

June 1, 1991 (Vol. 6, no. 19)

Dear Colleague:

Revolutionaries like Lenin and Mao, who were willing to sacrifice millions of people to attain utopia, had themselves never seen a real utopia. Wherever they looked they saw abject poverty, bourgeois grossness, and upper-class ostentation. What if they had encountered utopia? With such experience, would they still have considered the human sacrifice worthwhile? In other words, what if Lenin and Mao had not merely dreamed but actually saw and ate in the Memorial Union, UW-Madison?

Memorial Union is, surely, utopia. The physical setting of lake and distant shore is nearly perfect. The building is handsome and its cafeteria, though not luxurious, offers comfort and a splendid view. Food is wholesome and affordable. Newspapers can be brought at the indoor newsstand or borrowed from patrons who no longer need them, as you get ready to sit down to a carafe of coffee and pancakes. All around you, you see not only students boning up physical geography, or holding hands, but an assortment of townspeople--doddering elderly retirees, babies bawling in high chairs, workmen at their coffee-break, salespersons looking over their catalogs, pensioners and out-of-work intellectuals who use the friendly cafeteria as their club, paraplegics in wheelchairs, and mentally handicapped persons spearing their food and talking to themselves.

What I see is not only a handsome place, but a caring social world made up of people from all walks of life. Anyone who is not stark raving mad is welcome. People at the Union seem to enjoy each other's presence, if not each other's company. Diversity peaks here, in age range, health, wealth, intellectual accomplishment, happiness and despair. No one is in command, yet we all behave ourselves. A utopia that a Lenin or a Mao can only dream of is right here in my neighborhood. Yet I am overcome, at times, by sadness. Is this all? The striving and horrors of history have culminated miraculously in a happy outcome--the best possible outcome, which is the Memorial Union. But it does not seem to me quite good enough. A recent survey finds that the majority of Americans still believe in God. Maybe they rather than the unbelievers have the right idea--the intellectually demanding thought that any deeply satisfying human life requires a metaphysical-transcendental foundation.

Have a good summer and see you next Fall,

