

The Importance of People

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LOOKING BOTH WAYS

JANUARY IS a good time to talk of Janus. In the early days of this century there was a race of men called janitors, just as in Rome there once was a god named Janus. But now times are changed (and a good thing, too!) and just as the prestige of the Latin tongue has waned, so has the honor attached to the god-given term of "janitor." "Custodian" is the better word today, and it is to be hoped that this change symbolizes an increased general respect, as it certainly does an increased self-respect on the part of the ever-watchful caretakers who tend our public buildings.

It is not certain if the school janitor of the past was a special branch of the general family, but certainly he represented special virtues. Lest these be forgotten, they shall be named here: Watchfulness, Philosophy, and Fellow Feeling. I name them in the ascending order of their importance, I think.

There was many a teacher in my high school who knew less of the students there than Captain Archer who presided over the old building and who rang the warning and the tardy bell. On one memorable occasion a habitually sly member of the sophomore class cut the bell rope so that, with no



official warning given, no official tardiness could be registered. Captain Archer was somewhat surprised, as we all were, when the rope, which had been cut nearly but not quite in two, parted and fell on his head. It was his duty to report the incident, and, as I recall, something stern was done by the superintendent. But Captain Archer's only comment to the public was, "Boys will always be havin' fun. Besides, it's a lot easier to put on a new rope than to get a cow down from the belfry." He did not, even under stress, you see, subscribe to the younger-generation-going-to-the-dogs theory of many weary and frustrated old people. He even gave the evidence to prove that times—and youth—were growing better.

I was struck by this and other pithy remarks of this good man, but I suppose I never really began to consider seriously the place of the janitor in my education until I went to a New England College where certain pursuits of knowledge required access to buildings such as the library after hours, and it was the janitor rather than the librarian or a professor who understood that when you had to have a social science handbook or a copy of Shelley, you had to have it, even (or especially) if it was midnight. And, too, there was Joe, in the fraternity



house. Joe was as wise a man as any in that place—wiser in fact.

It was Joe who first brought home a fundamental of biological science, involving the family, romantic idealism and social patterns. One day when Joe was patiently picking up the card room, retrieving the



debris of lesser, younger, and more careless men, the house chaplain asked, apropos of nothing whatever, "Joe, how many children do you have?"

"Four that I know of," said Joe, and went on to connect the vacuum cleaners, possibly, but not certainly, oblivious of the fact that he had started an endless series of new speculations about man and woman. It was a compatriot of Joe's who stopped the angry attacks on the star tackle of our football team after we had lost the Big Game. The tackle was being upbraided for having lost his sleep through a heavy date the night previous to the game. Old Doc, though himself an ardent follower of the team, silenced the bitter accusers and announced, "No, boys. Some



women is sweeter than any ball game ever won or lost."

It is natural, I suppose, that janitors (for that is the main topic) should turn often and long to thoughts of love. For, like the poets, they are watchful. Perhaps they see what is, more often than those who look for what should be. It was only after I became a faculty inmate of educational buildings that I realized how deeply janitors, along with Vergil Horace, Freud, Havelock Ellis, and the Elizabethan poets, were impelled to think about human motives such as love and honor. They also think a great deal about authoritarianism.

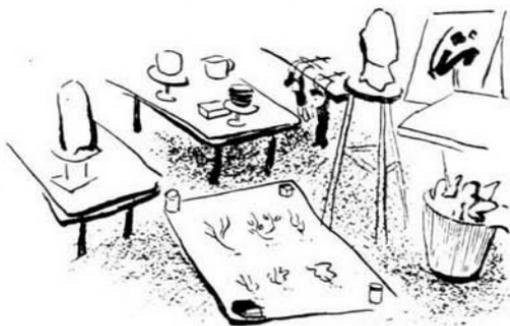
For example, janitors in a certain university were at one time checked on by an overseer. This man was tall, thin, and dyspeptic. He made irregular rounds, hoping to surprise his underlings in derelections from duty. Whenever he found anything out of place or a job undone he seemed to take pleasure in recording demerits against the unlucky culprit. This policy of his did more than any labor organizer to bring into being a strong janitors' union. But in his days of "unimpeded snooperiority" as one janitor called it, he took special pleasure and offense in his visits to one campus building. It was the laboratory school where a good deal of experimental work was done. Here there were continual changes in the janitorial staff. This example will show why.

The art teacher of the school had made the studio a place rich in materials of all kinds and had invited teachers of all subjects to use her room. It was not uncommon to find at work there a boy from the mathematics class painting panels for a mural on the history of measurement; a group of eighth-graders working on a series of plaques which showed the plans of medieval, Victorian, and modern cities; some ninth-grade science students getting ready for a puppet play on the development of concepts of the universe; a core class making models for an exhibit on housing; a group of upper classmen designing sets and costumes for a play; all these in addition to the regular classes in painting, sculpture, and art history.

Since these projects involved many materials and considerable time, it was natural that the room was often full of a great array of objects in unfinished form, and that the clean-up problem was usually acute. What

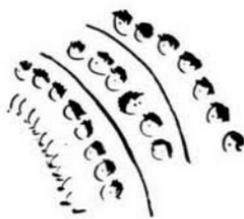
happened over and over again was that the students left things so that work could start quickly again the next day; the janitors saw the point and did not disturb them. The inspector reported that things were in a mess, the janitors were reprimanded and complained to the principal, the principal requested the art teacher to tidy things up, the art teacher did her best, but could never get the things satisfactory to all concerned.

This was an excellent illustration of the difficulties which can be created by persons who have different purposes in mind. The teacher and the janitors could work out a good mode of operations so long as student



janitors and other doers of the less-honored and interesting tasks of our society.

He concluded with a story of the janitor in the largest high school of the city. This man was a kindly person when he began his service. He had remained so through all the hard work, the slights, and indignities put upon him by irritable teachers and careless children. And by two things—being kind, and taking time to talk with people—this good man had become a friend and counselor to hundreds of people, young and old. But he had never told anyone what to do. He had listened well, and shown sincere interest. That was his big contribution to education. How much it was needed and valued was symbolized, said the superintendent, by a happening of the past June. Somewhat to the surprise of some parents and teachers, the senior yearbook had been dedicated to the janitor of the school. The dedication was in these words: "To someone we care about because he cares about us."



experience was the main thing to be considered. But when the inspector came in from outside, his standards (as set up by the Big Boss, the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds)—based on the care of lecture classrooms, not of individual development—were imposed to the general discomfort of all.

Finally, there was the school superintendent who introduced his speech on "Extra-Curricular Activities as Part of Total Education" by saying, "I have been in this school system eleven years and have worked under four janitors." He went on to point out how many of the things from health to human relationships—which seem small but make lasting impressions—are the results of the human and professional qualities of



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