

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Among the many advantages enjoyed by people living under democratic governments is the right to complain. In this country it's a right we exercise to the fullest, day in and day out, most of our lives.

As babies we start, as do infants the world around, yelling for food, comfort, cuddling, warmth, love and a change. As infants, we yell for a change of pants, and as we grow older and learn some controls, we yell for other changes.

Other than that small difference, our yells don't much differ from the time we come into the world until our hollerings are finally stilled.

Unlike many millions of people of other nations, we can complain all we want, about anything and everything, and be reasonably certain that, by and large, we'll be ignored by authority.

That doesn't sound like a blessing, perhaps; but it is.

If our complaints are loud and frequent enough and if enough of us yell in unison, they won't go entirely unheeded, but they are generally ignored by authority since, in this country, complaining isn't viewed as a threat. Nor, in most cases, are complaints voiced as threats.

On the contrary, complaining serves as a healthy outlet for frustrations we are all experiencing from the moment of birth the end of our days.

Babies cry, no doubt, because being born isn't particularly pleasant. Every sensation the newborn has is less comfortable than what he's been accustomed to feel, and since all are foreign to its experience, each is a shock and a fright.

In addition, each day brings demands on the new person to assume responsibilities for himself, and learn controls. Every child learns more during the first few years of his life than he does in any other period; he must learn, to survive.

Older children cry whenever things don't suit them exactly. In time they learn to adjust to or manipulate their immediate surroundings to partially fulfill their needs and achieve certain degrees of satisfaction. They don't cry so often, but they still complain.

Along the way, youngsters learn to accept a reasonable amount of frustration, to adjust some of their expectations to reality. This process is socialization; along with it come many ideals and illusions about what life is all about and what it will bring.

By the time a human reaches biological maturity, he still finds plenty to complain about. Nothing, after all, is perfect; not even youth, good health, opportunity, and freedom to choose.

Our freedoms are spread over a broad spectrum of life. Freedom of choice in education, career, mate, religion, location, associates, friends, and life style; all these are personal decisions most of us make freely.

And still we complain. We complain because nothing is precisely as we'd like it to be.

How fortunate we are that we may complain and be ignored!

How little we know of the burden millions must carry in silence. Those people face the same frustrations in their imperfect world that we do; but they may not complain.

For them, to complain is to jeopardize personal safety and the small liberties they do have — to choose what they shall eat, wear, watch on TV, read, hear on the radio, or who their friends are.

It's inconceivable to us that it could ever be dangerous to disparage our local, state, or federal leaders, or to criticize the system.

Yet we close our eyes to reality when we assume our complaints are a privilege we are, somehow, more entitled to have than those who are without it. Only through accident of time and place do we find ourselves this free. More people on

earth are denied the luxury than enjoy it.

People, everywhere, accept the infant's wail of dismay at finding the moment of birth less than a happy experience. But from babyhood onward, in most countries, complaining is frowned upon.

The child must be taught to accept without complaint or question; not to do so endangers not only him, but the entire family. Children learn to smile at and acquiesce in whatever frustrations and disillusionments they meet face-to-face.

In this country, as we leave youth behind and disillusionments inevitably come, we yell. We struggle to alter the system to satisfy ourselves.

Our counterparts in the unfree world learned from babyhood to accept non-fulfillment, to handle frustration in silence, to smile at disappointment.

For them, the alternative is far worse. For them, the best course is conformity. This accounts for smiles of people living and working in countries where we know the people aren't, for one moment in their lives free to speak up when they don't like something.

How can they do it? Early training assures it. Just as we accept physical limitations of gravity, weather, the courses of the tides, they accept these and other restrictions as well.

We might prefer, for instance, that laws of gravity could be temporarily suspended, that we might fall from a height and not be hurt. Early in life we find it's impossible. Complaining changes nothing and ignoring the force of gravity may be dangerous — even fatal.

That early training differentiates the Western Worlder from people of totalitarian regimes.

We yell all our lives; we fight the system; we battle to change it to suit ourselves as individuals. Sometimes it changes, gradually and in small ways, to meet our demands; sometimes not.

In other countries, the only voices raised in opposition are of those strong enough to escape or those brave enough to risk it.

Our right to yell and criticize and complain, and to be ignored when we do so, is precious. It strengthens us and stretches our horizons. It's our most valuable treasure for therein lie the seeds of creativity — tomorrow's solutions to today's problems.

While our counterparts in other countries may appear happier than we — and often they do look as though they were — it's important to our understanding of them and of ourselves, to remember that we have the privilege of displaying our feelings. They do not.

Think about that.