

College President Tries Life on the Other Side

If you could be me for just one hour . . .

walk a mile in my shoes . . .

—Joe South

Little Haverford College in Pennsylvania had 750 students, 80 teachers and a singular president who was always urging his students to break the "lockstep" of their lives.

And then in 1973, he broke the lockstep of his life by starting a two-month sabbatical digging sewer ditches in Atlanta, Ga. for \$2.75 an hour. The "climactic" event that brought college president John Coleman into the ditches took place three years before in 1970, the attack by construction workers on peace marchers in Wall Street.

He recalls reading with a sickening dismay of overalled men banging their hard-hats on the long-haired heads of student activists.

"Part of me," he says, "was on both sides of the clash. There had to be a reason why both groups did what they did . . . I wished that I understood more of what both sides were saying and feeling."

The journal covers eight weeks, divided roughly into three parts covering the ditch digging in Atlanta; his time as sandwich and salad man at the Oyster House in Boston; his stint as a trashman for Liberty Refuse Co. in College Park, Maryland.

Coleman used his real name, told his employers that he was a dropout from the sales world ("which in a way, I was") and left the rest of his past at home.

Part of his immediate past included a stretch at the Ford Foundation under McGeorge Bundy and he was initially inclined to stay there when the Haverford job first opened up:

But I saw how many of the professionals at Ford and other foundations had grown lazy or arrogant after their first few years on the staff. Few people can handle the experience of being begged year after year.

Conversely, back in the ditches, Coleman reports that few people can handle the experience of being put down year after year.

"Just a goddam laborer," he writes after witnessing Dick the engineer bitch about Stanley the pipe man. "Would I ever get hardened to hearing that if this were my life's work? It's a precondition for loving others that man love himself first. How can he do that if the part of his life which is his job is treated in so callous a way?"

The teacher in him extracts the lesson: To the extent that anyone back on the campus feels tonight he is just a goddam laborer, we have failed as much as if we cheated him in his pay.

From the physical standpoint, you get the feeling the prey is in, once he adjusts to it, hog heaven.

He eats well, sleeps well and discovers muscles he never knew he had and no part of the job is more satisfying than the soaking bath afterward.

At 50, he is proud of being accepted by his boss, the sharp eyed Gus, and his co-workers as a shoveler of some ability.

"No one is going to tell you," he writes, "That you are a good man in this crew. The closest you can come to an open expression of respect is when you are called an obscenity by someone who is smiling at the same time. That's a clear enough message, I suppose."

Leaving Atlanta and the ditches, he heads for Boston and tries restaurant work. (He learned how to cook a decent meal after his



**BOOKS of
the TIMES**

by **GEORGE VUKELICH**

Blue Collar Journal: A College President's Sabbatical

By John R. Coleman, J. B. Lippincott, 252 pages.

marriage of 23 years ended in divorce, and he figures it fitted him for some menial restaurant job).

He gets one: porter-dishwasher at Stuart's Restaurant in Boston and is fired within an hour:

He had begun mopping the floor when the boss came over from behind the counter.

"What's your name?"

"John."

"I'm afraid you won't do. This isn't your work., I can tell." He put two dollars in my hand.

"But why?"

"It's not your work. Sorry." He was gone.

Coleman recalls that he was in a state of shock and anger and for the first time he began to understand what men and women of his age who lost their jobs went through.

He turns down a job in a nursing home kitchen: "I wouldn't have the internal strength to work in this next-to-the-last resting place."

He turns down a job in a country club kitchen: "I thought about long hours in a sterile kitchen in the service of people with whom I had little in common . . . their world seems even farther from mine than the world of the pipeline workers in Atlanta was."

And he winds up as salad and sandwich man at Boston's Oyster House.

"People in restaurants," he writes, "seldom look at the faces of those who wait on their table. They have still less reason to look at a busboy or a salad man. I become a non-person when I put on white. In effect, I say to those I meet, 'There's nobody here.'"

The book's third section, Coleman's trashman experience, is a rollicking, perceptive swing through College Park, Md., with the trucks of Liberty Refuse.

"The way most people look at you," Steve said, "you'd think a trashman was a goddam monster. Say hello and they stare at you in surprise. They don't know we're human . . ."

Coleman determines to say hello to everybody on his route and he soon sizes them up by their trash: The Tidy Tims, the Dirty Dans, the Wet Willies (they leave uncovered trash cans out during rains) and the Roguish Robs (they put unauthorized trash in their cans, like a cost-iron engine block wrapped in a candlewick spread).

One of Coleman's conclusions:

"Someday we may find," he writes, "a broader recognition of the need for rhythm in young people's lives, the need for times of deep, disciplined involvement in formal study and then for times of paid work and travel of more than a summer's length. The next step will be to recognize the need for a similar rhytm in our own lives."

It might be instructive to have the opinions of other presidents at other places of learning. Perhaps John Weaver in Madison. Or Miller Upton in Beloit. Or Richard Nixon in Washington.

John R. Coleman was born in Canada. He received his B.A. from the University of Ontario and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. He is the author of seven books on labor and economics, has served as President of Haverford College since 1967, and also presides as Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank in Philadelphia.