

The Importance of People

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THE CASE OF ARTHUR AND OTHERS

PROFESSOR AESOP set his glass down and began feeling in his pocket for his tobacco pouch. His companion, a former student and now curriculum director of a large city system, went on with his comment.

"It's easy to see things that are wrong, especially from the outside," he said. "Maybe that's why the myth grew up that for real results, you need a group of strangers to come and evaluate a school. There may be merit in it, but not unless the strangers understand the purpose of the local faculty."

"You're right about local purposes," said the professor. "I'm sure that Arthur, there, felt grossly misunderstood when he started behind the meat counter and got kicked by the butcher."

Arthur raised his nose from the hearth rug and cast a temporary eye on the professor, winked, re-arranged his paws and his tail, and went back to intensive resting.

"As a matter of fact, I believe that Arthur's intentions were to make off with the best meat he could find. The question is, why?"

"Don't you think the butcher would have kicked him just the same?" queried the younger man.

"He might," said Aesop. "On the other hand, if he had known that the neighbors who were to feed Arthur while I was out of town had been called suddenly to a family sick bed in the country, and that Arthur was shut up in the garage for two days without food and only a little water, it might have made a difference."

"But Arthur won't go behind that counter again," remarked the younger man. "Maybe that's the justification."

"No," said the professor, "he won't even go near the butcher shop. That's the trouble so often when you settle things by force. It leaves the whole problem of future relationships unsolved, and more difficult than ever."

"Let's apply it to an institution—to your school system."

"You have been telling me about a number of very difficult persons. You began with the English teacher who speaks of students as 'my children' and who resents any influence which other teachers may have upon them. Then you mentioned someone high in the central office—you wouldn't be thinking of the superintendent, would you?—who is a dictator in temperament."

"Don't forget the faculty at Watercrest," broke in the curriculum director.

"Oh yes, a whole faculty which has been in the 'best' high school a long time and which has lost sight of any need for common purposes or for taking part in planning any new undertakings. Yes. That is a hard one for a curriculum director who wants changes and improvements. I suspect that the language teacher you mentioned—the one who is so much in love with her standards and so little concerned about individual pupils—is on the faculty of that school."

The younger man grinned.

"You spoke also," continued the professor, "of a science teacher who does something which you called 'putting on an act.'"

"All of these are recognizable types in educational circles. That's why they are worth discussing at length and why it is important to discover the causes for their behavior. If you can understand as well as characterize each one, you may find a way to deal with them successfully."

"But you did not confine yourself to these difficult and perplexing cases. You described at least three others, even more difficult."

"Yep!" said his companion. "The home economics gal who has such good ideas and is sweet and kind and takes an awful beating from the old hands who shove her and her ideas around if she opens her mouth."

"Just so," said Aesop. "And the two radicals—the physical education man who has so much concern for putting social ideals into practice and who antagonizes people with his 'wild ideas,' and the social science teacher who is cynical and bitter about his job because he has to keep it to earn a living but he no longer believes that education, in school, can bring about much improvement in the way people live together."

"You've got it, all right," said the young man. "And while it made me feel better to tell you my troubles, I feel pretty gloomy as I hear you sum them up."

Aesop paused while he knocked out his pipe on the fire dog and gave Arthur a few welcome scratches. Then he sat down again and resumed.

"You feel better because you have begun to define the problem. You feel worse because it looks hard to deal with. But maybe talking it over can be some help, particularly if you talk it over with the people you have mentioned."

"They'd kick back, harder than the butcher," said the curriculum director. "They won't take criticism from anyone, least of all a new man in curriculum."

"No. None of us likes criticism as well as he should. Most of us like to be understood, though."

"Now you're coming back to your first point. Well, how do you do it? I've tried to be nice to everybody."

"Being nice is good as a beginning. But there is no end to the listening that it takes to be understanding."

"But there's no time—"

"It may be done in groups."

"But they won't talk about themselves in front of a group."

"They might talk about their concerns. Especially if you could begin in the right way. If someone knows how to ask their opinions, they might talk. They might even ask other people for their opinions. It's very hard. Scarcely anyone knows how to get this started. It is a different thing with every group and person. But in the cases you have mentioned there are certain things which stand out."

"Oh, you mean that the English teacher needs love so she wants the students to be

her children. The superintendent feels insecure, so he wears horns and bellows to conceal it. Is that it?"

"To be sure. And the teacher who is most insecure is likely to clutch not at straws but at 'standards.' The teacher who shows off before the class wants to be recognized and honored for his ability."

"And the faculty at Watercrest—what about them? It's the whole bunch of them."

"What do you think?" asked Aesop.

"Well, sometimes I wish those old folks would all eat toadstools and get retired fast that way."

"You think they are permanently ossified by age? It's a matter of age? What about John Dewey?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe it's something else. But they are so self-satisfied."

"Satisfied or indifferent?"

"Or afraid. Yes. I guess they don't see visions any more. And maybe, maybe it's because it's been a long time since anyone was interested in their visions."

"I think you are getting at it," said Aesop. He stood up and stretched, then went to the window and looked out at the snow-covered hill which fronted his house. A sparrow hopped onto the window sill. He spoke to it.

"We all need to dream to create, to do things, and to be loved. What other people think of us matters as much or more than anything else."

"We can't control all that happens to us, but we can control the way we meet it—to an extent."

"But the things that happen in an educational institution—a lot of them that matter the most, like the way staff people treat each other, the things we set up to work at with children, what we talk over with parents—these things can be controlled and planned for, not by a curriculum director alone, but by any group who will make a start."

"I know what you're going to say," the young man interrupted. "But what about the radical and the cynic?"

Professor Aesop turned back from his contemplation of the sparrow, who had exhausted his search for crumbs and was now chattering indignantly.

"Idealists need a lot of tenderness and a lot of concrete responsibility," he said.

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