

The Importance of People

Stephen M. Corey

TEACHERS ARE PEOPLE

DO YOU KNOW the new people who joined your teaching staff this fall? Do you really know the people you have worked with for years? We ask these questions because we believe that many educators place a disproportionate emphasis on teaching techniques and not enough on the importance of people. The achievement of personal integrity by the individual and the appreciation of that same quality in other people is as important to the success of a school program as concern for the development of the program itself. Stephen M. Corey of the School of Education of the University of Chicago will write "The Importance of People." Each month Mr. Corey will present scenes from life situations which reflect significant concepts of behavior and which may be counterparts of many of your own experiences. The cases described are actual situations, disguised to protect the persons concerned.

MISS SCOTT is a bright, articulate, beginning teacher. She knew everyone in college at least superficially but has barely had time since school started to get a line on her colleagues.

MRS. ANDERSON is older and mellower and for seventeen years has served successfully as curriculum coordinator. One of the reasons for her success is evident in the following conversation which took place late one afternoon in a corner of the faculty room. Both Miss Scott and Mrs. Anderson like each other. They started to "hit it off" well from the very start of school six weeks earlier.

MRS. ANDERSON: Well, Sunshine, how are things going? I haven't seen you to chat for a week.

MISS SCOTT: Oh, fine — I guess. I like the kids and they seem to like me. The Barton boy asked me if I would be sponsor for the Photography Club and when I said I didn't know a shutter from a tripod he said that didn't make any difference.

MRS. ANDERSON: Good. I think he exaggerated a bit but several of the children have told me that you seem interested in them and that they could talk easily to you. How are you coming with the other teachers?

MISS SCOTT: Why? Have you heard anything?

MRS. ANDERSON: No. Helen Bates said she had sat next to you at lunch several times and that you seemed happy and resourceful.

- MISS SCOTT: She's sort of an odd one, isn't she? I mean with her long skirt and high collar and wedding ring on her right hand. I wasn't able to get very far talking with her.
- MRS. ANDERSON: Yes. I guess Helen is a bit odd. I've known her so long, though, and like her so much as a person that her peculiarities don't loom up. Has anyone told you about her?
- MISS SCOTT: No. What is there to tell? Scandal?
- MRS. ANDERSON: Hardly. Helen Bates came to Central about eleven years ago and for a long time no one seemed to know her. She was a bit mousy and did her work and was pleasant, but she lived up on the North side and didn't respond very noticeably to superficial attempts to become friendly. I didn't get to know her myself until near the end of her third year. I was picking my mail up in the office about 5 o'clock and saw her reading a telegram with a set to her jaw that almost scared me. You know how sweet she looks usually.
- MISS SCOTT: Yes. As if she were about to play someone's Madonna.
- MRS. ANDERSON: Well, this time she looked different. I didn't think too much about it but the next day during my free period she came up to 209, sat down across from me and said she had to unload.
- MISS SCOTT: Oh. That type. Needs a shoulder to cry on and all that.
- MRS. ANDERSON: No more than anyone else, I guess. But she needed it badly then. It seems her father had died right after she got out of college and she and her mother had been left with three children to rear on the income from a forty-acre vegetable farm up near Hamilton.
- MISS SCOTT: Quite an assignment for a mouse. Was her mother on that order, too?
- MRS. ANDERSON: Her mother had paralyzed legs — lived in a wheel chair. It seems that Helen had put every dime into this little farm and during the summer she worked like a horse canning, packing vegetables, establishing outlets for produce in Cincinnati that didn't rob her too much, and keeping the children clean behind the ears. Hence her long skirts. Her clothes are, as she put it once, just "cover up," not adornment.
- MISS SCOTT: What about the telegram?
- MRS. ANDERSON: Oh, yes. It doesn't seem so important now. They used a little truck to haul the stuff to market, some wires got crossed or something, and the thing burned up. This on top of two sisters with whooping cough — they are both at Illinois now, Delta Gammas — was more than Helen could stand. She had to talk.
- MISS SCOTT: Well, who'd have thought it? Could you help her much?
- MRS. ANDERSON: In a way, I guess I did. I was terribly concerned, and she knew I was and appreciated it. She talked for an hour and since then we've been awfully relaxed with one another. I told her about my troubles and we both came to know one another as people. We work together fine on committees even though we don't always have the same ideas about how things should be done. We know we like each other anyway.
- MISS SCOTT: Do you see a lot of one another?

MRS. ANDERSON: No. We're both busy but when we are together we don't spar around much. We can talk about anything.

MISS SCOTT: Are there a lot of people on the staff with backgrounds like Miss Bates? I don't mean with farms and little sisters and crippled mothers but with interesting backgrounds. Most teachers seem so sort of stuffy and standoffish as if nothing interesting ever happened to them.

MRS. ANDERSON: That's only when you don't know them. When you know them they're all interesting. I mean when you know them as people. Take John Henry — the bald-headed one who teaches history in 136, have you met him?

MISS SCOTT: Barely. Don't tell me he was an actor or something.

MRS. ANDERSON: No, but his wife died six years ago and he refused to let relatives rear his boy. He's wonderful with boys. Every summer since his boy was 11 the two of them have taken motorcycle trips to American historical shrines — not only the chief ones but out-of-the-way places like some town up on the east fork of the Little Miami where Indians and whites intermarried and had schools and churches long before 1740. They stay for days sometimes and take pictures and notes. They have wonderful trips and Mr. Henry has collected materials for his classes that keep the children actually excited.

MISS SCOTT: I would never have pictured him on a motorcycle. He looks more the type that reads papers at home every night and goes to summer school to learn how to be a principal — if and when.

MRS. ANDERSON: No. When you get to know him he's terribly interesting. So is Betty Knox, next to you in Room 311. Have you gotten acquainted with her?

MISS SCOTT: Again, barely. She talks easily and we joke a bit each morning but I haven't the slightest idea what goes on behind her front. What does?

MRS. ANDERSON: You'd enjoy finding out for yourself but she's another interesting one. Her family has more or less disowned her because she asked a 16-year-old cousin of hers who had a baby without benefit of marriage to come and live with her until the poor kid, the cousin, could get squared away and find a job.

MISS SCOTT: H-mmm-mmm. Where's the baby?

MRS. ANDERSON: Oh, Betty keeps her at her little flat. The high school junior girls in Child Care have almost adopted the youngster and they literally suffocate her with attention.

MISS SCOTT: Well, well. Here I am in the midst of all these things and I never suspected. I'm sure dumb.

MRS. ANDERSON: No, you're not. You just haven't been around here long enough. Teachers are like everyone else — they're people. I hear more than most because I see them all and they know how interested I am. I just couldn't do my work if I had to deal with a bunch of professional automatons. The ones I think I help most are the ones I know best — as people.

MISS SCOTT: So they say — and it works with the kids, too. You've given me some ideas. I'll let you know how they come out. Goodbye! I go now to explain the Articles of Confederation. Wish me luck!

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