

Children
of
Crisis
a study
of courage
and fear
Robert Coles

Robert Coles's 1967 study of children and adults in the South during the Civil Rights era is a landmark of documentary "observation and participation" in modern American literature. "I had to weave together fragments and cut away at long monologues or dialogues. In each case I had in mind conveying to the reader what about that person, that life, that situation or problem, that series of interviews sheds light upon the central (and vexing) issue this book aims to examine: the relationship between individual lives and the life of a nation—where a crisis has come upon them both."

TOM FRICKE

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MYSTERY AND MANNERS:
A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT COLES

We all survive and prevail through a mastery of certain details, or fail by letting them slip through our fingers.

Robert Coles
Doing Documentary Work

When, in the early 1990s, Bob Coles was asked to give a series of "somewhat academic" lectures on the topic of his choosing at the New York Public Library, he replied, "Academic! That's a scare word for me!" But he gave the lectures anyway and the resulting 1997 book, *Doing Documentary Work*, is a classic portrayal of documentary as personal engagement with the world. The book, with its sensitive readings of such documentarians as James Agee, George Orwell, William Carlos Williams, Dorothea Lange, and Walker Evans, displays Bob's approach to every topic he has taken up in his remarkable life: the focus on people as exemplars, the self-scrutiny, the refusal to fall into old orthodoxies or to replace them with newer ones, the recognition of and even the pleasures in ambiguity, irony, and contradiction, and the continuous emphasis on any human encounter as an opportunity for moral awakening. For all that, *Doing Documentary Work* is far from academic. It is as concerned with, as he has elsewhere written, "that central matter of moral inquiry: How should we try to live this life?" as any of his books and essays.

Bob writes that "each of us brings, finally, a particular life to the others who are being observed in documentary work" and that "to take stock of others is to call upon oneself." His own life exemplifies the persistent call on one's own resources

in those graced moments of encounter. It is a life of conversation. Born in 1929, Bob recalls an upbringing punctuated by discussion around the dinner table. He remembers his father's comments when Neville Chamberlain declared war on September 1, 1939. He remembers being called in from a football game by his mother to hear the news of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. And he remembers, too, the evenings when his parents would read to each other from the works of Tolstoy, George Eliot, Hardy, and Dickens. "This is what my parents paid attention to. They wanted us to pay attention, too, wanted us to understand and talk about these things. My father would read the *Christian Science Monitor* because there were no ads, and good reporting, writing, and my mother would read the *Boston Post*, which no longer exists, and we'd listen and join into their discussions."

He was later inspired by such mentors as Perry Miller, William Carlos Williams, Dorothy Day, Erik Erikson, Anna Freud, and, tellingly, by the young African American, Ruby Bridges, who he witnessed as a lone, composed little girl surrounded by an angry white crowd in the early desegregation struggles of the American South. This last experience led to Bob's first documentary work in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Children of Crisis* books, five volumes which are themselves documents central to our understanding of poverty and class, the Civil Rights struggle, and the conditions for hope in twentieth-century America.

I once asked Bob why he didn't write his autobiography. "But I have," he said, "All those books are my autobiography." And indeed they are, over seventy-five of them, ranging from *Children of Crisis* through considerations of children's spiritual and moral lives, studies of Dorothy Day, Simone Weil, Erik Erikson, conversations with the fugitive Daniel Berrigan, collections of essays, poetry, and more. The public recognition of his importance is as broad and deep, including, to name only a few awards, the Pulitzer, a MacArthur award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and a National Humanities Medal. He taught at Harvard as the James Agee Professor of Social Ethics and as a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities. He founded *DoubleTake Magazine*, that iconic journal of documentary without boundaries, with Alex Harris. He has been an adviser to presidents and politicians.

Yet Bob is a man of exquisite perspective and balance. You sense this right away when you meet him: those stained blue jeans, that open-collared shirt, the scuffed brown shoes. He will be embarrassed by the names that come up in his conversation. "All that name-dropping," he'll say, "and the risk of taking all this to heart." And then he'll mention others that he knew, whose importance to him is equivalent: the working families of the South, of Appalachia, of Boston, the named—Ruby Bridges, Domingo, and "Una Anciana"—and the anonymous. He'll mention them, too, and the conversation will continue, the risks of aggrandizement—"But what can I do, all of this is true"—averted, the balance retained.

I called on Bob to tape the conversations excerpted here because of his importance to documentary work. The portions of our talk printed below are a small part of five hours that we taped over two late August days at his home in Massachusetts. Both of us are partial to a documentary style that lets things emerge in the conversational moment itself—or, at least, we decided that we would have our own discussions this way. "A lot of other people who want to do an interview come to it with a list of points. I'd have this whole list of the things we were going to discuss in front of me and I'd refer to documents. With you, well, I don't know what the hell I'm going to talk about."

Most of what appears here comes from the part of our conversation that took place in Bob's study, within sight and hand's reach of the artifacts that allow Bob to partake of the presence of those others—his family, his friends, his teachers—who spark thought and offer illustration for his points. To sit in his study is to sit among the icons of his moral landscape, Bob with his back to a book-lined wall scanning the pictures facing him—Dorothy Day, Walker Percy, William Carlos Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Kennedy, Bruce Springsteen, Raymond Carver, Tillie Olsen, Erik Erikson, more. I sensed, as he spoke, that he talked with them, too. Or, better put, it was they who were listening, nodding, and occasionally wincing, his saints, exemplars, and teachers pleased to see that he had gotten it right for the most part, all the things they passed to him.

Bob talked, leaning, gesturing, swaying, and frequently laughing. He moved in to watch my lips and my face when I

spoke. It was partly that he's hard of hearing. ("Even at my age, when I've lost some of my hearing, I don't want to get a hearing aid. I don't want to hear through that. You see, if I use that, I'll actually hear much less. This way I pay attention to the person instead of the machine.") But I could imagine him in all those prior conversations—with Ruby Bridges, Daniel Berrigan, Robert Moses, Dorothy Day, Walker Percy—wanting to hear but also to see, joking and laughing, making the same asides: "Now this is important . . ." or "This is off the record. You need to hear this, just don't use it . . ."

Sitting with him, I realized how concretely one's connections inspire, one's traditions stay present. "No ideas but in things," Williams's words and Bob's refrain, made real in this room. The books on his desk, a simple hardwood table that belonged to his father, are these: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the Book of Common Prayer, Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest*, a Bible, and a small black copy of the Apocrypha bookmarked by his mother at Ecclesiasticus. Bob writes at this table on the burnished wood of a clipboard with brass fittings that cantilever it for angled writing. This was also his father's. These things—the books, the pictures, table and board—make tangible the genealogies of thought and feeling that ground written ideas.

Bob resisted my questions about method, distrusting any retreat into rule and pronouncement. But I picked up a few things in spite of him. He works in the mornings, slipping five or so loose sheets of yellow legal pad paper into the board, writing longhand on both sides of a page, five hundred words to a side. He edits by hand and sends his words out for typing, editing that copy again. "I don't type. I don't want to know how to type," he said.

If there is a method, it's that focus on the documentarian's body and mind, his or her total presence, his or her active participation and attention, that reliance on the self and its self-knowing. The machinery of convenience—tape recorders, cameras, technique—are like a hearing aid. They separate us from people.

"Oh, I just sit over there and write what I remember on yellow paper. I have little notes that I make in the course of the day. And I collect the notes into scraps. Or if I'm writing about a person I will remember the conversations and I will put it

down. In some cases, where I have taped it, I'll play the tape. I don't have the tape transcribed. There's the difference.

"I never transcribe. I listen. And I'll put in a few phrases that I've written down for myself. But the way I do it is to make their words equal to my words, so their words and my words are together. In other words, Ruby will say certain things, or will have said certain things, and I've selected and strung them together, changing the subject when I feel I should. It's just as among those drawings, hundreds of drawings, I'll only choose two or three for drama, for observation, for communication, for good art. All these criteria at work."

"It doesn't bother you that this isn't very scientific?" I said.

"Scientific . . . I don't know what the word means [laughs]. And I don't want to know! I level with people, though. I don't tell them that they're getting verbatim stuff. I tell them that this is me—that this stuff goes through me. Listen, even in the first volume of *Children of Crisis* I just used little excerpts, that's all. It's excerpts. Isn't that what life is about? We remember certain things about people."

And what we remember transforms us.

In the excerpt printed here, Bob insists that Flannery O'Connor's essay and book, *Mystery and Manners*, says all that needs to be said about the documentary enterprise. But he also said, "there's that other O'Connor story, too. I call it 'The Humbling of Head.' Do you know that? Well that's not the actual name of the story, but that's what it's about: Mr. Head learns to be humble. Well, that's the story of my life. That's it. That's what Williams was about, too. That's documentary."

After I returned to Ann Arbor to begin work on this transcript, Bob called me and brought up the story again. "Tom, remember what I was saying about Flannery O'Connor and Mr. Head? Well, I've been thinking more about it. That's it. You have to write this, it's a story about documentary work. It's called, 'The Artificial Nigger'—and, boy she got hell for that title, but wouldn't change it—but it needs to be taught to all documentary students. That's what we're about, we documentarians. Know-it-alls, confident observers, humbled by what we study. Documentary is about redemption. It's about salvation. You've got to say that."

And now I have. Bob's words, my words, scraps of paper. Me going through them.

TF: I thought we might begin today with James Agee because he is so clearly a model for documentary work and so clearly important to you. One of the things he causes us to do is to explore our own motivations for this work. I have the sense, for example, at least in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that there's this quality of him trying to complete himself, to become whole.

RC: Well, I think documentary work is a search for, among other things, connection and sometimes for paternity, maternity, cousinship, brothers and sisters. It's a family search of a kind, to know other people and to be with them and to offer them, through yourself, to the world.

It's important to remember with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, that these people in Alabama aren't really so distant from Agee himself. Here was a guy who went to school in Boston and New York and went back to the region that nurtured him and bore him—a return to his own working-class background through these Alabamans. If you move a little bit over to Tennessee, you have his whole life. True, there were certainly higher-class sides to him, but that's the mother's side, not the father's. His father, the father he lost as a child, was more the working man. And that whole class tension in his life between the mother's family and the father's family, between middle class and working class, is also a part of documentary work.

This is true for many of us, I should say, people like myself who may have gotten into a professional life of some kind, but who feel connected in their own way to another existence. You know, the differences in background in my own family, I think, prepared me to be interested in different kinds of people. There was my mother's farm family, a working-class family, and my father who became an engineer and a scientist, but who was from basically poor people going back to England. Then there was the Episcopal Church on my mother's side and the Jewish and Catholic sides through my father. My father grew up in Leeds, in Yorkshire. His mother died when he was a little boy and he had to deal with the whole complexity of his background. He came to America, started a whole new life, and married an American woman whose family had come from Europe, settled in Iowa, then Boston.

TF: Does this mean that documentary is a kind of searching

for connection, but from a motivation that has to do with a recovery of personal sources?

RC: Someone like me seeks to find out about life through others. That's my story, but I don't want to generalize from it. Other people have other kinds of motivation. I'm trying to make sense of all these different, to use Erik Erikson's language, "identities," and pouring it all together. It's no wonder that I taught *Invisible Man* with such passion and also no wonder that I got interested in writers like George Eliot and Charles Dickens, who were concerned with fundamentally similar questions through their literary creations: Who was who and how do you understand people? That's what *Middlemarch* was really about.

TF: I think, too, that this might have something to do with your sense that the human person is an entity imbued with a mystery that needs uncovering to be understood.

RC: It's what Flannery O'Connor says: *Mystery and Manners*. That's a good phrase for documentary work. If nothing else comes out of this conversation [laughs] there it is, what might happen in life. I think mystery accompanies us all the time, including you and me right here. You'll never know, just as we never know where this conversation is going to go.

TF: Thinking of Agee with Flannery O'Connor, they both have—at least in what is now *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and then in everything that O'Connor does—this sacramentalism. It's this concreteness that enshrouds or, maybe grows out of, mystery. I read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a religious text. It's got the cadences of the King James Bible and all that, but there's this profoundly religious impulse underlying it too. Do you get that?

RC: Well, it's a mixture because the Book of Common Prayer is very much in Agee's writing. So there's that Biblical side. But there's also this constant, internal reaching out for connection that he had. I mean, amidst all—I don't want to use shrink words, but he was an extremely excitable and almost irrepressible person and it's almost as if he intuitively knew he wasn't going to be around too long. Given the smoking, the drinking, and the way he lived, it's almost as if he had to cram everything in hard and fast, because there wouldn't be much more time.

I think though that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

ultimately was a version of Hardy's *The Return of the Native*: the boy coming back and seeing so much of his family's life and his own life, wanting to extol and commemorate and also to look at and understand it. It's a beautiful, personal book with that whole Biblical side which was so much a part of him through the Episcopal boarding school in Tennessee and the relationship he had with Father Flye.

The book is at once a memoir, a documentary effort, and a miraculous literary effort. And along with that there's a lot of good, strong, astringent social criticism. That section on education anticipates a lot of writing on education from years later—work by John Holt, Edgar Z. Friedenberg, and all the others who wrote about education back in the forties and the fifties, and then Jonathan Kozol later on. I think they would be honored to feel that he's a predecessor. He did it, as they did, from a personal point of view. In contrast to those critics who start from educational theory, he did it in that literary-spiritual tradition which, of course, is also Biblical because, you know, Jesus was a teacher.

And so were the Hebrew prophets. They instructed and they pointed out right and wrong and they exhorted. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is, among other things, an exhorting book, one that exhorts but also presents. It presents pictorially. It presents descriptively with words. But it also exhorts. And of course, it's also a long poem, so to speak.

TF: In your *Doing Documentary Work*, referring to both Orwell and Agee, you say that they ultimately failed at the projects they were assigned—Orwell in his *Road to Wigan Pier* and Agee in his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

RC: Yes, because Agee didn't do what Henry Luce wanted him to do. And Orwell failed because he didn't do, I think, what the British journalists wanted of him—rather, he was idiosyncratic, cantankerous, difficult, with "problems," temperamental [laughs]. Well, we'll put quotes around all of that! But you see where I'm going.

That's what they had in common, Agee and Orwell. They were oddballs, eccentrics in the literal sense of the word "eccentric," and not in the pejorative sense. And also, let's face it, they were great writers, though, of course, quite different ones. Agee originally was the poet. You know that his first bout of writing was in the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Or-

well was always, I think, the tough, shrewd English essayist-in-the-making, with a canny, skeptical eye that missed nothing. Agee was wide-eyed—using that eye image—wide-eyed, just reaching out with his eyes to touch the world and hold it, and then giving it back to the reader, who then becomes wide-eyed, too.

TF: Yeah. It's as though he peeled away whatever skin that separated him from the world.

RC: That's right, getting to the heart of the matter. Orwell wasn't doing that. He was surmising, watching and surmising, and then bringing a tough, skilled way of thinking, seeing, and writing into the world. But you know, I think of Orwell as a traditionally able and skilled English essayist. And I think of Agee as a brilliant and, again non-pejoratively, eccentric poet. A poet who is so multifaceted and in ways charged with so much psychological and spiritual energy that he, at times, went all over the place—in his life, but also as a writer—and yet pulled it together.

TF: If you're going to pull Williams into that constellation, how would you characterize him then?

RC: The physician. The tough work. The learning from patients. The poet, both inflamed—again in the non-pejorative sense—but also under control. Not the erudite Pound, certainly not the exiled Pound, and most certainly not the highly intellectualized Eliot. Yet they haunted him and made him feel, if I may say so, much less than they. He fought them combatively by saying, "I am an American. I am a doctor. I work with patients. They have given me so much, and as a writer, as a poet, as an essayist, as a storyteller I will give back what they gave me."

It's no accident, either, that Williams loved to draw. He was very visual and very interested in photography. He used to show me pictures. He'd point pictures out to me and he kept on telling me to look at Edward Hopper's pictures if I wanted to understand America. Even in the courses I used to teach, you know, I used slides of Hopper's paintings.

But Williams was, to draw from Saul Bellow, "American born." And he gave back to America. He did go to Europe but was very skeptical about the influence of the higher realms of England and France. That American skepticism would be a polite way of saying *disdainful*.

The Williams I knew, though, was the documentary worker. This is the one I knew: the one who took the house calls, the one who commemorated those lives with *The Doctor Stories*, drawing on everyday life along the Passaic River. And this Williams was a house-visiting doc, going on calls—a bit of an eccentric among doctors because of his writing and his art, and also cranky and cantankerous, full at times with scorn. I think he was like Agee in this, although Agee disguised his scorn with high rhetoric and poetry. Williams was more punchy and direct. Agee transformed his scorn into the religious and the spiritual, though we know that when he was dealing with education in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he got rather nasty.

Even here there's a connection. Agee directed that nastiness at Harvard just as Williams got nasty about Harvard, though from a distance, because of what Harvard meant to T. S. Eliot and, I think, to the whole country: a kind of bastion, as he would say, of academic pomposity and self-importance. "Snobs," he called them, "a bunch of Harvard snobs." He put his hand once on my shoulder and said, "Don't get that disease." I was standing there trembling. I thought I'd have a heart attack! Here I was a medical student and he's telling me, "Don't get that disease." Well, I think he was implying I could have caught it because I'd just graduated—the infectious disease of smugness.

TF: You know, your earlier mention of Flannery O'Connor causes me to remember a story about her that relates to Williams's emphasis on the concrete: no ideas but in things. She was at a dinner party and there were other people there, including Catholics who were a little bit more "sophisticated" and a little embarrassed about some of the orthodoxies of their religion, like the transubstantiation. "Well, that's just a symbol," one of them said at the table. It may have been Mary McCarthy who said that. And Flannery O'Connor responded . . . you know the quote, right?

RC: Go ahead.

TF: "Well, if it's just a symbol, then to hell with it."

RC: That's right!

BOTH: [laugh]

RC: Well, there you have the whole thing. That's it. That's why I have Flannery's picture before me. That's why I went to talk

with her mother. "To hell with it." That's it. That's what Williams was about, too. He said, "To hell with it," too. Where Flannery said, "if it's just a symbol, then to hell with it," he'd say "to hell with that whole world," while pointing across the Hudson to Greenwich Village and the intelligentsia. He said to me once, "You know that word *intelligentsia*?" I said, "Well, I think it must have to do with a lot of people who consider themselves intelligent." And he said, "That's it! That's it!" Well, for a kid who was going to medical school and who went to, what he called, "a snot rag college," hearing a great writer talk about "fucking intellectuals!" was a revelation. You know, I laugh at it now, but at that time [laughs] . . . That's who Perry Miller sent me to, you see—encouraged me to write about and sent me to.

TF: Perry Miller is a first mentor.

RC: Oh, absolutely, the first one. And he, even though he taught at Harvard, also called the very place he taught "a disease." Not quite the way Williams did, but he always talked about "all this crap around here." That was Perry Miller. I have an appetite for rebels. I just seemed to stumble into them, I don't know how. I didn't seek them out. Of course, Perry Miller was my teacher and I did get close to him and, later, I dedicated one of my books to him.

TF: Did this attitude come out in his lectures? In his classes?

RC: In his lectures and also when he supervised me as my tutor and teacher, especially when he supervised my work on Williams. It was he who suggested that I write about Williams and this itself was an act of rebelliousness against the English department—he taught English and history, so even then I was exposed to this mixing of fields.

TF: What do you think he saw in you that would make you the proxy for his rebellion against that department?

RC: Well, first of all, I took a small seminar with him, Classics of the Christian Tradition. There were only a few of us and a lot of the other students were veterans from the Second World War. They were much older than me. I was a kid among them and I learned a lot from them. Here they were, veterans. They had fought and seen people killed. And there I was, this kid from Boston Latin School with some privilege but no experience in life—a little experience seeing his parents trying to piece together their lives and the complexities of their

background, but you know what I mean. I was privileged in the sense that I had had a safe American life and had never seen death.

What eventually happened between Miller and me is that I sought him out because of some of the writing I had done. He made comments on it and when I went to see him in his Widener study we got to talking about life. I told him that I thought maybe I wanted to be a high school English teacher and he said, "You sure you want to do that?" I said, "I'm not so sure." And then we were talking about America and he suggested that I get to know Williams's work. And that changed my life.

When I wrote my thesis on Williams, he would say to me, "You and I are in a conspiracy. We're bringing Dr. Williams to Harvard. I'm the teacher and you're the student, but we're sneaking him in here with all these snobs!" Well, I'm repeating myself, but when Perry Miller had me send my thesis to Williams, it changed my life.

TF: I was just thinking, too, that Williams's relationship with Eliot, in many respects, parallels your own expressed relationship with social science—that is, your standing against that carapace of theory.

RC: You've got a point there. I think so. I also think some of my animus directed at social science has to do with my mother's love for literature. My mother and father used to read to one another from Tolstoy, from Dostoevsky, from Dickens. It's no accident that my brother then became a professor of English. They loved literature. I also got some of that animus from my dad because he was a strict scientist. He went to MIT and scorned what he called "pseudo-science" including, by the way, [laughs] psychoanalysis and psychiatry.

And I'm thinking that some of that has seeped in. But, you know, why should I be so much against social scientists? In a way, I am one. I'm a psychiatrist. I work with people and I even did some psychiatric studies. In fact, I also wrote a paper as an undergraduate that was also Miller's doing. He said, "Why don't you go and see how those psychologists work?" From that I got involved with someone named Richard Solomon who had me working in his lab. That was a job studying how rats could run down this maze, learn about it, and transfer that to other situations—"generalization." I'd for-

gotten all about this. He basically wrote a lot of the paper, but gave me credit for it.

It was my first publication, though it's not mine. It was Richard Solomon's. Perry Miller said, "Find out how these psychologists and sociologists work," so I just went over and got a job. Early in the morning, I'd go and work with these animals in this maze. I'm not saying this was a big influence in my life, but I saw something and I was encouraged to do something about it.

Miller was a man of all seasons, pushing me around even at Harvard. I remember he said to me, "You'll see how those people called 'psychologists' and 'sociologists' work and you'll see what they do to animals. You'll see what they do to people. You'll see how they become like what they do." And I looked at him [laughs] and didn't know what the hell he was talking about. I got quite an education from Perry Miller.

TF: One of the earmarks of your work, and indeed of the conversations we've had over the last two days, is this resolute concreteness, a refusal to generalize. If I ask you to make a general statement about documentary and what documentarians should do, you always demur and say, "Well I don't know about other people. This is what I do." I relate this to a comment that you made yesterday. I asked, "Do you think of yourself as a writer or a documentarian?" You said, "No, I think of myself as a physician." I'd like you to expand on that a little bit. What are you as a physician?

RC: I became a physician who works with children, and in so doing and so being, I learned how to be very careful about details. Look at the skin. Listen to the voice. Observe their bodies, how they bear themselves. I looked because I had access to them: I was examining them. Pay attention to what the stethoscope tells me. Pay attention to what the neurological hammer tells me. And in so doing, learn something about how they are as human beings, as young people. This is my training. And the attention to detail that I learned in that, I think I carried over to the other work I did.

To my mind, documentary work is like what Williams did. As I told you before, going into those homes, those apartments, those tenement houses, was really about meeting those people, learning from them. All right, later he wrote about them and later, I guess, I learned to write about such

people. So there was that example of a physician who also wrote. I say "physician," but I hope not with the snotty professional smugness which is an occupational hazard. But it seems like I've been a doctor all my life, ever since I went to medical school. I used to keep my stethoscope and neurological hammer here in my study. I put them away about a year or two ago (I gave them to my grandchildren) but I used to always have them available.

So much goes back to Williams. He's the one who used poetry to tell stories. And when I called that book *Doing Documentary Work*, it was the "doing," the verb that made it possible—emphasizing activity rather than the categorical, adjectival side that's social science. That's what matters. Documentary is between "do" and "work." I see myself in the tradition of people like Williams, and artists, who worked by showing how work goes for others—and by implication, how it goes for themselves. I am in the tradition of those who are interested in how life goes on among people. That's my "method": I try to observe and write about what I observe, to get people to tell their stories, one after the other.

I know it started with Williams—with what I learned from him about being with people because I was more than a little shy and withdrawn. Yet, when I'm with people it seems there is something that happens that I connect to what I learned in medical school and from Williams. I learned it from Perry Miller, too, like when he got me that job training animals to run down mazes [laughs], and then had me send something off to a doctor. And that led to taking pre-med courses. When I had trouble with the pre-med courses, Miller would say, just as Williams ultimately would, "So what? So they're a little hard. You can do it." He said, "You're learning so much. You don't know how much you're learning. You're learning about evil and how it can exist even in this place," [laughs] whereupon Williams would say, "Of course, in that snot rag place."

So there I was just a kid trying to get through the "snot rag place." You learn from your teachers and you go out and meet so many people. You know, I worked in Cambridge with working-class kids when I was working on *The Middle Americans*. I tell you, it was such a pleasure to get away from Harvard Square and go across town to be with those families—Irish, Italian—just fellow human beings. I'll never forget

hearing them talk about Harvard, including the man who told me that he was afraid to walk through Harvard Yard to take a short cut home. I said, "Afraid?" Boy, was he afraid. Then I began to think that this is what I was told by Miller and Williams, that I should be afraid, too. [laughs]

Well, I was so happy working in some of those homes, just learning about how the folks lived and made do, to use that phrase. I found that when I was in those homes, I was with the people that Tillie Olson and Williams gave us in their writing. I'd think of those writers, but I'd also just get to know these people and let them inhabit my mind. Then I'd write about them.

It was like crossing a divide that I was glad to cross—to get away from something, but also to affirm myself and be a part of something. It was being part of America, going into homes where the American flag really meant something. I remember I went into a home and they had a record of Kate Smith singing, "God Bless America, Land that I Love." I practically started crying. I felt, as they felt, that connection to her voice and to that American message. All right, on the left we'll dismiss this and, on the right, they'll manipulate it. But I'll tell you it was something to be connected to and to appreciate—even bearing in mind the admitted dangers of such feeling: apologetic defense of what is indefensible, on the one hand, and the smug superiority of the left, on the other. But these people were neither left nor right. They were right in the middle. They were ordinary American people and they wanted something to hold on to. Just as I want to hold on to Anna Freud or Erik Erikson, they want to hold onto Kate Smith and "God Bless America." They want to be part of something. And they have every right to want to be part of something that is great.

TF: Well, this is of a piece with your resistance to whatever loses sight of "the details," as you put it. There's your frequent quoting of Williams's "no ideas but in things." You're saying here that when you lose sight of people, you have gone astray. That's the resistance to theory, to ideology, to abstraction.

RC: The Civil Rights Movement had to do with *individuals*, things like eating and sleeping and voting—going into a restaurant and a movie house. You see, this is everyday stuff,

as Percy puts it in his novels. Whereas, with the American left, we're getting more into ideology. And that keeps me away.

And remember, I grew up having to concentrate very closely, to pay attention to people. There were my parents, with their different backgrounds and my trying to understand that. But I remember other things, too. Here's something that's important. My father had a high-power radio and I remember that he would listen to Hitler screaming to the Reichstag in German, which my father knew because he had gone to MIT. That contrast, German as the language of the scientists and Hitler's screaming. He'd turn to me and say, "This is the leader of the German people who gave so much to the world, the nation of Goethe and Schiller, the nation of great science. And look what's happened." And then he'd get sardonic and he'd say, "The next time people tell you that education is going to make it a better world, you tell them that the German people were the most educated people in the world." I remember that voice of Hitler's and I remember my father extracting from that a lesson for himself and his family.

I can't get over that, my father listening to that radio when I was a kid. This began my career, really, as an ironic observer who understood disparities and contradictions. I'm always talking about contradictions and irony. I mean, my father was pointing it out to me as a little boy, saying, "This is the leader of one of the most gifted peoples of the world, the best educated nation in the world, the world of science and literature." What does an eight year old do with that? Well, he remembers it.

My point is that I learned from my father the need to understand even people you can't tolerate. You have to understand them (though not necessarily agree with, or sanction them). That is why I have worked with segregationists, even people in the Klan. I think I worked with them because I was brought up to try to understand them. And in trying to understand, I also saw their need. They were desperate. This hate substituted, in their minds, for a sense of belittlement and inadequacy and vulnerability. They were poor working people, some jobless. In a horrible way, hate was one of their few possessions.

But this can be misunderstood. When I wrote about busing in Boston in *The New Republic* it created a storm because I

was also trying to understand the white people who were screaming. Many liberals got very angry at me.

TF: Well, that focus on the people results in a refusal to demonize. We can probably think of exceptions, but by and large, you approach people in an effort to understand.

RC: I don't know how to do anything else. What I try to do is just to understand the world and offer it to others. And I think that's what I know how to do. Sometimes I fall flat on my face. I just don't get the message correctly. I mishear or misunderstand and there are obstacles in my own mind that prevent me from really appreciating other people. Sometimes I get combative in a wrong-headed way, like I may have done on behalf of some of the people in the South, namely some of the segregationists. Instead of concentrating on the misdeeds they were doing, I was trying to explain their dignity and their struggles and sometimes you can go overboard when you do that. You lose perspective. Or you tone down some of the bad sides in order to bring forth that complicated dignity. But there are hazards in this. The same thing can be said for some of my work on the other side of the fence. Some of those families we knew, African American or white, that I didn't write about, were not very nice people. You notice that in *Children of Crisis*, the tendency to elevate and embrace. The cynical way of putting it would be to say you just push the bad aside because it doesn't fit in with a certain kind of idealized stereotype—that you're a liberal do-gooder.

TF: Is that a responsiveness to the moment, though? I mean, historically that was what needed to be done.

RC: Well, that would be a nice way of putting it [laughs], a nice way of putting it that gets me off the hook. But, the other side of it is that there is some documentary work that is not being brought forth. And then you might say, "Well, because of the historical moment," Erikson was always using that expression, *historical moment*. I would say that's very definitely part of it. But on both sides of the fence, to use a very strong pejorative word, if you're fudging or at least omitting things, you're not doing a full documentary portrait. That has to be said confessionally or at least problematically as a subject for discussion. I think that's what we ought to be discussing with our documentary workers and students. What do you see? What do you tell? What don't you see and why? And what

don't you tell and why? Or even if you see it, how what you don't tell and why you don't tell makes you a member of a particular world—the world that you want to be part of, that's going to publish you, that you teach at, that you go to school at? All these variables. This is tough stuff.

But Jane and I were very uncomfortable in some homes. This is the kind of stuff I've never been able to really write about. I never wanted to make this a public matter. I just put it aside and went on to some of the more dramatically instructive and important and helpful things. But I think, for the record, it's interesting I'm coming up with this now. I haven't thought about it for a long time.

Some of it's common sense, though. I mean, let's face it, if you go into a group of people, some of them you're going to like and some of them you're not going to like so much. But if your job as a documentary writer is to convey what you're seeing and hearing, to make an embraceable effort that includes a whole range of human possibility, probability, strengths, and weaknesses, at least you ought to discuss this in some way with yourself and maybe with the reader.

TF: There's another part of your concreteness that I want you to elaborate on. When you are asked a question, you refuse to be didactic in your responses. You're much more likely to tell a story, even a parable. Now stories and parables are open to many different interpretations, in contrast, at least ideally, to the more didactic style of science. Science tells, but you let the hearer discover.

RC: Well, it's a choice. I think I choose storytelling. I don't choose the analytic approach even though I am capable of using it. I'm not going to deny my ability to analyze and even conceptualize in my mind. This is actually important. I can't parade a kind of ignorance or indifference or hostility to all that, because my own mind harbors theory and analytic thinking. I have a kind of knowledge, of conceptual possibilities in pediatric psychiatry and in psychoanalysis and psychiatry—child psychiatry, child psychoanalysis. I learned a lot of that thinking, that kind of abstract analysis, and I use such stuff in my head when I'm listening and thinking and remembering. But when I'm writing I don't present all that. I think this refusal to display that kind of thinking in one's conclusive writing life, is—I don't know whether to call it a habit,

a preference, a reflex—a choice would be a nice, folksy way of putting it.

But that is true. There is no question about it. I could write these theoretical matters down, but I choose not to. This is where I go back to Williams—and also to Tillie Olson and all those writers I love and teach, to my mother and father appreciating Tolstoy, and to Walker Percy and Dostoevsky. These are the people I love.

It also goes back to my relationship with magazines like *The New Yorker*. There's the profile of Walker Percy right on the wall there. It's there because of the concreteness of his life. I've taken the thinker, the novelist, the American Kierkegaardian—the man who brought Kierkegaard to an interested American audience—and I tell of him in such a way that it's his story. I use *story* in a laudatory way rather than in a derogatory way, the way some social scientists might use it. And that's what I do. That's what I love doing, bringing Walker to myself and to my fellow readers. When William Shawn thanked me after he read it, "because," as he said, "I've learned a lot," that was a huge compliment. This tells me, I'm back to what I wanted to be, which is a high school teacher. Of course, I became the kind of teacher I hadn't intended by ending up at Harvard teaching in the Medical School and other parts of the university—the Law School, the Business School, and the School of Education (in all those places I summoned novels or short stories or poems). But I thought I was going to be a high school teacher of English and, in a way, that's what I've been [laughs].

TF: This morning, as I was thinking about this parable-like quality in both your conversation and your writing, it occurred to me that, whether consciously or not, one effect of that is a democracy between you the writer, you the documentarian, you the speaker and the receiver. You're not being didactic. You're not saying this is what you must get out of it. You're presenting it in such a way that it becomes a product of the moment and the concrete person who is reading and receiving your message. The reader, the hearer, becomes a participant in the documentary process as a result.

RC: That's very well put and very helpful. That's it. I think one connects and then it's I/thou. And then the *thou* becomes part of the *I* and the writer is conveying that new thing, an

I-thou to the reader, who then becomes another thou and another I. And that's what's going on, no question. That's why, by the way, I think I have these pictures on the wall with me. I continue to see these people. I have to be reminded of them. I live with them and the sight of them and the memory of them—or with their words, like with Percy. This is all a part of the whole continuing personal odyssey, if you want to call it that. It's a journey and they are companions with bread—companionship: *com panes*, with bread. They are companions, taking of the bread, sharing of the meal [laughs]. That's what documentary work really is, it's one person and another person meeting among all the folks who ever were and will be and still are—the questioner, the listener, the speaker, the teller, the teller of the story, the listener who then gets from that another story, which connects with the listener's story, just as the teller's story connects with other people's story: parents, friends, events. And that's all coming together.

I've been all over the world. I've been in South Africa. I've been in the Middle East, and all through Europe and Latin America. There's nothing like this country. Every time I come back I'm just so grateful to be back here. Put this on that tape. I love this country. Look at us. We're a polyglot nation taking all the cast-offs from all these other places, people who came here because they were ne'er-do-wells or they were seekers—they were desperate and vulnerable and hungry or in search. And that's America. Everything we've been talking about is America.