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## *In My Opinion*

### THE NEOLITHIC CONSERVATIVE

The voice of Paul Goodman has been stilled by death, and I have lost something I needed to hear. Again and again I have been lured by the siren songs of the educational reformers; and, each time, I have been distracted by the sour notes of this soloist who would not, could not, carry a "pop" tune. Just when I was convinced that a particular National Science Foundation or Office of Education program would solve a serious shortcoming in our schools and colleges, Paul Goodman would step forward to present a thoughtful defense of the right of the individual not to participate in this utopian scheme.

Over a decade ago Goodman taught me to question the loose abstraction we call "society." I know the term means a great deal to social scientists and anthropologists, but I have trouble coping with it. Life is a series of face-to-face interactions with other living things. Just as studying plants has caused me to appreciate variation and to seek out the plant that is different, so seeing variation in students has caused me to appreciate the ends of the normal distribution curve. Each person has the right to be heard, and "society" often overlooks this in favor of order and administrative convenience.

Youth has lost a friend. For Paul Goodman the aim of education was to liberate—or, as he put it in a discussion with students on the Colorado College campus several years ago, "The role of education is to teach people to let their minds roll on." He encouraged teachers to permit their students to gaze out the window. And when questioned as to the educational value of this policy he flatly stated that everyone has a right to his thoughts and that it is none of the teacher's business where the student's mind is at any particular time. Goodman argued that reliving the walk to school or summer vacation, or rethinking last night's spanking or why he has to eat his spinach, is more important to the student than anything the teacher could possibly be doing in class.

Those who know me well would never consider me to be a conservative or an anarchist (who, oddly, have much in common); yet I like the "neolithic conservatism" and the "community anarchism" that Paul Goodman described in his writings. His search for autonomy, for the right to make mistakes, for the right to refuse to take superficial orders, and for the right to complete a task in one's own way represented a refreshing alternative to our highly structured society.

Paul Goodman would argue that the most important contribution educational institutions can make to the individual is to keep the school environment tolerable, so that students can go about the business of living their own lives.

Through his writings Paul Goodman will live forever. May his ghost always be riding on my shoulder as I go to meet my classes.

*The Editor*