same time, I early glimpsed the hope and kindness that flourished there and never entirely disappeared.

Before and during the same general period, I had occasion to go on the back wards of one of the California state hospitals every six weeks. In this work I came to know something about the lives of forty-eight women who had come in to the mental hospital as young women and had been hospitalized, twenty, thirty, or, in one case, forty-five years. I

read the stories of these women in their case records, and I met and talked with them. Their stories were not significantly different from the stories of young people in the Haight-Ashbury. They, too, had been seekers when they were young, and they had faced some of the same youthful crises. I felt that a good many of them would have had different lives had there been a Haight-Ashbury for their crises in the California of their early years.

In American society, we seem to have a built-in crisis in the adolescent years for everyone; in an atomic age, this crisis has escalated, and the words “kill” and “overkill” threaten all of springtime. As John Lennon and Paul McCartney have said: “I read the news today oh boy ...” For a brief moment, the Haight-Ashbury offered some relief from doom; for many young people, I believe that it was an alternative to suicide, or being a patient in a mental hospital, or becoming a criminal; and these three alternatives threaten too many of our young people today as the only ways out in the present situation of world crisis and vast continuing injustice.

Some thirty years ago, the American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan suggested that preadolescence is the nearest that most people in America come to untroubled human life—“that from then on the stresses of life distort them to inferior caricatures of what they might have been.” Somehow the young seekers in the Haight-Ashbury changed this timetable. They extended the period of promise and hope beyond preadolescence into the adolescent world, in some cases into the world of the adult, so that there was a golden period. It was an awesome thing, the vision was frightening; and there had to be awesome risks. In a world dependent on chemicals for life and death, for hope and despair, the young seekers in the Haight-Ashbury felt that they, too, had to have their own chemicals. There were always wise heads among the seekers who saw the dangers of this need and tried to keep it within bounds, tried to define it as a *rite de passage* to the new Utopia, but only as an interim step. But the establishment and the mass media focused on the drugs and their dangers and in focusing saw nothing else, so that in the end this flaw, which might have been overcome by the young seekers in time, became the fatal flaw through which the cancer of the larger society could attack the new young society.

It would be a mistake to look upon the Haight-Ashbury community as another Bohemia, except insofar as any Bohemia has within it some of the seeds of Utopia; for the seekers in the Haight-Ashbury were not simply trying to escape from the sick values of the central society—they wanted to build a new world. In a very real sense, they belonged to the tradition of Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands, for like Alcott they venerated the innocence of children, they abhorred brute force, they withdrew from materialistic values, they wanted to do something about the lot of oppressed peoples, they wanted to change the education of the young, they wanted a leveling of society and an end to status, and above all they cherished Nature and the peaceful life. In most ways, Fruitlands was the direct forerunner of the Haight-Ashbury, as if Alcott's lost records of that Arcady had somehow found their way into the hands of the hippies. Fruitlands, too, lasted less than a year—from June 14, 1843 to January 14, 1844. In the beginning of that experiment, Emerson, Alcott's neighbor in Concord, had journeyed to Fruitlands, and Odell Shepard, Alcott's biographer, reports on this trip and on Emerson's reaction:

Emerson came early in July—Emerson, whom Alcott would rather have pleased than all the world beside.

"The sun and the evening sky do not look calmer," he wrote, "than Alcott and his family at Fruitlands. They seem to have arrived at the fact—to have got rid of the show, and to be serene. Their manners and behaviour in the house and the field were those of superior men—of men at rest. What had they to conceal? What had they to exhibit? And it seemed so high an attainment that I thought—as often before, so now more, because they had a fit home, or the picture was fitly framed—that these men ought to be maintained in their place by the country for its culture. Young men and young maidens, old men and women, should visit them and be inspired. I think there is as much merit in beautiful manners as in hard work."

So much he said by way of wholehearted approbation; but then came the cautious Yankee afterthought: "I will not prejudge them successful. They look well in July; we will see them in December."¹

It was a New England winter that finally ended Fruitlands just as it was a cold San Francisco summer that in part ended the Haight-Ashbury experiment. At the end of Fruitlands, Bronson Alcott wanted to die, and it was only his debts and his sense of obligation to his family that maintained life in him; he could not afford the luxury of dying. But Fruitlands had a resurrection, a continuity in the American scene. For one brief fall, winter, and spring, it clearly blossomed in San Francisco. It is in the hope of its blossoming again that I want to tell this story of my own encounter with this Utopia and of how it renewed my youth and my hopes. I began my sojourn with fears, and I witnessed many tragedies there. But the main outlines of this experiment were noble, and I mourn the golden moments and the tender hopes.

December, 1967

Washington, D.C.

¹ Odell Shepard, *Pedlar's Progress* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), p. 366.