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### AMERICA'S DEEP TRANSCENDENTALISTS

This issue is devoted to an essay by Sean Wolf Hill on the "Deep" Transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Our essayist also publishes a "newsletter" of ecological wisdom and simple commonsense entitled "Compost Modern Life." In a recent issue (Winter, 1989-90), Sean wrote, "We do not really live in an age of information but in an economy based on the storage, retrieval and manipulation of data...Pervasive are the erroneous beliefs that proliferation of data is the same as information and that the rapid processing of data is wisdom."

Sean claims that individuals are losing their ability to morally control and wisely interpret this data. This results in "data-induced learning disorders." Learning should be an organic process whereby new information is combined with old knowledge in the light of chosen goals and purposes. But, faced with data overload, the person experiences anxiety and either narrows the learning field or frenetically tries to keep pace with the flow of data. Both reactions cripple the learning process.

Some might claim that Sean is wrong and that such a disorder would be terribly dysfunctional in our modern society. Quite the contrary is true. Our techno-economic system requires people with such learning disorders. The system thrives on specialist knowledge, systemic managers, and information processors. The truly dysfunctional are those who would raise moral, aesthetic, or philosophical questions that would threaten the system's claims to normativeness. Furthermore, the counterproductivity that Sean points to, i.e. more data leading to less knowledge, is typical of a rationalist system programmed for total control over natural and human complexities. More information yields less wisdom, more fertilizers yield less food, more regulation yields less clean air and water. Humans are organically, pre-rationally a part of a living world. To live with it well requires affective modes of understanding, empathetic relationality, and responsible forms of self-control. Our learning process must include these abilities and be checked by them.

Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman spoke out for an America based on reverence for Being, respect for the land, and a commitment to transcendent values. They warned against the rising American desire to sell its soul and relinquish its moral conscience to engineers and business tycoons. They feared that we would become a nation or Empire of Means, both in the sense of unchecked growth in production and consumption and in the sense that the means become ends in themselves and subvert all higher ends (human, natural, divine). Sadly, today, one sees even some so-called environmentalists cheering on this Empire and kneeling before its idols, begging for a few crumbs--instead of driving the money-changers from the Earth's Temple! That the problem might be more than just a matter of getting short-changed does not enter their minds. The disorder has taken hold and proclaims itself "reasonable."

--Don St. John

THE DEEP TRANSCENDENTALISM OF EMERSON,  
THOREAU AND WHITMAN

by Sean Wolf Hill

It is not surprising that the heyday of American Transcendentalism can be dated as 1830-1850, for this was also a time of preparation for the coming age of industrial technology. The functional high-tech of 1830 consisted of horses, illuminating gas, whale oil, canals and steam. The age of petroleum was yet to come. The Transcendentalists were responding to a changing climate of human action--Emerson's "cleavage in the hitherto firm granite of the past."

The movement was not simply a reaction to Calvinism and Lockean associationism, it was also a protest against the coming tide of technology. Technology brought with it a behavioral distancing of humans from the raw experience of nature. As early as 1830, the forested Northeast had been slashed by 31,000 miles of railroad right-of-way. Yet the population center was only a few hundred miles from the coast! The spirit of the frontier was laying waste the hills of West Virginia, had clear-cut Ohio, over-cut Northern Michigan, created mudslides in California, filled the Monongahela and Allegheny with sludge and draped the Sierra Madres in smog. By 1850 Midwestern farmers were no longer agrarian Jeffersonians, but had become businessmen-employers overseeing the monocropping of vast sections of land.

This exploitation of the land was accompanied by a debasement of awareness. In 1831 DeTocqueville noted that:

the Americans themselves...are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and may be said not to perceive the mighty forests around them till they fall beneath the hatchet. Their eyes are fixed upon another sight: the American people view its own march across the wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes and subduing nature.

The exploitation of the land meant such a declination in the American character that by 1838 James Fenimore Cooper could critically write in Home As Found:

In most nations...acts are extolled and seemingly appreciated for their naked merits. Little of this exists in America, where no man is praised for himself, but for the purposes of party, or to feed national vanity. In the country in which, of all others, political opinion ought to be the freest, it is the most persecuted, and the community character of the nation induces every man to think he has a right of property in all its fame...Americans are a people of facts and practices, paying but little attention to principles, and giving themselves the very minimum of time for investigations that lie beyond the reach of the common mind.

The American Transcendentalists in turn sought to reach beyond not just the common mind, but mind in general. They fought against a tide of institution and technology that was drowning the individual, diluting spiritual experience and eroding a grounding in nature.

Transcendentalists began with a harsh reconsideration of Lockean associationism. In 1829 James Marsh argued that adherence to a cause-effect theory of the human condition prevented us from finding "rational grounds for the feeling of moral obligation." Locke's assertion that (in Marsh's words) humans are "just a better animal" at the whim of "a blind and irrational fate" incorrectly absolved us from responsibility. In 1826 Sampson Reed had chinked the armor of the tabula rasa mind theory, insisting that humans "see the light, not make it." Reed viewed the mind as a dynamic process in which recombinant virus-like ideas "are developed

and reorganized in a manner...not easily explained." Concurrently, William Ellery Channing bashed Calvinism for its dogged allegiance to the original-sin myth that sentenced people "to total depravity...from the first moment of moral agency." Along with Reed's modern ideas of innate tendencies, Channing believed humans are born with a conscience "the ground of responsibility and the highest distinction of human nature."

Thus, by 1829, human nature was coming to be seen as "originally blessed," insightful, moral, visionary and inherently transformative. By 1940 the Transcendentalist Club organized to fight for all the attendant reforms such views necessitated.

Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody tackled educational dogma with the Temple School and treated school as a place for "the awakening, invigorating, directing of a child's faculties rather than a forcing...upon prescribed...courses of thought." Orestes A. Brownson spoke out for labor reform. He called for "a repeal of all non-labor laws" and for Americans to "realize in our own social arrangements and in the actual condition of all...that equality...which God has established."

Samuel Gray Ward, in 1843, cautioned against the adoption of "a national architecture" and for building practices that "give fair play to the individual." Margaret Fuller called for women's rights through a realization of the power of the feminine and the masculine. "Let us not impede the soul," she wrote, "let us not bind it to man or woman, black or white. Jove sprang from Rhea, Pallas from Jove. So let it be."

George Ripley's Brook Farm Community was formed "to ensure a moral, natural union between intellectual and manual labor...to combine the worker and the thinker."

Theodore Parker, in 1841, surpassed Channing by proclaiming that the Holy Bible was the mere commentary and opinion of mortals. He preached for a "natural religion" in which the only credo is "the great Truth which springs up only in the human heart---that there is a God." In 1856, looking back over the movement, he stated that it had upheld "the adequacy of man for all his functions" and had facilitated the emergence of "the right feelings from the automatic primal instincts." John Sullivan Dwight termed Transcendentalism a "Religion of Beauty." Christopher Pease Cranch equated the moral with the "natural," since nature "lets the soul feed its own instincts...knowing that if we love her wisely, we cannot be poisoned in her company."

The numerous and vociferous Transcendentalists were mainly concerned with seeing tangible societal reform. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman each distanced himself from the argumentative hubub that inevitably surrounded a gathering of the Transcendentalist Club. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman preached a transcendentalism that was deeper because of its distance from the fray. They can be viewed as the quieter, deeper pools rather than as the turbulent headwaters of Transcendentalism.

#### EMERSON: THE WISE SILENCE

Emerson is important as the codifier of Transcendentalism. He made definitive pronouncements regarding humanity's place in nature and the relationship between individuals and cosmic spirituality. Fiercely individualistic and often harshly critical of others, he frequently disappointed the Transcendentalists. He refused to be involved in causes like the Brook Farm and Fruitlands communities, vegetarianism and public protests for women's rights. He may even have worn cotton. It wasn't until his later years that he became "political" by supporting the Free Soil Movement. He eventually

denounced the formal Transcendentalists. Aloof and crotchety, he was the only one to set down a complete philosophy of Deep Transcendentalism.

Between 1817 and 1826 Emerson worked his way up the tight, regimented tiers of the Concord Unitarian community, going from Harvard Divinity School to a full minister's post at the First Church of Boston. Although he pleased the church elders with his sermons and performed his duties in an acceptable manner, his journals from this period reflect a move toward a more radical individualism. He was formulating his doctrine of Self-reliance. Eventually, he came to despise the role of preacher as deliverer of the Scriptures and grew weary of ministering to the sick and of delivering platitudes. By 1832 he flew full-force against the dogma of organized religion by refusing to deliver the conventional service of the Lord's Prayer. His separation came with the pronouncement of his new faith, "self-reliance." Individuals "should not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness." From the pulpit he proclaimed that "we do not make a world of our own, but fall into institutions already made...and this...is a loss of integrity and power." That is, individuals alone can empower themselves, and they do this by creating their own worlds of meaning.

The idea that it is up to the individual to discover goodness in the world eliminated both the preacher and the church from their roles as links between humankind and God. "Truth is self-evident, self-subsistent...you don't get a candle to see the sun rise," Emerson wrote in his journal. Self-reliance is not "rugged individualism" or misanthropy; it is a state of being contemplative in nature and thus of being a channel for direct experience of God. In 1802 Wordsworth had lamented that, "we lay waste our powers: little we see in nature that is our own." Coleridge by 1820, had developed this idea

into, "So I will build my temple in the fields." Emerson was a direct recipient of the romantic view of humankind's place in nature, and he developed this romanticism into an ecological spirituality.

After a brief visit to his European roots, Emerson returned to Concord not to preach, but to lecture. Under the guise of lecturing on "Natural History" and "Man's Relation to the World," he tested his odd mix of science and religion on his provincial New England brothers and sisters. In his new "sermons" he proclaimed that a self-contained apprehension of Truth results from an original, elemental relation to the universe. The deeper meaning of Self-reliance is that insight, inspiration and revelation come to those who seek a sensual communion with nature and shun conventional dogma. In this he differed from the formal Transcendentalists for whom "transcendence" meant a super-sensual "conscious experience" of God. Because Emerson was more organic and poetic, he held that any communion with the world must include the senses.

Despite this difference, the publication of Nature in 1836 made Emerson the intellectual hero of the Transcendentalist Club. This "little book" inspired Alcott, Brownson, Fuller and the others to organize their efforts. In Nature he presents the universe as a whole, self-balanced system "in a distinct but most poetical sense." He emphasized the healing and regenerative powers flowing from a direct experience of nature. For all his bookishness, Emerson became the mystic when he wrote, "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

For Emerson, it is only through the immersion of the self in nature that the walls of the self dissolve and becomes open to the power of God, Truth, Beauty,

Reason, Love, Poetry and Goodness. These are different names for the same thing--the utter perfection of nature, which deifies those receptive to it.

Such an ecological spirituality is the goal of anyone with "good character." Revelation is near at hand, and, in being open to it, the person becomes immersed in the vast power found everywhere. Revelation gives a person both meaning and perfection. In effect, elemental, unanalyzed, unreduced, nature is Religion.

Emerson had a disdain for "Culture," whose effect was to "make Nature subordinate to Mind." Social institutions caused a schism between Mind and Universe. For Emerson, the mind is not an isolated faculty that studies nature; it is a direct organ of nature itself, for "nature is the mind's old home." Emerson sought to return the human intellect to its primitive place in the abundance of elemental nature, where the perfection of natural law could be translated into good works and moral action. The Poet was the one who could be this translator because Poets see the world as "ductile and flexible" not as rigid and finished. "The means of knowing is as important as the end," Emerson wrote. Indeed, there is no separation between spiritual vision and action. One flows from the other. The ultimate foundation of human nature is spiritual, not material. The spiritual life should precede and advise the worldly one. Only then can we live as a community of Poets.

"A man is a god in ruins," Emerson says. To transform the ruins and establish a vital community, individuals have to transcend their hypothetico-reductive approach to understanding the universe. "The problem of restoring the original and eternal Beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul." He saw this redemption in an evolutionary light. Humanity is now faced with the task of reaching its potential nadir, but this can only be achieved if humanity is swept up in "the great

undulation of nature." Each human act participates in this grand momentum, and therefore each act can be a prayer. With no distance between the individual and the world, human law and universal law became "the same law working in nature for conservation and growth." He expands on this idea in the "Over-Soul," showing that "within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which each part is equally related."

Emerson's Transcendentalism was "deeper" than that of the Transcendentalist Club. His disillusion with formal transcendentalism came when he saw the invasion of French Fourierism and its pre-occupation with social reform. It represented less communion with nature and more scwabbling over politics. His neighbor, Thoreau, also marginal to the Club, was putting into practice the delicate balance between spirituality and action that Emerson lectured about.

#### THOREAU: BY WEARINESS AND DEVOTION

Henry David Thoreau is variously portrayed as a nature writer, a conscientious objector, and an orthodox Transcendentalist. He was all of these things at once. This is the key to understanding his brand of deep, ecological spirituality. Nature taught him that the only genuine life was one that lay beyond social artifice. The personification of Emerson's doctrine of Self-reliance, Thoreau believed that he had a moral obligation to "Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!" His "simple living" did not lead to a cult of simplicity, but to an expanded consciousness.

His ideas had a pioneer spirit without the characteristically American obsession with movement and material "progress." A further cultivating and civilizing of the individual and thus of societies, could be attained by learning the lessons of nature. The primeval woods, instead of making people ignorant and ferral, could

teach them how to view life with respect and sanctity. Thoreau preached for a give-and-take between society and nature. Americans had to learn to validate their presence in the New World by reforming their spiritual practices and their daily activities.

Long before he met Emerson in 1837, Thoreau had concluded that the good life meant learning to simplify needs and ambitions and to jettison psychological and material impedimenta. His 1833 Harvard commencement address on "the commercial spirit" really encouraged another kind of "spirit:" "This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than convenient; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used." In order to attend to the aesthetic and spiritual, rather than to the utilitarian, benefits of nature, one must learn to scorn public opinion and to refuse to accept either conventional ideas of "success" or traditional means of judging others. His motto became multum in parvo (much in little). In the two decades after he first met Emerson, Thoreau spread his doctrine of "plain-living and high-thinking" through lectures at the lyceae and essays in the Dial.

Thoreau's 1843 Dial essay "A Winter Walk" is really a visionary testament. In it, he describes an icy world of throbbing abundance and vitality, empowered by a "slumbering subterranean fire which never goes out" whose "altar (is) in every man's breast." The heart of nature and the heart of humankind are one. On such walks Thoreau felt himself in a "residence of pure and self-subsistent valor...(in) the simplicity and purity of a primitive age, a health and hope far remote from towns and cities." Living at one with nature means a redemption of our corrupted souls, and redemption results from action. "If we have desecrated ourselves---as who has not?---the remedy will be by wariness and devotion to reconsecrate ourselves... Conventionalities are at length as bad as impurities."

He chose for his act of reconsecration a two year and two month "experiment" at Walden Pond. He wanted to test his convictions; to see just how simple life can be and still be good. He "wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and to see if I could learn what it had to teach." Contrary to popular impressions, his life at Walden was not isolative. He took daily walks to Concord and had quite a number of visitors, although the mile-and-a-half trek kept away trivial or annoying ones. Removed from the business of the village and ultimately responsible to himself alone, Thoreau found that both work--"getting the soil to say beans instead of grass"--and leisure could be times of contemplation. He found it possible for one to "take rank hold on life" anywhere while doing anything. Physical distance was not necessary to "withdraw and stand aloof from the State effectively." Nature is a place of intensity, not of size.

His stance on society echoed Emerson's. Labor is a kind of curse, epitomized in his time by mechanized farmers "digging their graves as soon as they're born." His fellow men and women lived in "quiet desperation...lying, flattering, voting, contracting...into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity." He felt that "Society is always diseased," and as evidence noted the ennui, tedium and anxiety that "presume to have exhausted the variety and joys of life." True wisdom was found in living a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust: "not doing desperate things." For Thoreau, "every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity (to nature), and I may say innocence." In removing itself from the dynamic intensity of nature, society had lost its way and thus its morality. People must learn to be conscious for "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep," "To be awake is to be

alive," and "We must learn to keep ourselves awake...by an infinite expectation of the dawn." Perhaps, more importantly, people must learn to be pre-conscious as well. "Our life is not altogether a forgetting, but also, Alas! to a great extent, a remembering, of that which we should never be conscious of."

Spirituality hangs between "an instinct toward a higher life" and an equal attraction toward "a primitive, rank and savage one." This tension confirmed the presence of a transcendental Over-soul that permeated all. Of the pike in Walden Pond, he wrote, "They are of course Waldens all over and all through, are themselves small Waldens in the animal kingdom, Waldenses." This immersion into the teeming, varied totality was Whitmanesque. Behind it lay the unmoving quiet assuredness of Truth.

When I detect a beauty in any of the recesses of nature, I am reminded by the serene and retired spirit in which it requires to be contemplated, of the inexpressible privacy of a life---how silent and unambitious it is.

Individuals have a moral duty to validate their lives by engaging in such contemplation and thus to refuse to accept "such paltry information as we get" from society. "All of nature is your congratulation, and you have come momentarily to bless yourself."

For all his quasi-misanthropy, Thoreau held faith in the human ability to intuitively connect with the higher laws, and to climb the ladder from apprehending nature up to the living of a gentle life, and finally to achieve mystic insight. For all his lecturing, writing, and direct action, he found that, "It were in vain for me to endeavor to interpret the Silence." And so, in the vein of Joseph Campbell he came to merely advise, "Follow your genius."

## WALT WHITMAN: THE SIMPLE WELL-JOIN'D SCHEME

Walt Whitman was born in 1819 into the wild country of Long Island's North Shore, in an environment blending faith and heritage and tight with a liberalism that held basic human rights, individuality and anti-elitism as sacred. He carried along his faith in Democracy, and his Quaker disdain for cruelty, greed and injustice, as he moved with his family to Brooklyn in 1824. He had heard the rebel Quaker Elias Hicks preach about "The Inner Light" that sanctified all people and he wrote in his journal this summary: "The soul or spirit transmits itself into all matter." This became the cornerstone of his ecological spirituality.

Uncontaminated by various occupations from radical editor to government bureaucrat, Whitman dove into a mysticism that went beyond language toward a vision that could not be directly represented without a loss of its emotional truth. His poems metabolized into spells seeking to evoke the power of nature transmitted through humanity. He sought to "elevate, enlarge, purify, deepen and make happy the attributes of the body and soul of man." Breaking the popular bounds of "gentility," he tapped into and sang of the sexual character of humans and nature.

Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lust,  
    voices veil'd and  
    I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified  
    and transfigured.

Whitman's theory of nature viewed the world as a "perennial miracle" in which "the tendencies of all toward happiness" made each moment a promise for a divine future. His oft-misunderstood "egoism" stems from his views that "every condition promulgates not only itself, it promulgates what grows after or out of itself," and that the individual person is quite

definitely a part and a condition of nature. He believed that humankind held a special place by being, in terms of evolution, "the acme of things accomplished...the encloser of things to be." Whitman's "egotistic" mega-identification with all individuals and with nature came from realizing there really is no difference between a given man or woman and the universe. They embody each other, Walt embodies them, and they embody Walt. This is what he means in "Song of the Rolling Earth," "the earth...closes nothing, refuses nothing, shuts none out."

The perfection of nature is beyond reductive analysis, and although Whitman sees the separate elements of nature (coarseness, divinity, sexuality, charitability, equality, realness, spirituality, aesthetics, and intelligence), "the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be complete." Thus, seeing the completeness and being complete are the same. We should be more like the earth, "...tumbling on steadily, nothing dreading."

In this broad earth of ours  
amid the measureless  
grossness and slag,  
Enclosed and safe within its  
central heart nestles the  
seed perfection.

Whitman is often branded as an uncritical Patriot. This misreading is due to a literal treatment of his frequent references to the "greatness of America." Whitman spoke in symbols and to him "America" served as a metaphor for "the procreative urge of nature." Though grounded in evolutionary theory, he avoided the erroneous over-interpretations of the Social Darwinists. He saw the American Revolution as an expression of the universal rage and dynamism of creation. Even in his early poems, he treats America not as fulfillment, but as potentiality. He saw in both the earth's and humankind's

actions "the same undying expression" of "flux and efflux."

Though at times he was mesmerized by the terrific power of industry, he continually countered with the idea that "nothing is better than simplicity." He urged his fellows to notice the "unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees" and the

perfect rectitude and insouciance of animals...Not to repel or destroy so much as accept, fuse, rehabilitate. To obey as well as command, to follow more than to lead, these also are the lessons of the New World.

At their first meeting in 1856, Thoreau told Whitman, "I don't think much of America." In the author's 1855 preface to Leaves, he reveals similar misgivings about New World culture. "The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity in the spirit of the citizen." In his great 1871 essay "Democratic Vistas," he described society as "canker'd, crude, superstitious and rotten." By 1876, "Pathology" was a synonym for "society." He found he must escape "from all the standards, hitherto publish'd, from the pleasures, profits, conformities/ which too long I was offering to feed my soul." He witnessed the political corruption, hypocrisy, exploitation, war and slavery, and he decided society had become "a body without a soul." And so he cautions

against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions,... physical plenty, industry, ...do, of themselves determine and yield to any experiment of democracy, the fruitages of success.

(We might well give Walt's advice to the contemporary Eastern Europeans!)



The noise of society is not "the Me myself." Whitman saw that the true Self stood "apart from the pulling and hauling," were it could merge with the "silent cyclic chemistry of Nature." He talks of "compassioning" upon "the truth that awaits in all things and which does not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon." In poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," "Song of the Open Road," "Song of the Redwood" and "In Paths Untrodden," he preaches the forsaking of the superficial for "the life that does not exhibit itself/ yet contains all the rest." He warns against "the terrible doubt of appearances" because "the real something has yet to be known." True wisdom meant "putting myself here and now, to the ambushed womb of the shadows" and once born feeding the self "readily with the sweet milk of the nipples of the breasts of the Mother of Many Children."

### CONCLUSION

The eco-spirituality of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman can be summed up as "human kind has certain moral obligations." That in itself is not a revolutionary statement. There have and always will be moralists of every stripe throbbing to tell us what we should or should not do. The revolutionary message is that moral obligation springs from the human condition so much as from the pre-eminent unalterable conditions of nature.

Their philosophy was utterly optimistic, or, at the very least, positive. Critics trashed Emerson because he offered no theory of Evil. They didn't see that he offered no explanation for evil not due to some egregious oversight, but precisely because he didn't believe there was such a thing. He saw no problem with this. The ultimate law of Deep Transcendentalism is: nature is perfect. There is nothing to counterbalance nature. Society is not predetermined by some hard-wired original sinfulness to be out of balance; it is simply suffering from and demonstrating the

symptoms of a separation anxiety from the bosom of nature.

Dysfunction, pathology, "canker" are born out of this "quiet desperation." Healing comes readily when humankind returns to the source for its sustenance. Humankind is not self-subsistent; it relies upon the ecological dynamo for strength. The circuit that connects societies of individuals to this dynamo is still intact, but it lacks the electromotive force which is energized when individuals begin acting in a manner respectful of the natural order. Moral obligation is both the means and the end of this mission, just as a movement of electrons is both the means and end of what we call "electricity."

Following one's genius, finding truth, and accepting the Universe--these are their own rewards. They are both means and ends.

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Sean Wolf Hill is currently busy collecting oral accounts of people's earliest childhood memories. Anyone wishing to participate should record on a C-60 tape his or her earliest memories, being sure to note name and address on the tape. You should also send along the following: Where you were born, your age, where you grew up, and where you now live. Enclose these along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope (\$.65) and you'll get a copy of the finished product. Mail to:  
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