

Free!

Volume 1
Number 1 *Free!*

Article 24

2-1973

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Recommended Citation

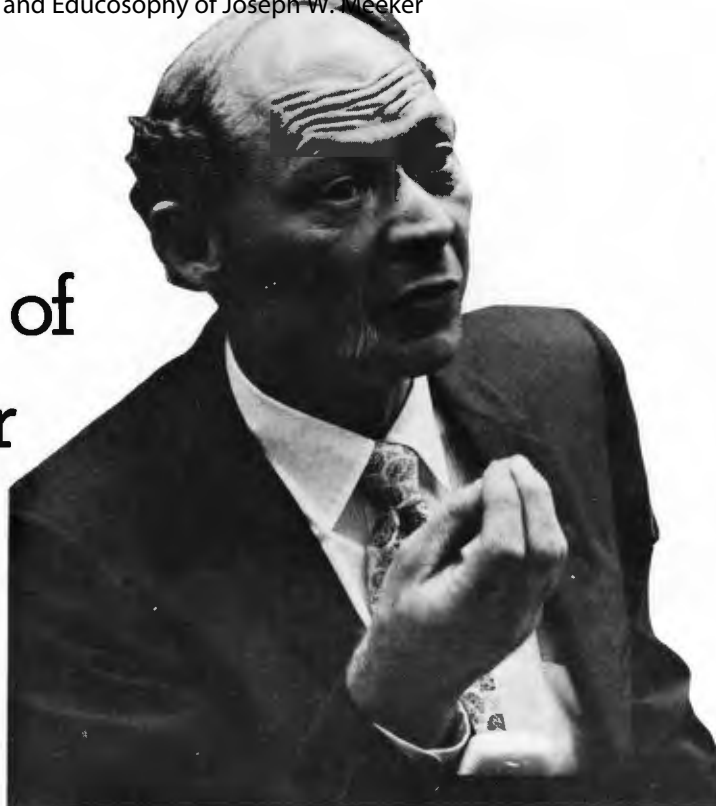
Schlesinger, Robert Nathan (1973) "The Ecosophy and Educosophy of Joseph W. Meeker," *Free!*: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 24.

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The Ecosophy and Educosophy of Joseph W. Meeker



by Robert Nathan Schlesinger

On October 23rd and 24th, Dr. Joseph W. Meeker, a Fellow in comparative literature and lecturer in environmental studies at Kresge College, University of California, at Santa Cruz, visited the UNI campus to deliver a formal speech and a number of informal discussions.

Dr. Meeker's formal speech, entitled "Academic Fields and Other Polluted Environments," began with a number of analogies between academic fields and agrarian fields. Both professors and farmers have "fields" which are their own "private piece of reality," which they must till as a means of support. Also, professors and farmers have similar methods for managing their fields, both with unfortunate results.

Dr. Meeker then went on to use the 1970 Corn Leaf Blight as an example to illustrate this point. Corn leaf blight occurred because almost every corn farmer in the United States used one special type of corn as the breeding stock for his crop. Therefore, this specialized corn crop was very vulnerable in that if a disease got started, it could wipe out the entire crop because their genetic makeup and thus, their resistance, was essentially the same. Well, before long, a fungus mutated which attacked only this special type of corn. And so, corn leaf blight began.

Dr. Meeker stated that "universities have been suffering from a corn blight for years." Most academic fields can be described as fragments of information maintained at a "monoculture stage." These academic fields are quite similar to the farmer's fields which are botanical systems deliberately kept at a monobotanical stage. Dr. Meeker went on stating how "monodisciplinary scholarship and highly specialized education are as risky to our intellectual well-being

as genetic over-simplification has been to our agricultural well-being" and that it is urgent that this condition be recognized and that some action be taken promptly to rectify it. It was then noted, however, that the scientists that seem to have recognized the serious problem of genetic uniformity have devoted most of their efforts toward developing new and more specialized varieties of corn. These scientists seem to be attacking the problem of uniformity by developing a more specialized uniformity. In academia, it also seems to be the trend to solve problems of specialization by creating a new and more specialized group of "super-experts." "We seem to be acting like other doomed species, who have clung tenaciously to their specializations long, long after environmental changes have rendered those specializations inappropriate" states Dr. Meeker.

Professors teach their students how to protect their fields and "their little flowering truths" from all those invaders that continuously tend to creep in from neighboring fields ("the department down the hall"). In our society, we regard an expert as a person with highly cultivated knowledge; we should, however, remember that this expert has achieved this highly cultivated knowledge by cultivating his ignorance as well. "Philosophy is a weed in the field of chemistry."

Dr. Meeker then went on to state that throughout history, wisemen characteristically ask interesting questions, as Socrates had a habit of doing. Experts, however, are "usually unwise enough to answer questions." Problems cannot be solved by asking questions, but asking questions often does lead to thinking. People that want to cause a change in something

quickly and find mere questioning to be too passive, might be wise to remember that Socrates might have had more to do with changing the world than all of his contemporaries who devoted their efforts to solving community problems.

Another important point that Dr. Meeker made during his speech was to point out the importance of the humanities and literature in seeking solutions to today's environmental problems. Solving environmental problems requires an interdisciplinary approach. The humanities and literature may have much to offer in showing a record of how man sees himself in relation to his environment and in showing how literature has influenced man's attitudes and actions towards his environment.

Dante's (Divine) *Comedy* is a good example of how man sees the environment as an intricate factor influencing his well-being. Dante's Hell is a place characterized by denuded forests, filthy and polluted water, and noxious gases. The inhabitants of Hell have brought on their own misery by exaggerating their own selfish rights at incredible costs to others and to the environment.

Dante's Purgatory is a place of experiencing and learning, where the inhabitants discover the world around them as well as the relationship between themselves and the rest of the world.

Dante's Paradise is a place characterized by extreme complexity and beauty. The inhabitants of Paradise realize the part they play in the complex physical, social, and spiritual life of the world. Paradise is a place where people strive to become more and more aware of the complexity of the world, rather than striving to reduce the complexity into simple models.

Following the speech, Dr. Meeker was asked a number of questions, mainly concerning the education system and the Vietnam War.

On education, Dr. Meeker commented that within a few years, grades will probably be a rarity in the university education system. He went on to state that he hasn't given a grade in the past three years and that he doesn't know very many teachers that have. Also, he commented that departments have been successfully abolished at the university where he is currently teaching. Students have a major role in decision making and it is most difficult for a faculty member to get tenure without the overwhelming support of the students.

Another interesting development is the analysis of each course by the students. At the end of each term, the students in each course get together and write up a one page analysis of the course. Then, when that course is offered again, a representative of that class attends the first day of the class for the new term, reads the one page analysis to the incoming class (and to the teacher) and makes a recommendation (sometimes, for the students to drop the course). This often leads to the teacher having to defend his methods and/or changing the structure of the course.

On the role of our military experts in the Vietnam War, Dr. Meeker commented that "those little people on bicycles are just beating our B-52's all to

pieces. They're doing better with their bicycles than we're doing with our B-52's and our computers. It's perhaps because they're in a situation where they see the context of things whereas all we have are 97,000 people looking at individual aspects of it and we're unable to integrate that knowledge. It's a pretty good example, I think, of one of the problems of highly specialized expertise."

Dr. Meeker responded to another question about the Vietnam War by stating that "the Vietnam War has had an interesting ecological effect on one species. I understand the tiger population has quadrupled and now, when the bombing is heard, tigers run toward the sounds of the explosion, because they are confident that there will be an excellent supply of fresh meat waiting. Tigers are multiplying very rapidly in South Vietnam at the moment; about the only place in the world where large predators are on the increase."

The following day, Dr. Meeker lectured in an Animal Behavior class and an English class. He also participated in a number of informal discussions. The topic of discussion at these informal meetings was mainly education.

Besides discussion about the many, many advantages in abolishing grades and departmental barriers, there was discussion about the advantages of abolishing irrelevant courses, thus freeing faculty members to offer new and more relevant courses or perhaps, an interdisciplinary curriculum. Freshman English was mentioned as a course that has been shown to be of little value and therefore should be replaced. Dr. Meeker followed that comment up by stating that "it's been a matter of fairly common knowledge for at least two decades now that a freshman English course does not, in fact, make a significant difference in the propensity of students to write by the time they become seniors. It is a drag for the people who have to take it and for the people who have to teach it." Other participants in the discussion commented that a number of other "frustrating and unproductive courses" should probably be weeded out of the system. Dr. Meeker agreed, commenting that weeding out should be done periodically rather than "putting tail-fins on an old course."

Dr. Meeker's visit was a rewarding experience for those who had the opportunity to hear him lecture and to talk with him. Hopefully, UNI will consider many of his comments on education and begin implementing many of them, for these changes seem to be happening at a great many other universities throughout the country. Also, it is hoped that his interdisciplinary approach to environmental problems will be thought over carefully.

Mankind typically cannot resist the flattering, but naive, thought that the world must have been created just to be used by himself. Today, mankind seems to be in the uncomfortable position of realizing that this is not only untrue, but before long, the world may be getting along without mankind. Certainly, all thinking people, regardless of their professional affiliations, must now take quite seriously the environmental problems of today.