

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Dictionaries are fascinating books. We use them so little, and they contain such a wealth of information, it disturbs me to think of all the knowledge available within the covers of a single book — one found in most homes and all libraries — and used so seldom.

Most of us turn the pages of a dictionary to find the correct spelling of a particular word. Sometimes the dictionary is consulted for a word's precise meaning, although not many people are as fussy about using proper words to impart exact meanings as they once were. Most seem satisfied if the person they speak with understands the general gist of an idea.

Again and again we hear "you know" rather than the words to describe the idea. "You know" substitutes for precision and for a vocabulary sufficient to communicate thoughts.

Often, we don't "know". The speaker hasn't words to tell us what's going on in his head. He falls back upon "You know", and goes on, leaving us ignorant of the principles upon which his discussion is based. Small wonder there's a communication gap.

During a recent perusal of my dictionary I encountered the word "meliorism". The definition: "The belief that society has an innate tendency toward improvement and that this tendency may be furthered through conscious human effort."

The belief? You mean to tell me it's not a conviction?

Is it possible we've deluded ourselves, all these years? Is another of our illusions about to be shattered?

No sooner do I perceive the meaning of meliorism than I realize that if it describes a belief, there must be those who believe the opposite. It's not possible for a word to describe one belief without there being another word to describe the antithesis of that belief.

Where there are optimists, for example, there are pessimists. Where there are meliorists, there must be those who believe society does not possess any innate tendency to improve itself, nor that any conscious effort on the part of humanity can improve society.

This negative view I find unacceptable in spite of all evidence to support it. It's a belief I couldn't accept unless I were prepared to sever all connection with society.

There is, of course, evidence to support this negative

position. On the other hand, I believe there is also evidence to support the meliorist.

While the world's societies are far from perfect, improvements can be seen if we take a long-enough view. More people live at higher standards today than ever before in history; at least in the history of the world we know much about.

It's possible, of course, that prior to those civilizations we believe to have been the earliest because that's as far back as our meagre knowledge goes, there were even earlier ones.

It's possible, too, that these earlier ones may have reached heights more magnificent than anything we have yet achieved. Some cataclysmic event may have destroyed them, leaving only tiny enclaves of humanity to survive, procreate, and begin the cycle of reforming civilization, once again.

It is even probable that this occurred. Archaeologists repeatedly discover evidences of pre-historic civilizations; we can find out little about them though we may learn some things from artifacts as they are carefully uncovered.

What became of the Etruscans? When did their civilization flourish and why did it pass away? If we could fit together all the pieces of the Etrurian puzzle, we might have answers to support or refute meliorists.

In his fascinating book, "The Source", James Michener introduces his reader to a beginning knowledge of early Middle Eastern civilizations that flourished before written history.

As we look into what may have come before, we begin to feel some patterns could be repeating themselves, that forces within society tend to make it endure while other forces threaten society with extinction.

We know such a teasingly tiny bit about society's capacity for self-preservation and the reasons for the risings and fallings of civilizations.

Historical study reveals society improves itself at times, and apparently consciously; at other times it appears determined to destroy itself. That it has succeeded in both is evident to the historian, the archaeologist, the sociologist.

The successful societies, though they may have been short-lived, indicate mankind needs to make greater conscious efforts to maintain its gains and make further improvements.

Is it preordained civilizations must fall? May they not rise constantly? Must forces for good always be overwhelmed by forces of destruction?

The great civilizations of Egypt, Greece, the Roman Empire formed a foundation for modern society, interrupted though progress may have been by their decline. After the Dark Ages there always came a Renaissance.

What triggered the rises, what determined the peaks, what foretold the declines? What forces touched off the rebirths? Where are we, today, in the pattern? Surely we have the capacity to observe and reach some conclusions which would be useful in self-determination.

Do we stand on a precipice of decline? Is our society so decadent and degenerate that we are about to be overrun by barbarians? Or do we stand on the shoulder of our greatest achievements?

Are we about to enter a golden age with all the world's people knowing peace and plenty?

Is there something we can individually do to intensify the tendency to improve society through conscious and collective effort?

The answer lies in our hands. It's not for "the government" to decide and control. It's not for "the other guy" to take the responsibility. It's a job for you and for me.

What can each of us on this earth do consciously to better our society? If we care about the kind of world we shall live in between now and the day we die, and if we are concerned about the kind of world our children and grandchildren will live in after we're gone, we had best start taking responsible action to assure meliorism is more than an optimistic belief.

All the socialization, education, religious training, progress in medical practice and technology, positive thinking and action of the past five hundred centuries can pass into oblivion.

"You know" must give way to specific definitions, precise meanings, clear-cut goals and, in some cases, extremely tough decisions. "You know" must be spelled out in practical disciplines to assure meliorism is more than a belief.