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NUCLEAR FEAR

Growing Up Scared... of Not Growing Up

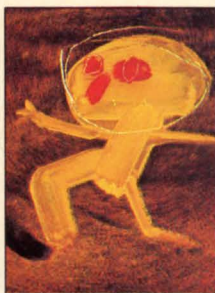


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When Kids Think the Unthinkable

*CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS 5 YEARS OLD
WORRY ABOUT NUCLEAR WAR.*

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO GROW UP THINKING THAT YOU WON'T?

BY MARCIA YUDKIN

I am constantly aware that at any second the world might blow up in my face."

"I have now accepted the fact that there quite possibly will be an 'end of time.'"

High-school students made these comments in response to the question, "Have thermonuclear advances affected your way of thinking?" Behavioral scientists are disturbed, but no longer surprised, that children, even as young as 5 or 6, as well as teenagers fear that a nuclear war is likely.

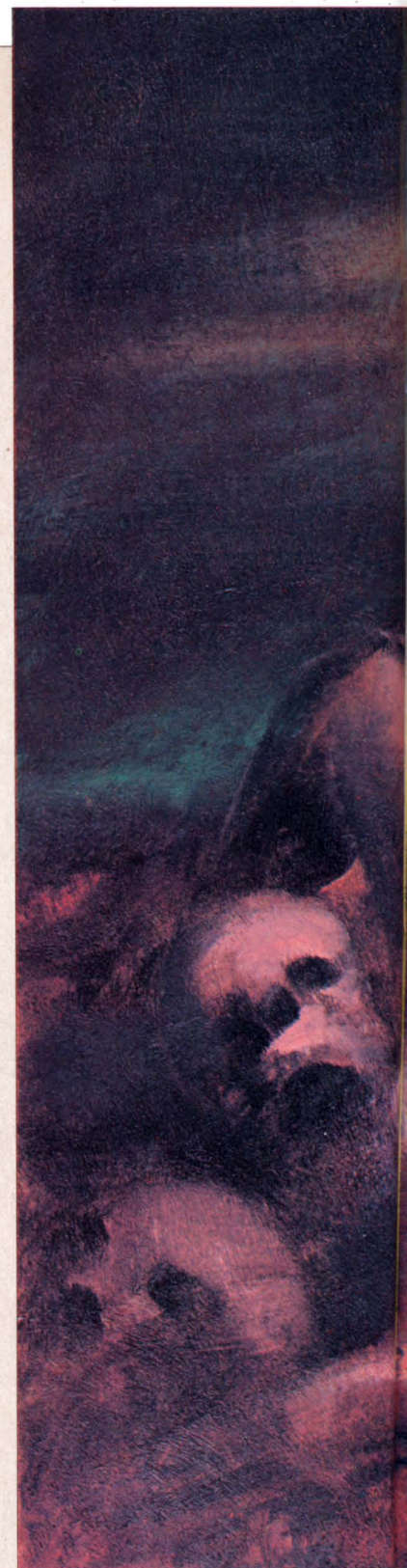
When, in 1978, child psychiatrists John Mack and William Beardslee of Harvard University began to study the effects of nuclear developments on children and adolescents, they doubted that young people knew much about nuclear developments or deeply feared nuclear disaster. With the exception of a few studies done in the mid-'60s, there was very little evidence to show that children feared or even thought about nuclear war. Mack and Beardslee were startled, therefore, by the intensity of the fears revealed in the answers, such as the two mentioned above, that 75 Boston-area

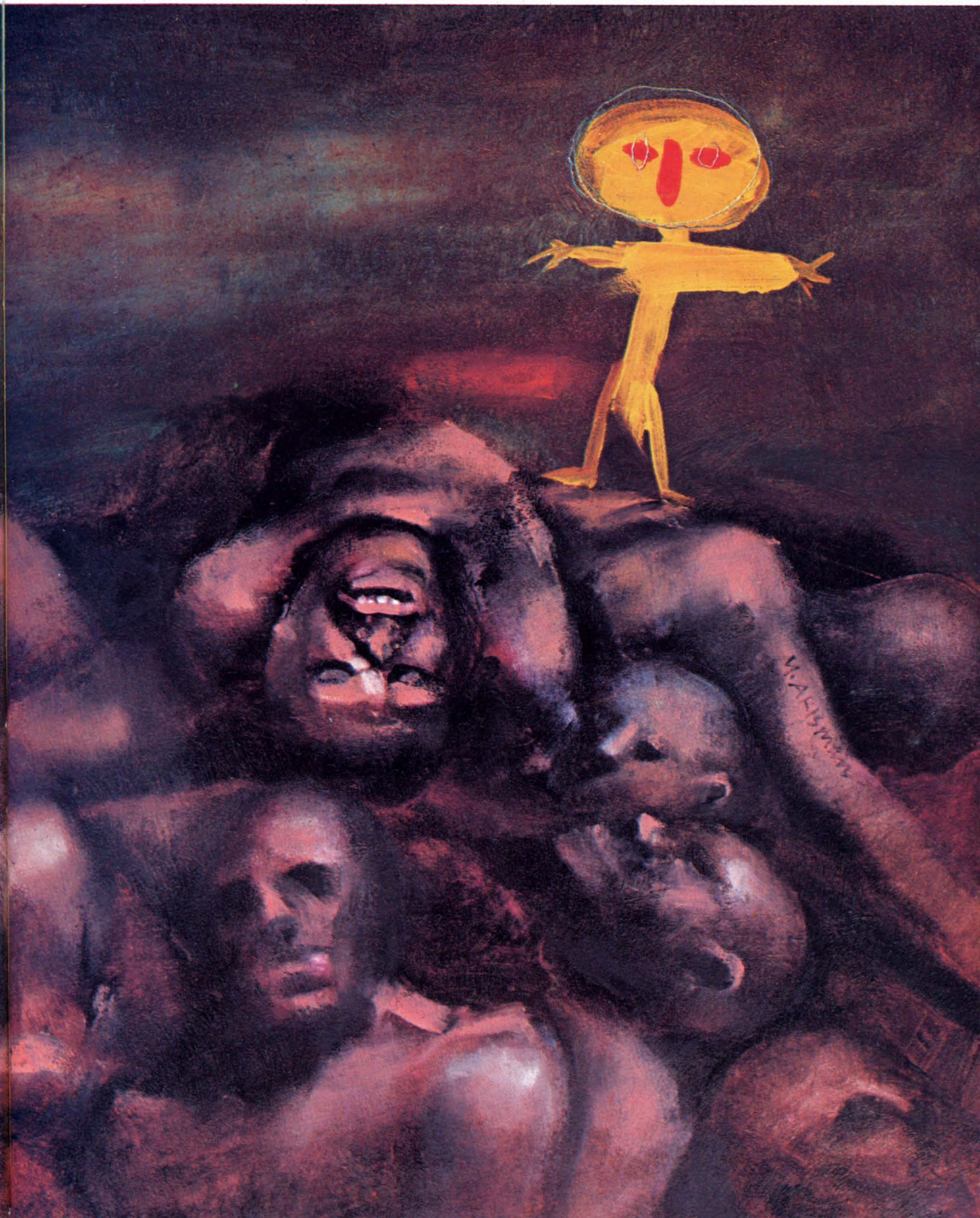
high-school students gave to the questionnaire used in their study.

The first question, "What does the word 'nuclear' bring to mind?" elicited this response from one teenager: "Big gray clouds, red warning lights, dead wildlife and humans, unnecessary deaths and bodies." Another student's chain of associations included, "Danger, death, sadness, corruption, explosion, cancer, children, waste, bombs, pollution, terrible, terrible devaluing of human life."

By the end of 1980, Mack and Beardslee had collected responses to the questionnaire from 1,151 students in grades 5 through 12 at schools in urban and suburban areas of Los Angeles, Boston and Baltimore. They found that the students were generally uneasy about their future, and that most were at least concerned about, and many quite afraid of, the nuclear threat. About 40 percent of the respondents said that they were aware of the nuclear threat by age 12.

To see if the largely middle-class respondents from East and West Coast metropolitan areas were better-informed and more prone to nuclear anxieties than the typical American





SEVERAL FIFTH-GRADERS SAID THAT THEY HAD NIGHTMARES ABOUT EVERYONE EXCEPT THEM BEING BLOWN UP BY BOMBS, LEAVING THEM ALONE AND HELPLESS.

teenager, Richard Stafford, a psychologist at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, decided to question students in his small town. The high-school and college students from this working-class, conservative town also revealed substantial concern about the threat of nuclear annihilation. The majority of Stafford's sample reported that they thought about nuclear war at least sometimes, with nearly a third checking "often" or "all the time." Most rated the chance of a nuclear

war as 50-50 or greater, and almost two-thirds believed that their chances for surviving a nuclear war were poor or nonexistent.

Young people's fears seem to be growing, according to an ongoing study of American adolescents conducted by Jerald Bachman, a social psychologist at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Every spring since 1975, Bachman has asked graduating seniors at some 130 high schools across

the nation to fill out questionnaires designed to elicit their attitudes on a broad range of social issues. Embedded in a series of questions about inflation, energy and other problems facing the nation is the item, "How often do you worry about the chance of a nuclear war?"

Bachman says, "Concern with the nuclear issue has been substantial, with the most consistent and steadiest increase in concern of any problem that we asked about."

The percentage of males who said that they often worried about nuclear war rose from 7.2 percent in 1975 to 31.2 percent in 1982. And in 1982, more than a third of all the high-school seniors agreed with the statement: "Nuclear or biological annihilation will probably be the fate of all mankind within my lifetime."

Last year, Scott Haas, a Cambridge psychologist, asked 60 high-school juniors in western Connecticut and Massachusetts questions about the future. Although more than half of the questions were open-ended and did not refer to nuclear war, 80 percent of the students wrote about nuclear war on at least one question.

In response to a question asking what the world would be like in five years, one student replied, "How are we supposed to know? There could be a war tomorrow and blow us all off the face of the Earth." Another said, "The world in the future will probably be a chemical and nuclear wasteland. . . . Culture will go back to the primitive age when you steal or kill just to stay alive."

Haas noticed a class bias in students' feelings about how serious an issue nuclear war is. While students from upper- and middle-class families ranked nuclear conflict as their most important concern, students from working-class backgrounds rated the economy and unemployment as more serious than the threat of nuclear war.

Haas went back and questioned some of the students after the film *The Day After* was shown on television in November to see if it changed any of their attitudes. He found that the film just seemed to add to the youths' feelings of helplessness. Thirty-six of the 45 students questioned said that they did not want to survive a nuclear war, and 28 thought that nuclear war was inevitable.

Researchers have speculated that

EAST MEETS WEST

How do Soviet children feel about the threat of nuclear war? Last August, psychiatrists Eric Chivian of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, John Mack of Harvard University and Jeremy Waletzky of George Washington University went to the Soviet Union to find out.

They gave a questionnaire to 300 youths between the ages of 10 and 15 at two Pioneer camps. (Pioneers are similar to American Scouts.) The three researchers wanted to find out how much Soviet children knew about nuclear war and whether they thought nuclear war was likely or survivable. The questions asked were similar to those used in a study of more than 900 California students.

Chivian, Mack and Waletzky had been warned before they went that Soviet youths would not know anything about nuclear war. But they found the opposite to be true. Soviet children were very aware of what the consequences of a nuclear war would be. "The entire Earth will become a wasteland. All buildings will be destroyed. . . . All living things will perish—no grass, no trees, no greenery," said a 13-year-old.

According to Mack, most Americans believe that the Soviet Union is preparing its population for civil defense. But, he says, "The Soviet children didn't believe in civil defense. The whole notion that the Soviet Union is telling people that nuclear war is survivable is wrong."

Said one boy, "You couldn't survive a nuclear strike. The nuclear

radioactivity remains for a very long time. Even if a person goes underground, no matter how much he wants to live, he wouldn't."

The Soviet youths were pessimistic about the chances of surviving a nuclear war: Only 3 percent thought that they and their families would survive one, compared to 16 percent of the American students. But Soviet children were more optimistic than Americans about avoiding a nuclear war.

Only 12 percent of the Soviet children thought that nuclear war would occur in their lifetimes, as compared to 38 percent of the American youths polled. And an overwhelming 93 percent of the Soviet youths thought that a nuclear war was avoidable; only 65 percent of the American students thought so.

Chivian explains that Soviet children are "very active in trying to prevent nuclear war. They sign petitions to send to NATO, they belong to International Friendship Clubs. The message they get is that their activities are helpful, and this gives them a sense of hope. American kids aren't as involved, and there is more despair."

At the end of the interview, the researchers asked the Soviet youths if they had any messages for American children. One said, "I'd like to wish that they'd struggle and fight against nuclear war." Another added, "We are the same type of people as they. We also want peace."

—Elizabeth Stark



WE HEARD A 6-YEAR-OLD BOY SAY HE WONDERS EVERY TIME HE HEARS A PLANE OVERHEAD WHETHER THAT'S 'THE WAR PLANE.'

the nuclear threat may be saddling developing egos with despair, producing a sense of powerlessness, cynical resignation, impulsive behavior and anger at the adult generation.

"We don't know a great deal about the effects of nuclear anxieties on children's growth and development," says Eric Chivian, a psychiatrist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and cofounder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. "What is it like to grow up without believing that you will? It's hard to expect kids who feel that way to work hard in school, develop deep relationships or do anything that has a future element."

Chivian and Roberta Snow, a founder and president of Educators for Social Responsibility, concluded

from a recent study that adults are unaware of the depth of children's concern about nuclear war. From January 1982 to March 1983, they interviewed five classrooms of public-school students in the Boston area, grades one, three, five, seven and nine. They chose classes that had not discussed nuclear weapons. Three of the five teachers warned the investigators that their students knew nothing about nuclear weapons, did not think about the threat of nuclear war and would have nothing to say about it. They were wrong.

"We heard a 6-year-old boy say he wonders every time he hears a plane overhead whether that's 'the war plane,'" Chivian says.

Most of the older children that they questioned revealed an awareness of

the world-destroying potential of nuclear weapons, while the younger ones associated nuclear bombs with vivid, personal imagery of death.

A fifth-grader describing what he felt when he learned that nuclear bombs could blow up the world said, "It made me feel weird, scared at night. I was scared almost half the week because I thought a nuclear bomb was going to blow me up." Several fifth-graders said that they had nightmares about everyone except them being blown up by bombs, leaving them alone and helpless. "I think I'd rather be dead," one girl added. Many expressed fears that they wouldn't grow up. One boy said, "I always keep thinking I'm going to grow up to be an astronaut, but I think I'm never going to be one."

YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Mr. Reagan:

When you were shot, it was a national catastrophe. Who will cry for me when I am dead, from your pro-war actions?
Literally Yours,

I am 10 years old. I think nuclear war is bad because many innocent people will die. The world could even be destroyed. I don't want to die. I don't want my family to die. I want to live and grow up. Please stop nuclear bombs. Please work to bring

President Reagan,

How can you say you're for peace when most of our economy is going towards the military?

The citizens of this country would appreciate the U.S. if they all respect their trust as if they could trust a person. You can't hold your hands in for the wash for the million satisfaction of power.

It's funny + president know

Please nuclear I want don't What's the And long to

Three years ago Hannah Rabin, then 15, her younger sister, Nessa, and four friends formed The Children's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CCND) "to give kids hope by giving them a way to express their feelings and do something." Mobilized by a lecture by physician-activist Helen Caldicott, they decided to organize a letter-writing campaign.

On October 17, 1981, CCND members read nearly 3,000 letters from children to President Reagan in front of the White House. They were

turned away when they tried to deliver the letters to him in person. In June of the next year, they read a second batch, of more than 5,000 letters, in front of the White House. This time they succeeded in meeting with the President's liaison for youth, Thelma Diggin, and tried to impress on her that the nuclear issue was the most important concern of youth in the United States and all over the world.

Most of the letters were from 10- to 18-year-olds, although some were from children as young as 6. "Kids

express their fear very simply and very strongly," says Susie Dennison, one of the CCND's founders. "The letters from young kids are very shocking. They're so young and already they have this fear."

In addition to initiating the letter-writing campaign, the group produced a neatly handwritten booklet, *The Nuclear Threat—What Kids Can Do*. It included a section on how the six teenagers founded the organization so that others wouldn't think that they needed to be "superkids" to form their own group.

According to Snow, young people's fears are compounded by the fact that adults don't mention or discuss nuclear war with them. Most of the children she and Chivian interviewed, as well as most of those surveyed by Mack and Beardslee, learned about the nuclear threat through the media, particularly television, not from friends, teachers or parents. "Kids hear the media talking about impending doom.

They know or sense that there's some real immediate danger that the adults around them aren't talking to them about," Snow says.

Benina Berger-Gould, a clinical social worker in Berkeley, California, agrees. "During the year that I've been giving workshops for families on coping with the nuclear threat, I haven't seen one parent who knows how to intervene when they hear a

child express the fear of nuclear war."

"Even the most well-motivated and socially conscious parents are paralyzed on this issue," adds Donna DeMuth, a family therapist in Maine, who with Berger-Gould chairs a special study group of the American Family Therapy Association on children and the nuclear threat. "Parents tend to respond with denial or lecturing. The normal, caring, affective respons-

Dear President Reage
Will you please stop making
Nuclear bombs? Thank you

stop making
bombs.
I want to live! I
don't want a war, anyway.
Why use for a war?
It always takes a
long time to rebuild

In the fall of 1982, the central committee disbanded in favor of a growing network of local CCND groups, coordinated through an office at 14 Everit St., New Haven, Connecticut 06511. As of the beginning of 1984, there were more than 80 chapters worldwide.

Some adults are surprised that teenagers can carry out political actions on their own, others think that they are naive or idealistic. Rabin bristles at that: "What does that mean? That you're being idealistic if you just want to grow up?" —M.Y.

es parents give when a kid has a scraped knee seem to be absent when parents are confronted with the nuclear war issue."

According to Steven Zeitlin, a Newton, Massachusetts, psychologist, parents and children are mutually protecting each other. "When kids feel that their parents can't handle something, they back away. In turn, parents avoid the subject in order to protect their

kids from the pain of facing a tough issue," he says. The parents' pain may have a lot to do with the responsibility they feel to see their children safely into adulthood. The possibility of nuclear holocaust, in other words, implies that they have failed at this task.

Silence about the issue of nuclear war not only intensifies children's despair and negativity, Zeitlin explains, but also leads them to be suspicious of adults, who have not been able to adequately protect them.

Studies have shown that children and adults deal with the nuclear issue in different ways. According to Yale University psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who studied Hiroshima survivors in the 1960s, adults cope by blocking out knowledge of the nuclear threat, a process he calls "psychic numbing." Children, however, learn to develop this defense against their fears only gradually.

"By seventh or eighth grade, kids are starting the denial process," Snow says. "They say, 'I try not to think about it,' or, 'I wish I didn't have to think about it.' Younger children just think about it."

Children of 4 to 6 years of age can be very frightened about what they hear on the news, while not really comprehending it, explains Milton Schwebel, a Rutgers University psychologist. At 10 or 11 years old, children begin to have the capacity to understand the danger as well as the fact that people are doing something about it. In between, however, he says, is "a difficult stage when kids are aware of something that can kill them or separate them from their families. They hear that people can do something about it, but they can't connect those two things."

Very young children, Schwebel counsels, should be reassured and told not to worry, because that's all that they can deal with. But from mid-elementary school on, it's important not to misinform them. Adolescents find the most reassurance in being told that parents also feel afraid, although not helpless.

Those who have studied children's nuclear fears agree that when young people learn that adults, particularly their parents, do care and are working to prevent nuclear destruction, they are tremendously reassured. Several antinuclear speakers are fond of the story about a teacher who asked her

students if they believed that there would be a nuclear war in their lifetimes. Everyone except for one boy raised his hand. When asked why he didn't think there would be a nuclear war, the boy replied, "Because my daddy is out every night trying to prevent it."

Educators, psychologists and psychiatrists stress that it is important to find out what children already know about nuclear war and to make sure that the information they have is correct. Chivian and Snow found that many of the younger children that they interviewed thought that every war was a nuclear war, and that their neighbors had access to the button. In California, for example, one mother who explained her antinuclear activities to her 4-year-old later discovered

KIDS KNOW THAT THERE'S SOME DANGER THAT ADULTS AREN'T TALKING TO THEM ABOUT.

that the child thought she was in a bomb-making group.

Behavioral scientists also say that it is important for parents to share their own fears with teenagers. According to Berger-Gould, "Kids think, 'If you don't feel afraid, you can't understand how I feel.'"

Another approach is to encourage children to get involved in projects such as writing to world leaders, corresponding with pen pals in the Soviet Union or joining a children's action group such as the Children's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. (See "Young Activists" box.)

Finally, Lifton counsels, parents should expose their children to a rich and full life. "Give your children hope," he says. "Hope is crucial." ■

Marcia Yudkin is a freelance writer from Northampton, Massachusetts, currently living in the People's Republic of China.