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THIRSTY BOOTS #16 is published by John D. Berry, 525 19th Avenue East, Seattle, Washington 98112, USA, for the entertainment of the members of ANZAPA, and for a few others who are allowed access only after a terribly difficult test. This issue is being published on November 28, 1983.

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I've been wearing my thirsty boots again lately, as the weather's been just what the rest of the country thinks our weather is like: solid, constant rain. The boots are heavy lace-up work boots, with thick Vibram soles notched all over to give good traction; I don't need that kind of traction on the city streets, but it's good for walking in the rain forest or hiking up a mountain. (The soles are hell to clean, though, when you step in a pile of city dogshit.) I suppose the boots could hardly be said to be "thirsty" in this weather and this climate -- in fact I have to waterproof them again every once in a while -- but they've served me for tramping through the dust in the summer at the Oregon Country Fair as well as splashing about in February in the bottom of a rubber raft on the Skagit River. As a matter of fact, the boots stink, rendering any socks I wear in them instantly stinkful as well, so I have to be careful about where I take them off. Whatever the scent is that got into them soon after I bought them -- and which didn't get into their predecessors -- it's resistant to any cleaning I can do, so I just put up with it. The boots' weight gives me a long stride and a heavy-footed walk in the wintertime, quite different from the quick, soft gait I have when wearing sneakers in the fall, or the easy shuffle of summer sandals.

I'll just take off these boots and get comfortable, but I'll put them out there by the door.

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I keep having terribly serious, not to say portentous, thoughts about the state of the world, the nature of civilization, and the moral responsibility of an individual for just about everything in sight. Don't worry; I'm not about to inflict them on you. Not most of them, anyway. (If I did, I'd never be able to look this fanzine in the face again.) But I'd like to touch on some of their peripheries, since they are, after all, what's been on my mind.

A lot of it comes down to the question of how to live well. That's one that I've wrestled with (quite pleasurably) since I was an adolescent and first started thinking about such things. My question was never, of course, how to "live well" in the sense of living high on the hog; I was well acquainted from my upbringing with what's called in this country "affluence" -- meaning low-level wealth -- and that familiarity kept my eyes wide open to the disparity between having a lot of money or goods and knowing what to do with them. For several years I worked assiduously to free myself from all the soft cushions that affluence put under me, but this wasn't so much a matter of feeling that it would be better to be poor as it was a desire to get free of parental and societal obligations so I could take up my own responsibilities, voluntarily. I managed to satisfy my emotional need with-

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out actually driving myself into penury, but I've so far managed to ensure that I would not be an affluent adult.

Wrapped up in this emotional process was that question about living well. What did it mean to live well? Clearly people around me, a lot of them anyway, didn't live well; they didn't live artfully, gracefully, or with real joy. Was it necessary to be poor in order to live well? I spent a lot of time, and a certain amount of money, trying to figure that one out. I can't say that I've ever come to a definite conclusion, though I'd be inclined to say no. Certainly there's a lot of difference between making oneself voluntarily poor and being brought up in poverty, and there've been plenty of would-be purists who have done very silly things as a result of their illusions about poverty. (Certainly, too, there's poverty and there's poverty. Having little money isn't necessarily grinding, but it isn't necessarily ennobling either.) It seems to me that living well has more to do with having enough and being satisfied than with having a lot. Or a little.

Just recently I ran across the phrase "living well" again for the first time in years, though the question in other forms had been in my mind constantly. I found it in Aubrey de Selincourt's The Age of Herodotus, a fascinating-looking book that I saw in North Point Press's catalog and (rather than buy it) took out of the library. (Later I bought their edition, knowing that I'd want it around to peruse and reread.) I don't think I'd really given much thought to classical Greece since I got out of school, though I'd sort of brushed by it several times on my mental way to somewhere else. I tended to think of Periclean Athens as the source of all the overly-rationalistic tendencies that mar our present civilization. I also thought of it as fairly decadent, and not a very good model of conduct, since it was this very Athens that in launching itself on the course of empire threw itself and the rest of Greece headlong into the disastrous Peloponnesian War.

De Selincourt seemed to agree with my latter belief, though not with my former. Though he wrote about the Athens of Pericles, he wrote more about the rest of the Greek world, and it was his point that the real heart of Greek civilization, the time when the Greeks knew best how to live and did it consummately, was in the centuries before the predominance of Athens, and was possibly not in that city at all but in others, especially in Ionia and on the islands of the Aegean, during the great age of lyric poetry. And his contention was that what they were doing was applying their whole lives to the very same question that I'd been pondering: how to live well.

His portrait of the Greeks sounds a little like a Northern European's perspective on any Mediterranean people: lively, mercurial, intense, passionate, treacherous, impulsive, and above all living in the present moment. (His emphasis on the treachery so common to Greek political life is a good antidote to our modern focus on the Greeks' ideals. "The Greeks were fond of saying 'Nothing too Much' only because they were naturally given to excess.") On top of this cultural difference from the world I know, the people of classical Greece lived in a much smaller, more intimate world than any that either I or a modern Mediterranean is likely to know: all this makes for insuperable differences between us. Naturally I find the cultural discrepancies fascinating in themselves, as I always do when I see one way of life reflected in another; but whatever might be applicable out of all this is those aspects of "living well" that might be transferrable from one time and

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place to another. But, whether it's just my bias or not, I seem able to find those aspects more easily in the study of how people lived than in what they later wrote trying to explain it.

How to "live well" was a familiar inquiry amongst the later Greek philosophers, but we in our more burdened and disillusioned age cannot but feel that the men of those old civilizations needed no philosopher to tell them the answers. They instinctively knew it, I fancy, for the simple reason that their vitality was unimpaired. They did not know that emptiness of spirit which hopes that tomorrow may bring some gift to fill it. "Happiness" is amongst the most slippery of words, but these peoples assuredly knew a kind of happiness which is lost to us today, and was beginning to darken even when Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War. It was beginning to darken with the first coming of doubt in the validity of present experience; and the glad confident morning was never to return.

The old Greeks had their dark superstitions, their hauntings and terrors; but these made the sunlight only the more desirable. Plato with his doctrine of the reality of the unseen belongs to the decadence of the pagan world, which in its vigour loved things passionately for what they were -- or as passionately hated them. For the earlier ages there was no division between what is and what seems, no suspicion that mortal life might, after all, be a sham. When Pindar called it the dream of a shadow, he used his beautiful metaphor only to point its brevity, the transitoriness of this gift of God, and not at all to call in question its worth.

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A short interlude, a digression on "living well." On my way home from the bank downtown, I stopped to sit a little while and eat a bockwurst with sauerkraut on a good roll, something I hadn't had in a year or two. Then, after a short ride on the electric trolley bus (because the weather's so cold; otherwise I would have walked up the hill), I got off in my neighborhood and bought fresh bagels and sliced ham and pastrami at the bagel shop and a roll of heavy twine at the hardware store. And walked home. The air was fresh, the sky lowering, the wind cold. I have to light my desk lamp to see well, even though it's only two in the afternoon. The small things, the details: living well. Living.

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I read a lot of essays, a lot of poetry, a lot of fiction. Very little science fiction, even less fantasy. I read for pleasur, and I read for wisdom, and they are by no means always found in separate places. Recently I read a 200-page poem by Kenneth Rexroth, The Dragon and the Unicorn, which is a fascinating travel tale, told in limpid vernacular poetry, infuriating occasionally for the poet's prejudices but engaging for his philosophy and the way it grows out of his experience (in the poem, and apparently in life), not the other way around. It was written between 1944 and 1950.

Now I've just begun reading his four philosophical verse plays, known collectively as Beyond the Mountains, which were published around the same time.

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Rexroth is an intriguing character, probably an admirable one, cantankerousness and all. He's been dead a couple of years now, and he was born in 1905; he's not well known, but the many varied pebbles he dropped into the common pool -- translations, poems, many essays, interpretations, encouragements and denigrations -- will ripple for a very long time. After I get through with this fanzine, I'll take up again the Elegy for Rexroth that Sam Hamill wrote (and published in an edition beautiful to hold and to read) and see if I can penetrate a little farther into Sam's knotty verse, so different from Rexroth's (and so different from Sam's own style when he's writing shorter poems). It was Sam Hamill who nudged me into reading more than Rexroth's translations, partly by talking about him and partly by writing in one of Sam's essays about meeting Rexroth when Sam was just a callow kid who'd fled Utah for the streets of San Francisco. This is how the threads of knowledge and discovery run: from one point, almost any point, the point closest to you, out in every direction to other nodes, other people, other ideas.

In the "postlude" to An Autobiographical Novel, Rexroth wrote:

Up until well after the first World War, no one, and I mean nobody; not the Pope, not J.P. Morgan, not Calvin Coolidge, had any belief that the capitalist system would outlast the century, or even that it would last another generation. Beginning about 1912 with the mounting of the counter-revolution that came in 1914 to be called the First World War, the ruling classes, the state and the economic system felt continuously threatened and endangered. On the other side the intellectuals, workers, artists, writers, all sorts of people, were confident that things were going to change completely. Everything was going to change, dress, the game of chess, the relations between the sexes, race relations, everything would change completely and the world would be different by the middle of the Twentieth Century. It didn't happen."

Not quite the history you learn in school, is it?

Trying to understand how the world really works, and how much of what other people tell you about how it works is untrue, is an integral part of living well -- but you can't ever come to definite conclusions. That is, of course you can, but if you stop learning once you've decided something, then you die. Living well doesn't mean finding the right answer; it means learning how to question, and how to live in its pursuit. That's why I like looking at how other people live well, whether Kenneth Rexroth in early twentieth-century America or the citizens of a Greek polis in the seventh century B.C.; and why I listen politely, receptively, but not overly passionately to their explanations of why they live the way they do, or of how they think they ought to be living. Details, it's all in the details.

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"The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object. Suddenly -- miraculously -- it will look like something we have never seen before." (Cesare Pavese)

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If I have a penchant for solemnity (as you can tell, without any evidence beyond these pages, that I do), it's indulged most thoroughly when I read Wendell Berry. Berry isn't usually solemn, but he's less gleeful than some of my other favorite writers. He spends a lot of time talking about how to live well, often propounding conclusions of his own more than questions. His voice is calm and careful, and he preaches a long, slow, loving involvement with place, and the time-honored (but unfashionable) virtues of honesty, and constancy, and responsibility. He's also a good stylist in prose and poetry; like Ursula Le Guin, he's fine to read and his concerns are basic, serious, moral.

"Unconsciously perhaps from the beginning, and more and more consciously during the last sixteen or seventeen years, my work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place. As I have come to understand it, this is a long term desire, proposing the work not of a lifetime but of generations." This is from the foreword to a retrospective collection of Berry's essays. His essays have focused more and more in recent years on agriculture: working backward from the mess that's been made of American farming by "agribusiness," and outward from his own experience farming a worked-out hillside in the part of Kentucky where he grew up, doing it with horses, not with tractors. All of his writing and thinking zeroes in on what you can't get away with, what the consequences of your acts are: that they always have consequences, and that you are always responsible for them, even if you don't know what they are. Again, since you can't know the limits of the influence of what you do, and yet you have to live with your responsibility anyway, it comes down to living well. Even if you don't choose to stay rooted to one place for life, the questions are much the same -- including the one about the consequences of your refusing to be rooted.

I spent an awful lot of time when I was younger yearning to be utterly free. I knew that I wanted to take up the responsibilities of being free, but it was the freedom itself that called to me like a siren. After exploring what freedom meant for quite a while, living a life where essentially I did what I wanted and only had trouble when I couldn't figure out what I did want, I found that the next part of my exploration had to be exploring responsibility, without which freedom doesn't exist. That exploration is one that's never stopped.

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The one conclusion I've clearly come to myself, out of my own experience rather than from anything I've read (though I don't doubt that I have read versions of it), is that what matter's isn't what you've got, but what you do with it. Of course what you start out with -- whether your arms and legs all work, for instance, whether your parents could afford to feed you well while you were growing, or whether you're intelligent or stupid -- makes a lot of difference in practical terms, but in moral terms, and in terms of excellence and worth, it's where you go from where you started that counts. This could easily be a recipe for aggressive go-getterism, but I don't measure "what you do with it" on a scale of goals or achievements. I'm not sure how, or if, to measure such success, but I am sure that it's what's important, that it's the way people's actions ought to be judged.

I've got a fairly placid personality by nature, so I don't feel I can

take much credit for keeping my temper when a touchier person might lose it. (This doesn't prevent my feeling smug about it, but I hardly count that as a virtue.) I can't congratulate myself too much for having a love of words, either, but what I've done with that, how I've taught myself to use words and plumb their meanings, is something I don't feel embarrassed to pride myself on. And where I've failed to discipline my talent and allowed my habit of procrastination more than its due range is where I unhesitatingly fault myself, even though everyone else does it too.

Living well may require using your time well, but it doesn't mean regulating it always with goals in mind; it can mean just thoroughly enjoying the time you do nothing but fuck off (what we used to call when I was a kid "hacking around"). It has a lot to do with enjoying where you are, with not ignoring what's around you in order to yearn for something else; it doesn't, however, mean not struggling, never striving for change, just sitting back and saying everything is wonderful. (That's one of the reasons I like Rexroth so much: he shows me one way of being committed politically and philosophically while not only avoiding but actively cartigating the kind of political life that puts causes before people and "the people" before you and me.) Living well may include taking the time to write serious, constructive fanzine essays like this one; it also includes smiling at myself while doing it.

Details: the sound of the mimeo kathunking around as I run this off; the smell of the ink; the chill of the basement air. The colors of black ink on yellow paper. The feel of the stapler under the heel of my hand. The texture of the jiffy bag I use to mail the copies. Tomorrow, again, the sound of rain.

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I've been playing with my books again, poking through boxes stacked in the basement (amazing how many useless volumes are in among the gems!) and trying to rearrange the books on my shelves to make room for all the ones I've bought recently (all gems, of course), pausing every so often to gaze helplessly at the stacks of books and despair of any solution. One thing I've noticed is that the shelfful of books that I once kept close to hand and regarded as indispensable, including a lot of Zen stuff and spiritual/philosophical works from ten yeass ago or so, now rests sleepily on a shelf in the basement, gathering cobwebs, rarely disturbed. Perhaps I should put most of them into boxes and put some of the books I haven't seen in a while on that shelf. I do find old gems in the boxes, and on the less accessible shelves, and pull them up into the light again to read: things like Jack Hodgins's stories, or Arthur Waley's 170 Chinese Poems. Much of what I read and reread now, whether newly bought or off my own shelves, is classics -- a good antidote to too much sf, or even to too much contemporary literature of any stripe. Thanks to North Point Press, I've been reading new or recent translations of Horace and Ovid and Goethe and Petrarch. (The Horace has got me thinking about digging out my Latin books, finding a copy of Horace in the original, and relearning the language.) I've also made a point of reading the work of people who've won the Nobel Prize for literature, after it finally sank in to me that it really wasn't the kind of popularity contest the Hugo awards are (or if it is, it's on a vastly higher plane). Sometimes I get lost, just looking at one book after another and not being able to settle down to any one. Then I leave books behind and go wash the dishes, or go for a walk. I'll get up and move around, and let the words just dissolve. 'Til later.