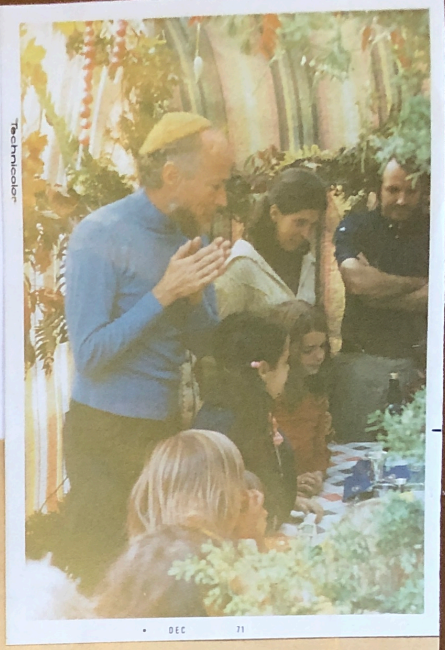
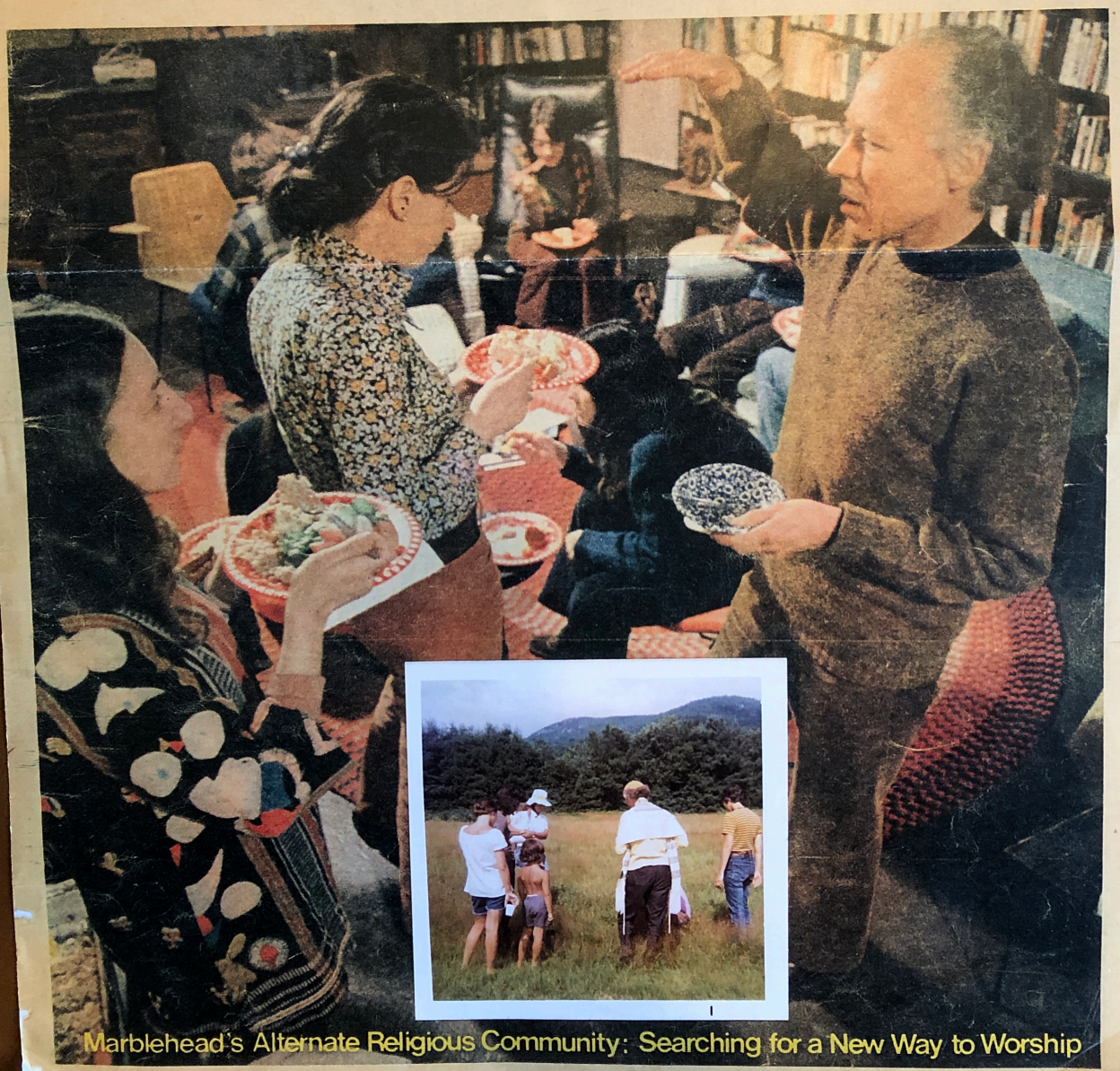


To Everett, with respect, admiration and love, for your vision, which led to many years of meaningful shared family experiences in ARC.
Joan and Ron



GLOBE
SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 1974, WITH TV WEEK



Marblehead's Alternate Religious Community: Searching for a New Way to Worship

An Alternate Religious Commuity: Searching for a New Way to Worship

Can a religious structure somewhere between formal and family worship change suburban lifestyles for the better? What can be found of value to the present in the religious insights of the past? A Marblehead group looks for some answers.

By LINDA WELTNER

Marblehead's Alternate Religious Community has no building, no address, no telephone number. Its members live in separate houses, lead most of their lives in nuclear families, dress no differently than their neighbors.

It took one year before they seriously considered giving themselves a name, and when they did, the memo read: "ARC- part of the circumference of a circle, a shape which hints of its own completion; like a rainbow, beautiful because it is non-material, a creation of the imagination. ARK- Will it keep us afloat?"

Who are the members of the Alternate Religious Community? What have they found of value to the present in the religious insights of the past? Can suburban lifestyles be altered by the transformation of inner space as well as by a more general transformation of society? On what trajectory has their ARC taken them?

This is but one answer of many.

□

Sixteen people sit around a darkened living room in Marblehead. They're full of chicken soup and turkey from the feasting of a Passover afternoon, but the symbolic celebration of the Jews flight from Egypt has given way to an urgent and disturbing discussion between people enmeshed in a lifestyle not wholly congenial to them.

The eight couples have spent two years building a religious structure that is a halfway point between temple and family worship, avoiding the rigidity of the one and the claustrophobia of the other. The holidays come and go, tensions within the group rise only to subside again.

"Why is this night different from all other nights?" the youngest child asks every year in the traditional Passover service.

The traditional answer will not suffice tonight. We all know that in the last 24 hours one of the couples has decided to separate. Although the reasons for that decision will be shared with us tonight, the decision itself is irrevocable. The group which calls itself the Alternate Religious Community is off balance, the familiar suburban territory, temporarily unmasked, has taken on the characteristics of a wilderness.

There are freedom songs playing unheeded in the background. There was a program planned, centering around freedom in America, other people's freedom. Civil rights, aiding lettuce pickers, ways of fighting the erosion of personal liberty — safe topics. On those, we all know where we stand.

But tonight, some of the women remember that the Israelites were reluctant to follow Moses, that bondage was more comfortable than the dangers of fleeing to an unknown, though Promised, land. Some of the men note thoughtfully that Moses never did arrive, but died in the desert, his dream unrealized, his people's belief that their children would succeed where they had failed reduced to a matter of faith.

History and the moment blend. The woman, who will soon no longer be part of a couple, reads some of her poetry. As we listen, the conflict between our need for security and our need for personal freedom makes invisible sparks in the air. We are torn one way and then the other.

One person speaks of responsibility, vows which bind, our children's needs, the old values. Another voices dissatisfaction, the importance of individual expression, the hatefulness of constant compromise. There are glimpses of the cracks in our personality which we usually gloss over for our public appearances.

There is nervousness and anger which flares for a brief moment. We are threatened and challenged. Each listens attentively to his mate. Who among us wishes to flee, we wonder. Who is held back from action by fear?

When the evening is over, each of us leaves for our own house with changed vision. Later we find that two couples have decided to withdraw from the group.

Is this a religious experience? For them the answer is no. But the twelve people who are left, including the two who will remain with us as in-

Copyright 1974 Linda Weltner. Ms. Weltner, a former writer for the Marblehead Messenger, is at work on a book titled Aboard the ARC: Story of an Alternate Religious Community.



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dividuals, man and woman though no longer husband and wife, feel we are just beginning our own journey together into an uncertain future.

We feel painfully the truth of Victor Frankel's terrifying words:

"During no moment of life does man escape the mandate to choose among possibilities. Yet he can pretend to act 'as if' he had no choice and no freedom of decision. This 'acting as if' constitutes a part of the human tragicomedy."

□

We were, in the beginning, as they say, seven couples. The men were lawyers, a psychiatrist, a teacher of history, a professor of economics, and bankers.

The women had rather satisfying jobs. Their part or fulltime occupations included a newspaper reporter, a psychiatric nurse, a librarian and an artist. One woman was home fulltime. Two were working in the field of community mental health.

All were in their mid-thirties. All had young children. We were acquainted with one another because of political activism. In the years before ARC was formed in 1971, individual members had helped found a community mental health center, fought for civil rights and civil liberties, worked for liberal political candidates and causes, demonstrated against the Vietnam War, and attempted to establish a local non-profit day-care center.

One woman had helped set up a residential center for juvenile offenders; several members took part in a move to take the liquor license away from a local yacht club on the grounds of racial and religious discrimination; one family had just made the decision to adopt an interracial child.

There was not one individual who had not, in one way or another, tried to go beyond his own daily concerns. Nor did the level of involvement diminish as the group became more significant in our lives.

We were, however, at a period in our lives of stock-taking. The most passionate moments in our lives had been led in opposition: in opposition to the government, to religious institutions, to commonly accepted ways of doing things.

We had, it seemed, been extraordinarily busy telling others fairer and more human ways to structure America, and yet what of the structure of our own lives? Had we created places in our own lives where we could be at harmony for once, and find renewal?

Socially conscious, achievement oriented, mostly affluent enough, we were busy and successful. (Just ask our mothers.) Ringing in our ears, however, was one question we could no longer avoid — so what?

Is this life really nurturing your soul?

It's terrifying facing up to the fact that there is something more that you want out of life than you have, especially when you have the things you've been taught to want. After that, it's relatively easy facing the fact that you may have to devise your own means for reaching it.

To be honest, when the group first explored the idea of a religious community of Jews, we were barely willing to commit ourselves to an evening a month, plus holidays.

We were tentative in our interest, out of sympathy with the rituals with which we were familiar, and not sure, even, how much we would like each other once we really knew each other.

If any one word could describe the shared quality of religious feeling, that word would have to be alienation. We had very little religious knowledge between us, which is not to say we had not attended Hebrew and Sunday schools, been confirmed or Bar Mitzvah.

Negative feelings about our own religious education, its superficiality, the element of coercion, its lack of relevance to present concerns — those feelings made it impossible for us to turn for guidance to our own past experiences. We were in touch only with vague longings and memories that gleamed momentarily from the closed compartments of our minds.

In those early months, the meetings centered around the need for something more personal than had been found in institutions, but what form does religious expression take when it grows out of personal needs and concerns? ►



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Jack Weltner, Joan and Ron Fox, Bob Freedman and Mary Gendler share a private moment.

How can parents, who are just beginning to raise questions, find ways to educate their children with them?

This we knew: We did not want to require of our children anything which we would not require of ourselves. We did not want them to take part in anything in which we ourselves were unwilling to participate.

We thought at the time we were there primarily for our children but we have come a long way since then. Time has taught us the truth of Bruno Bettleheim's reflection in Children of the Dream:

"The dreams parents dream for their children never come true, though neither are they wholly in vain. One cannot dream up a life for the other. One can only fashion a life of one's own."

□

Who can explain the fortuitous circumstance? While we were talking of community, Rabbi Everett Gendler, living at the ecumenical Packard Manse, was formulating a concept of alternate religious structures (to be published as "Yesh B'Rera?"/"Is There an Alternative?" in *Response* (fall 1971) very much in line with our thinking.

Meeting, it is love at first sight. Wisely Everett insists on membership for his family, not leadership. He recognizes that we are a headstrong and rebellious lot, skeptical of the authority of men or traditions. He is not above suggestion, however, and so our first article of consideration is the Sabbath.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. It is a commandment. A day of rest is a central article of faith for both Jews and Christians. But what is holy? And, we ask, remembering only nights of welcome sleep after Saturday chores or an afternoon spent dragging after indefatigable children at the Science Museum, what is rest?

We read and discuss Abraham Joshua Heschel's concept of stopping time as a way of making it holy. As mainstream Americans we know, too, that Carlos Castenada and an Indian witch doctor have succeeded in stopping time in a southwestern desert.

We have neither the wisdom of the scholar nor a handful of mescaline tabs. We are going to try to stop time together with 16 children under eight, for Everett has hesitantly invited us to the Manse to share with him how he and his family celebrate the Sabbath.

What can prayers over candles mean to people more comfortable with transcendental meditation than Shabbat? Lead us to water, Everett, we will have a sample tested by the Health Department before drinking.

At dusk, then, reeling from early departures from work in order to arrive before dark, we gather before a fieldstone fireplace. Everett pulls out honeycomb candlewax and demonstrates with his children how to roll candles. Before long, each of us has made one which crinkles under the pressure of warm fingers.

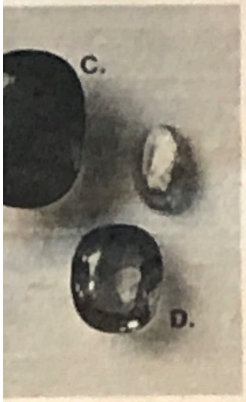
It is growing dark. We light the candles. Even the littlest holds a flame. Everett blesses the light. We taste the homemade challeh, tearing pieces off as we pass the loaf of bread around. Everett blesses it. It is good. We pass the wine. The children are curious and taste. Everett and his daughters sing. Are they songs or prayers? The children are transfixed into silence. The old house settles around us. We hear the quiet.

Dinner is subdued. The families have produced a feast from the pages of their Jewish cookbooks. Everyone helps with clean-up. When the children are finally tucked in bed, the group seems small and intimate. We share our thoughts. What are we doing here? (At Packard Manse? In the universe?) We sleep in the huge loft in double decker bunks, the families scattered through the room like clumps of stars.

The talk in the morning while the children play with a local babysitter is strangely unsatisfying. After lunch, we push the children on a suspension trapeze hung between the trees. The line never diminishes. The children could ride all day, shrieking with pleasure as they reach the highest point.

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Some parents push, others walk in the woods, time hangs heavy.

I join a group of children following Everett to his garden. Joyfully, we find the squash hidden in the grass, the cauliflower peeping out of its covering leaves, peas and beans dangling mysteriously from the vines.

Everett kneels so he can better explain to the children about the seeds which have sprouted in our laps: *"Man can plant them, but the life that is in them does not come from us."*

To my six-year-old the plum tomatoes are like Christmas ornaments seen for the first time. We are gathering flowering weeds for the dinner table. The children scoop up dandelions as if they'd never seen one in a lawn. They find a toad, and then a clump of wild blueberries. We point out poison ivy; then they're on their own.

The afternoon is never going to end. I give up fighting it. I settle under a pine tree to watch the needles fall. After a while I notice that the empty branches spiral round the trunk like the spokes of a broken umbrella. I am very pleased with my secret knowledge.

At dusk, before the fireplace, we light incense. Someone has made a Havdaleh candle to mark the Sabbath's end by braiding three of the rolled candles together. We sing "Shavuoh Tov," a good week, a week of peace, in a sing-song melody.

So this was rest.

Judaism's first gift.

The rituals were the symbols, we see, markers for the beginning and end of time, time that is different from other hours in the week. For many of us it was a turning point in our religious philosophy, the first realization that there was a wisdom in the tradition, if only we could find it. ►



Julia and Laura Weltner light candles of Chanukah menorah made from driftwood and mussel shells.



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Jack Weltner and young members of ARC pass the Havdelah candle.

Says Julia nuzzling tiredly against me in the car on the way home: "Can we celebrate Sabbath every year?"

□

Although many of us devised ways of celebrating the Sabbath somewhat intermittently within our families, it took us two years before we were ready to even consider sharing the Sabbath on a regular basis. We accept that, for it illustrates one aspect of community that is important to its understanding. That is, growth over time. Anything which is to survive must grow slowly and naturally out of people's wishes, if at all.

That first year we decided we would simply celebrate the Jewish holidays.

The first is Shavous, a harvest festival which coincides with the story of Moses' climb to the top of Mount Sinai. We gather the children and tell them that the rules people ought to live by have been revealed, and asked them what they think those rules might be.

We ought not to be surprised, since the oldest is only eight, when the first child pipes up, "Not to pick your toes." It is a revelation to us to listen to the rules for living as the children see them. They score 0 out of 10, and then work on a mural we still treasure showing, in one scene, God all smiles because he has company for the first time.

But holidays and people aren't static, and two years later the same celebration finds us setting up a mountain of lobster pots upon which Moses climbs until she (no explanation will suffice if you don't understand why we discount sex in assigning roles) discovers two cardboard tablets hung high on a fence. Each of the children carries a commandment to Moses and slips it into precut slots in the tablet.

Then the children of Israel are overjoyed to know such things as *Be true to those you love* (you know which one that is) and dance around waving sheaves of wheat from the Gendlers' garden. It is such superb theater, we do it twice.

About a month later, a little 4-year-old comes up to me and asks, "Do you remember which commandment I am?"

I kneel to face her.

"No, I don't. Do you know?"

She looks me square in the eyes. "Don't steal anything," she whispers solemnly before dashing away.

I wonder what she'll say years from now when her peers argue the merits of "ripping off" the Establishment because all values are relative.

It has taken three years, then, before the repetition of the ten commandments and a young child's words begin to raise troubling questions in my mind.

Thou shalt not kill. Even for a good cause — or a good meal? The Gendlers are vegetarians. They take the commandments seriously. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Even out of boredom, or love? Come on now, no one believes in those kinds of unqualified statements any more.

We are all good relativists. Truth, justice, right and wrong. Aren't they simply a matter of opinion within a given culture? We are teaching our children that there are absolute values, and they seem to believe us. But what do we truly believe?

Our evening meetings are beginning to take form in that a sharing period usually precedes whatever other business we have on the agenda. Music, poetry, passages from books, much of it secular rather than Jewish, affect us, making the meetings different from committee or social gatherings. We have used Pederson's book *Israel* to spark discussion of Biblical concepts, but except for gathering information about the holidays, none of us has raised the troublesome questions that threaten to divide and injure our newfound identity.

Do we believe in God? Do we identify with the tenets of the Jewish faith? Are those

articles of faith reflected in our lives? What, in God's name, are they?

I have begun to read and share Will Herberg's *Judaism and Modern Man*. Herberg calls the ethics of the ten commandments "inseparable from (Judaism) as one of its most essential manifestations." Man's moral nature, he believes, his capacity for judgment and decision, his responsibility in this world, are "a manifestation of the 'image of God' in which he is made."

Thou shalt not. Thou shalt not.

"Who sez," says the tough kid in me, jutting out her jaw.

"Why says?" I ask again, this time more gently.

Is it possible Herberg is right, that without a secure foundation in values that come from a realm beyond the limited human one, human life and all its enterprises lose sense and meaning?

This God is not simply a positive cosmic force in nature. Is it possible He speaks?

□

The Alternate Religious Community is searching to create rituals which will reflect its own inner visions.

Each of us is on our own search for an attitude which will give meaning to our lives, but to create experiences as a community, it is important that individuals be willing to move from their own comfortable frame of refcrence to join with the expressed will of the group. It is a difficult task, rarely achieved by all of us at any one time, requiring mutual trust, respect for another's experience, and the ability to share, not debate points of view.

Sometimes we have created rituals larger than ourselves, rich with years of tradition, no more our own achievement than that of the first builder.

For the first few years, we celebrate the harvest festival of Succoth by helping the Gendlers build the traditional outdoor hut, called a Sukah, on the land behind their new house in Andover. It is a beautiful setting, but Everett argues that the best temples are those built closest to home.

This fall, we spend two afternoons reclaiming what has been considered a vacant lot behind one family's house. We clear away the trash and abandoned rusty toys, and use fallen limbs to build the Sukah, upon which we hang autumn branches, fall flowers, garden herbs and cranberries.

At night, with the moon above, within the shelter of the trees, what we'd once considered an ugly field has become a sanctuary. We joke, as we make our way there with flashlights for the ceremony, that it reminds us of camp. Unspoken is the thought that it reminds us of forests and fragrant winds, and that we have made the transformation possible by believing it can be done.

Similarly, we search in nature for our Chanukah menorahs, or candelabras. Without fail, our individual winter searches for driftwood, shell or rock formations yield candelabras of incredible beauty.

Can the first step toward God be to notice that this world is filled with life and beauty if only we will approach it with reverence?

Step after step, only one at a time.

That first year we throw an outdoor birthday for the world on Rosh Hashonah, the new year. She attends, we know, because she blows out the candles on her cake. We have our own shofar, or ram's horn, and rejoice in our new ability to bring forth sounds. We make a circular calendar with the children and mark down the holidays and birthdays the new year will bring.

But the next year, a backyard celebration seems far too ordinary for such an extraordinary occasion. So we hike into Marble-



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head's conservation land, listen to one of our members talk about the geological origins of the earth, learn about the primitive people who have walked the land before the white man, sing songs, and hear the sounds of the ram's horn mingle with the rustling of tall grass.

Still not special enough! How can we adequately express our growing feelings of wonder about the earth's continuity and rebirth?

This fall we pitch into the rhythm of creation with such success we surprise ourselves. We decide to have a sunrise celebration on that sandy length of land facing the Atlantic called Plum Island.

We rise around 4:30, piling the sleepy children into cars. Even the familiar drive up through black night is transformed into a frightening rite of passage. My children are wide-eyed at the power of the enormous trucks bearing down on us with lights ablaze, shaking our station wagon with the force of their passing.

Gathering on the beach, we settle into a depression blown by the wind at the base of a large piece of driftwood. At daybreak, we watch the black clouds streak across a violent blue sky.

We huddle in warm parkas as the sky lightens, watching carefully for the first time how and when the sun rises, the speed with which it rolls into fullness, the change in feeling and mood, shared not only by us,but by the gulls who seem to gain new life with the light.

I've seen the sun rise before, on the morning of my senior prom and once making a connection in Switzerland for an early morning flight to another country. Its appearance caused a momentary interruption of activity. It was a pretty, but unwelcome reminder that my body wished itself in bed at what I thought a "godforsaken" hour.

But now we blow the shofar until the gulls scream, recite in solemn unity the Kingship prayers, sing along with some tape recorded folk music honoring the sun, and dip apples in honey, the traditional symbol of a sweet year to come. The taste lingers on our lips.

There is hot coffee, and rolls and cheese. Soon, about a half mile down the beach, striped bass fishermen make their appearance, worshipping in their own way, it seems,since they are totally unconcerned that they get no bites in the four hours we linger.

Later, remembering the experience, I feel again the temptation to succumb to the purely sensual, that immediate response to the power and beauty of nature. I repeat the words to the Kingship prayers, recited unthinkingly that morning as Everett read them aloud from his prayerbook.

"The Lord is King, the Lord was King, the Lord forever shall be King." The words compel attention to what lies beyond what we apprehend with our senses. Repeated over and over again, they are an antidote to the paganism that threatens to overwhelm us.

Reading what would have once been mere abstract philosophy, I come across G. F. Moore's words: "The maintenance of the world is a kind of continuous creation; God in His goodness makes new every day continually the work of creation."

There is a collage in my head. Kierkegaard adds, speaking of attempts to "prove" the existence of God: "How could it occur to anybody to prove that he exists unless one had permitted oneself to ignore him and now makes it all the worse by proving his existence before his very nose?... One proves God's existence by worship."

Three years. Are the new ideas beginning to gleam through the suburban masks we wear? I have read somewhere that modern man lives in a hypnotic trance modeled on the working of machines.

A friend tells me that Buddha answered his disciples, when they pressed him to describe his state of being, "I am not a God. I am not an angel. I am not a supernatural being. I am awake."

Tonight we gaze at a candle in the dark. We see the blue-black flame that cradles the yellow flame, the halo like a soap bubble shimmering in the air, the rays of light like spikey fingers that turn, when we squint, and reach toward us.

We see, truly see, a candle for the first time. The candle has always been visible but we are changing. Have we begun to break through the mists of sleep that blind and weary us? ■

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