

sons that so plagued his soul. It seems one dons the cloak of redemption only when he gets caught with his pants down.

Then, too, there is our own conscience to be dealt with. Since civilization yawned, retardation has been a condition we shook from our connubial sheets into some closet. After all it is a product of sex, and that is an activity in which we invest so much. Salvation has been sought more often between a pair of legs than between the pages of the Bible.

The proper tit was probably what Ponce de Leon was after all along, and nowadays we have Lewis and Clark expeditions padding their way through our organs to find where the river of the orgasm begins. There are those who say it isn't in the main stream at all, that the true course lies in tributaries, and oral sex sometimes seems to be described as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. We invest too much in a fickle bank.

Sex is where we are most vulnerable. Accuse an adult of mental shallowness or lack of social grace, and the odds are that the insult will be temporary, not permanent. But assaults on sexuality have cluttered more couches than an aunt with a throw pillow fetish. And, in the language of Houston Control, a retarded child is a "malfunction" of our ego—the child is a dark report card from God. This is no mean indictment to a society obsessed with perfection in which even our own body odors are considered offensive.

So we pretend the retarded children are not there, and we bill and coo over the "perfect" replicas we reproduce. After all retardation is not a chic cause. Who would want to throw a fundraising party on the blue lawns of Long Island or the Upper East

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THE BEGINNING

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Side for retarded kids? No revolutionary berets present, no kinky ethnic costumes, darling—nobody who is anybody would attend. Supposing someone brought some of the children? My God, one of them might stick his hand in the pate. So the "real" revolution goes on, while suffer the little children, for isn't there the Kingdom of Heaven? A tour of Willowbrook will tell you, like hell there is.

I was shaken out of my role as a sheltered parent when Malachy McCourt, who has a stepdaughter in the institution, asked me to tour Willowbrook with him. McCourt is one of the leaders of the parent group that stormed the doors at Willowbrook the week before. Needless to say, he is not a welcome sight on the grounds, so we arrived unannounced.

As we entered the first ward, our noses were greeted by the perfume of the consigned damned, piss and shit. The walls were cracked with age and plaster-scabbed, much like the faces of many of the patients. The room was about 70 yards long. On the cold marble floor lay the patients, some dressed, others nude, like some strange flora. The ward had about 70 patients and two attendants, contrary to the national guideline of one attendant for every four patients.

There wasn't one item of diversion (books, toys, etc.) in the room. Open pipes ran overhead,

marking a perimeter for the bare lightbulbs. The bathroom reeked of stale excretions, and many of the stalls were without toilet paper. This condition, according to Dr. Wilkins, results in a 100 percent rate of hepatitis among patients. The sole diversion in the ward was a tv set blaring "Everything's Better with Blue Bonnet on It."

By the time we reached the next ward the word was out that we were on the grounds, and, as we entered, attendants were hustling clothes and sneakers in to the patients. This is not meant as an indictment of the many dedicated attendants our group encountered at Willowbrook. The institution is so understaffed that the attendants in most wards have all they can do to keep the patients clothed and fed and to clean up the excretions.

A retarded child should require about 15 to 20 minutes to feed; but because of the understaffing, each child is fed in about four minutes. This forced, birdlike feeding (virtually shoveling food down the gullet) has resulted in deaths, because the foods goes into the lungs and causes chemical pneumonia.

As you look at these tragic victims, you have to fight back the impulse that death is not a blessing. I suppose another reason one doesn't like to look at retards is that it assaults one's faith. After a couple of hours at

Willowbrook, your curses are leveled at heaven as well as earth.

But man shaking his fist at God is an old and futile exercise. Things can be done for these children. They respond to attention and play like any other child, and there is no reason they shouldn't be granted the basic accoutrements of humanity in warm clothes and food. Also, we must find those who shouldn't be relegated to limbo. Many at Willowbrook have the potential to work outside the institution in structured situations. Five thousand dollars a year is spent on each patient, and the money shouldn't be used to maintain human beings in a zombie-like existence. Love has never been the exclusive province of the perfectly formed.

The sickest sight we encountered was in a ward with about 50 retards. We found two children of perfectly normal intelligence sentenced there, because both were paralyzed from the waist down. The nurse in attendance said they had been there for years and that both had parents of means. Michael, age nine, and John, age 11, talked to us, as they sat in wooden carriages that resembled Porgy's vehicle on Catfish Row. We talked about baseball, television, and other subjects, carefully avoiding any mention of their parents.