BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

PART ONE: ARRIVAL

My first recollection of Black Mountain College is going there.

Shafts of grey milk light permeated the great all of the old Penn Station in New York. How well I knew this light. It was the Dresden railway station all over again. These were nineteenth-century citadels, built at a time when men not only dreamt of faraway places, but confidently felt they could reach them. Great temples of arrivals and departures — the Valhallas of their time.

And from these great centers of iron and steam, silver rails radiated in all directions — iron horses spewing smoke sped men to their destinations — and their destinies.

Mine was a college in the South.

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The Southern Railway train, which left Penn Station at noon — with black waiters in red dinner jackets whisking crumbs off white linen tablecloths in the dining car, ice cubes in large carafes knocking noisily against each other, peach cobbler for dessert, and clusters of men drinking bourbon, smoking cigars and talking cotton and tobacco — had sometime after midnight turned into a pumpkin. Its red and white dining car had been removed, the bourbon-drinking, cigar-smoking men had gotten off, and the train was shortened by several links. It was now climbing into a kind of Appalachia, making rural stops.

What left New York the night before as the last word in travel had, Cinderella-like, returned its palace finery. By the time I

opened the shade and stared at the red clay of the region, it had become a milk train making whistle stops. High Point, Lexington, Statesville, Hickory, Alpine, Marion, Old Fort, Black Mountain.

The college garbage truck waited for me at the station. I was the only student that had arrived.

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Hidden in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, Black Mountain College had been a former summer resort. Its two wooden lodges, now dormitories, looked like the rustic administration buildings of a neglected summer camp; its dining room appeared not unlike the mess hall of migrant farmers. Yet, this gone-to-seed kind of place was envisioned in the early Thirties by a group of dissident professors from Rollins College and by some renowned refugee artists from the Bauhaus School in Germany as a college very unlike any that had ever existed before and probably since.

It was a kind of twentieth-century Shangri-La. Cut off from the outside world, one stumbled into Black Mountain with mud on one's boots or, as in my case, in a cloud of dust from the garbage truck. But contrary to a Tibetan lamasary, which was natural to the rarified regions of the Himalayas, Black Mountain College was dissonant to the honeysuckle-scented woods of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The college was not produced by its region and had little relation to it. Rather, like a floating university, it had tied up at the foot of the Great Smokeys because land was cheap.

And unlike a real Shangri-la, Black Mountain offered no metaphysical teachings. The college was clearly a twentieth-century vanguard think tank of the Western world. The approach was

existentialist. The product was intellectual. Man was the creator and the measure.

I knew little of this that September day in 1945 when I climbed into the garbage truck and drove with a fellow student in dungarees on that bumpy dirt road through the woods. I had picked the college from a list of liberal arts schools and, since it had accepted me, and some of the others had not, I went.

I was seventeen years old and I knocked at its gates. I am speaking symbolically, for Black Mountain College had no gates, no locks, and no keys. It lay open and exposed to all the elements and influences of its time; to wayfaring strangers in search of the *avant-garde* and disdainful of degrees; to stray dogs from neighboring farms; to ideas and theories, constructive and destructive. It lay there, nestled against two voluptuous hills which looked like breasts and a tranquil lake called Lake Eden.

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When I graduated three months earlier from Fairlawn High, my New Jersey high school, a special photograph was taken for The Crimson and Gray yearbook of a fellow student, Keith Mitchell, who later became Dave Brubeck's well known bass player, and me. We had both been voted “The Most Original” by the graduating class of 1945. Keith was asked to wear his jacket buttoned in the back, and I stood next to him in my white bobby socks with my shoes in my hands. I guess that's what “Most Original” was supposed to mean at Fairlawn. But not so at Black Mountain. Although the college stood for innovation, to be original there did not mean to be silly. All experimentation, all juxtaposing of basic tenets, was done with great seriousness. There was no place for dilettantism at Black Mountain. Innovation and

experimentation were approached with as much devotion as the citing of the Canon Laws in a monastery.

Dressed in blue jeans and denim work shirts and wearing our own hand-made thong sandals, we were the monks and nuns of the *avant garde.*

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The GI Bill helped fill the ranks that year with young men just returned from the Second World War. There were ninety of us, which was top capacity.

Black Mountain had no age requirements, no grades, and no examinations. Its one rule, if it can be called that, was to have an "interlude" once every semester when all classes were suspended, and that period was proclaimed as an important exercise in using leisure time. Most Black Mountain students were strongly self-directed, functioning best when left to work out their own schedules and interests. Interludes were generally peak periods of productivity.

The ratio of about fifteen faculty members to ninety students allowed each class to be a seminar and sometimes, an encounter. In the mid-forties, encounter sessions were a long way from being commonly practiced, but Black Mountain was decades ahead of its time. Faculty members used the college as a laboratory for trying out new concepts and new teaching methods, which they had no chance to do in the more established academia. Additionally, each faculty member owned the college co-operatively for as long as he or she cared to stay, and everyone lived at the college. No one commuted to Black Mountain during the day and went home, or lived elsewhere at night. Once you had made it to Black Mountain, you moved in completely.

This unique set-up had been intended by the group of dissident professors from Rollins College, primarily John Rice, whose iconoclastic life and teaching style had brought him into disfavor at Rollins and who, in 1933, the year Black Mountain College was founded, invited the painter Josef Albers of the German Bauhaus School, which was in disfavor with the new Nazi regime, to join the Black Mountain faculty.

By the time I arrived on the scene, twelve years later, the professors from Rollins College were no longer there, but the college's main ingredient, its open-endedness, was. It remained as the important backdrop, against which different players staged their ideas and concepts, free from outside objections.

However, Black Mountain was not without clashes. Spores of dissention germinated in thus bell jar of intellectual freedom from within and after a period of time, a point was usually reached when it became clear that the opposing concepts, their protagonists and their followers, could not co-exist. One faction would then make its exodus, leaving the other behind as the drained victor of the spoils.

During my two-year stay there, two major factions were confronting each other over a matter which my family and I never had to consider before coming to the New World. But once here, it began to crop up under different guises: equality.

The episode at Macy's, for example, when nothing fitted, was my not easily forgotten lesson in equality. There, the ideological concept of everyone being equal was translated into mass-produced merchandise, which seared home the message that everything is equal when everything is the same. If you can't fit into the sizes on the

rack, something is wrong with you, not the sizes. Two million coats can't be wrong.

Or, that the power of the boss is not superior to his workers, *i.e.*, my father's encounter with the union officials in Paterson, New Jersey.

Or, that each vote is equal and that the concept, or the person who receives the most votes, must be considered the best one, even when he, she, or it, may not be, because the most valued principle in a democracy is majority rule — a lesson learned from Parliamentary Procedure at P.S. #13.

Now, in the sophisticated atmosphere of Black Mountain College, the concept of equality reared up again. It took the form of elitism vs. grass roots.

Josef Albers, the great art teacher and inspirer of many, taught in guru-like fashion, meditation upon materials. For the visually oriented, it was a kind of religion — a concentration on the nature of rope, twine, color, metal, plastic, *etc*., their inherent qualities in terms of their texture and "vibration," and led to the discovery and re-discovery of esthetic, visual, and tactile relationships in the world of painting and design, albeit to the exclusion of other matters.

This shutting out of the outside world was certainly necessary in order to achieve the heightened perceptions for being cognizant of the "soul" of the inanimate. It was not unlike what a spiritually involved person needs for heightening his perceptions of the divine, except for the fact that the true guru in the metaphysical sense, considers himself the inheritor of an already existing divinity, whereas the twentieth-century Black Mountain artist, uninvolved

with superior forces, ran the risk, through the very act of creation, of considering himself divine.

But even if he didn't go quite that far, and merely felt he was so disciplined in his search for artistic forms that social involvement and government did not apply to him, for he was law unto himself and bothered no one, the elitism of the artist over the common man was at issue. And since privilege always goes with elitism, it was something that the artist implied he had a right to have more of. But what constituted privilege at Black Mountain? Certainly it wasn't dress; we all made our own sandals and dressed alike wearing the Levis and work shirts purchased at the GI surplus stores. And it wasn't money. We didn't need much there. The privilege he asked for was merely more privacy from the community and more freedom from community responsibilities. Couldn’t dishwashing and garbage detail be performed more often by the less gifted?

Hear! Hear!

To be sure, the implications of this view would be a touchy point in any environment, but it was particularly so at Black Mountain, where ordinary maintenance chores were essential to the very operation of the college, which could afford little paid help and was almost completely dependent on student and faculty labor.

The spokesman for the opposing point of view during this 1945-1947 period was John Wallen, a young man from Ohio, who was in the process of finishing his doctorate in psychology at Harvard. He tackled the question in three ways:

As an American pragmatist, management consultant, and efficiency expert, John Wallen argued with charts, statistics, and brass tacks on the economic plight of the college and its gut need for a more efficiently run work program. Obviously, if the work load were more

equally distributed, with all hands on deck, less time could be spent by each person on these tasks, as long as all contributed equally. It was a common sense approach that left no room for *prima donnas*.

As a mid-western Protestant, John Wallen saw value in all work whether or not it was art, and value in men and women, whether or not they were artists.

And, as a young psychologist, who had come under the influence of what were then the new approaches, *i.e.*, Carl Rogers (group process) and Hayakawa (semantics), John Wallen lectured on the relativity of value judgments. He questioned all absolutes, for who was to say what was art and what wasn't when so much depended on the time in history, the values of the society at that time, early childhood conditioning, and what one had for dinner?

Thus, if all men and women were, in fact, equal as human beings, with potentials which may or may not manifest within their life span depending on the above-mentioned relative factors, then, John Wallen implied, all men and women and all work, whether artistic or not, was important and, therefore, of value.

But what about Beethoven? That question usually came up when John Wallen's approach seemed to make too much sense.

Yes, what about Beethoven?

Well, wasn't Beethoven's Fifth Symphony a contribution to society, or would he, too, first have to shovel coal at Black Mountain in order to ingratiate himself as a co-operative member of the John Wallen faction of the Black Mountain College community?

That was the question.

When Albert Einstein was a young man, he and his colleagues also had a question which was ever recurring and left unresolved. The question was, “Does God play dice?” In other words, is the world happenstance, like a game of dice, or is there a plan to the universe? Naturally, if there is a plan, there is order, and where there is order, there are laws for physicists to find. But what's the point of looking, if God only plays dice? *Ad infinitum*.

Those physicists who chose to believe in a superior being, or a higher force, as Einstein did himself, searched for the order in the universe, *i.e.*, the nature of atomic matter, the nature of the atom, *etc.* Those who did not believe in a higher force, stayed with probability.

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I did not choose John Wallen because I liked to shovel coal. Rather, like the New World, which asked no questions as to what one had done before, accepting the newcomer to its shores — letting him settle wherever he chose, study whatever he wished and work — I reached out for the concepts held by the young American, rather than those of the elder European, because they dealt with people and I felt included, *a priori*.

I had not yet excelled in anything, but searched for acceptance without portfolio, rather than the other way round — like a true immigrant to the New World.

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