

# The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

## THE BORE

"IT MUST BE LATE," thought Mary as she glanced out of the window and saw Miss Tenny striding down the walk. It *had* to be late if Miss Tenny was leaving, for she usually made it a point to be the first teacher in the building in the morning and the last to leave in the afternoon.

"I'm glad I stayed just a little longer, so I won't have to walk with her," Mary said to herself. "I wish she could talk about something other than how hard she works. It gets to be an awful bore. . . . I'd better hurry now, though, or I'll keep Dot waiting."

While Mary and Dot were having dinner, the conversation drifted to Miss Tenny.

the pages of the dictionary in her room! Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous? She says she does it regularly. If there weren't any smudges in ours, the youngsters wouldn't recognize it as a dictionary, and I'd be sure it wasn't being used. If she really feels it needs doing, why doesn't she let the children do it? Or if she does do such dull things with her time, I wish she wouldn't talk about them so much. Know what I've decided? I think she thinks it's cute to be working all the time. I believe she enjoys thinking of herself as a martyr. Hooey!"

"Ye-e-s," said Dot slowly. "I guess you're right, but maybe there's more to it than that. I'd be willing to make a bet about her."

"What kind of a bet?"

"A bet that no one has complimented her on anything for a long, long time—maybe not for years."

"That's a safe bet," said Mary. "What in the world would one compliment her on? Not her clothes—she looks like a bag of odds and ends collected by mistake. Not her personality or ideas—she's the biggest bore I know. Not her teaching—the kids can't stand her and I doubt if they learn a thing. Not her—"



Martyr—with arithmetic papers

"I just can't understand it," Mary said. "Don't you suppose she *wants* to have fun? I can't imagine anyone finding any joy in correcting papers all evening and spending hours and hours on fussy little lesson plans when she might better make more general plans, then let the children help with the rest. Do you know what she told me she was doing the other day? Erasing the smudges from



A bag of odds and ends

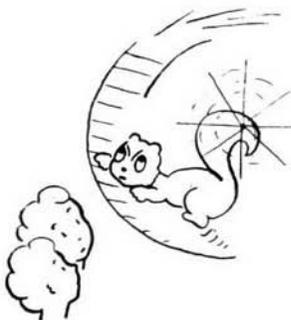
"I know," Dot interrupted. "Not anything. That's just the trouble. All of us want to be admired for something. We can't think of a thing to admire in Miss Tenney and probably everyone else feels the same way. My guess is that she knows it and is trying hard to find some satisfaction and recognition for her work. Or maybe she figures that if no one else will admire her, she can find personal satisfaction in thinking of herself as industrious and others as lazy."

Mary shook her head. "No. That doesn't make sense. If she were doing something interesting, I might understand it, but who's going to admire anyone for erasing smudges from pages of the dictionary! Or what virtue is there in getting to school at dawn, or even in correcting tons of arithmetic and spelling papers? Uh-uh, your theory is a washout."

"Wait a minute," begged Dot. "Not so fast. I don't think she's trying to be admired for the things she does, but for the fact that she works hard. Sounds silly, because you and I don't believe that work for work's sake is a virtue, but Miss Tenney may think it is. She may even kid herself into believing that the more uninteresting the work, the greater the virtue."

The scornful look on Mary's face left no doubt about her attitude toward such "virtues."

"You see," Dot continued, "it isn't what *we* think, but trying to see what *she* thinks, that helps us understand her. I agree with you that she's on the wrong track, but I don't think she thinks she is. Whether or not work for work's sake is a virtue may be somewhat beside the point, however. I think she'd be willing to settle for anything that would make her admired, but doesn't know anything else to try. As it is now, she's running around in a squirrel cage. The more she needs satisfaction and recognition, the more she works; the more she works, the more limited and pinched her personality becomes; the more limited and pinched her personality, the more she bores the people around her; the more she bores the people around her, the less attention they pay to her; the less attention paid to her, the more she feels the need for satisfaction and recognition; the more she feels the need for satisfaction and recognition, the more she works; and 'round and 'round it goes."



'round and 'round

"You may have something there," Mary agreed. "And when you put it that way, it sounds sort of pathetic, as though she keeps reaching for something that isn't there."

"That's it. And it *is* pathetic, isn't it?"

The scornful look was gone from Mary's face. Both girls were quiet and thoughtful as they ate their ice-cream. Finally Mary broke the silence.

"We've got to do something," she said earnestly, "we've got to."

"Yes," Dot agreed, "but what?"

"I don't know, but if you're right about why she is as she is, we ought to find something to compliment her about, something that will bring her the satisfaction and recognition you say she needs."

"You mean," Dot asked, "we have to tell her she's wonderful because she erases the dictionary? Nothing doing. In the first place, I'd feel like a hypocrite and a heel, and in the second place, it would only make her worse. She'd probably start erasing the whole library!"

"No," Mary agreed, "that wouldn't work. We'll have to find something else. There must be *something* good about her, or that she does well."

A deep silence followed.

"I have it!" Mary exploded with this exclamation so suddenly that Dot jumped and almost dropped her spoon.

"Listen," Mary continued. "I remember hearing Miss Tenny say once that she liked to cook. I remember it because I recall thinking I hoped she'd never ask me to dinner for I could never live through an evening with her. Let's give a pot-luck supper and

invite her, then praise her cooking in front of all the other girls."

Dot looked a bit doubtful, but willing to be convinced. "It might work. Let's try it."

From then on the conversation was full of plans for the supper.

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The pot-luck supper had come and gone. Mary and Dot were in the kitchen washing the dishes.



*It worked!*

"Well," said Mary, "it worked, didn't it? Miss Tenny fairly glowed when Fran Taylor asked for the recipe for that chocolate cake."

"Yes," agreed Dot, "it worked. But you have no idea how I've worried about that cake. What if it hadn't been good? Or what if Fran and the others hadn't backed us up in praising it? Or what if Miss Tenny had merely started in on how much work she'd put in it? It was an awful gamble."

"I suppose it was," Mary assented, "but perhaps I wasn't counting on it as heavily as you were. I have some other ideas up my sleeve. Maybe we could find a hat that'd look well on her, suggest she get it, then tell her how becoming it is. Or she might be persuaded to come to the art workshop. With her methodical ways, she ought to turn out some nice things on the potter's wheel. Or how do you suppose she'd do in the drama group? Or, when we get to know her better, we may find she has some ideas we'd be glad to praise. Maybe we're going to need these other ways of working. She may have gotten an inkling of how to share ideas through sharing chocolate cake, but one instance may not be enough."

"Pessimist, you," chided Mary. "But I guess you're right. Let's keep at it. I never realized how much people can do to help each other if they just take the time to try to understand, or how much real satisfaction it can give to everyone. Sounds a bit sentimental, but it's solid fact."

"I know what you mean," said Dot. "I feel that way, too. And, you know, Miss Tenny isn't nearly as much of a bore as I'd thought. Let's ask her to go to the movies with us tonight."

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From *Modern Man Is Obsolete* by Norman Cousins.

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