

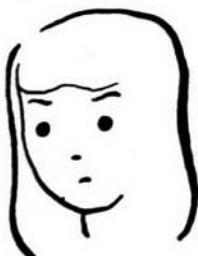
The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

AFRAID—OF WHAT?

"I'M JUST PLAIN SCARED," Mary Jane acknowledged to herself. "The very thought of doing my practice teaching before a group of thirty-five kids gives me shivers down my spine."

As she foresaw the situation, it was something straight out of a Salvador Dali painting, with seventy hostile, staring eyes and a limp watch that would allow time to pass only at a slimy crawl.



Just plain scared

". . . So you see, Aunt Alice," Mary Jane said after fifteen minutes of preliminary explanation, "I'm scared, and I want to know what to do about it."

Alice looked very old to Mary Jane, as 49 must always look old to 19,—old and tired, but wise. The girl was confident that the older woman would give her some answers

that would be comforting and sound, some tricks to make her feel more secure. She was a bit disconcerted when there was a silence that seemed to stretch into minutes. Finally Alice spoke.

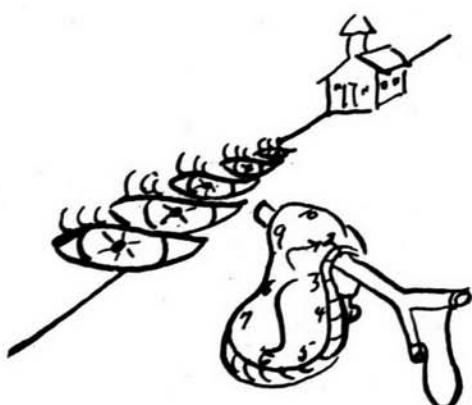
"Maybe a teacher never gets over being afraid. I know I haven't, and . . ."

This was too much for Mary Jane. The Dali picture took on a third dimension, stretching into year after desolate year, each filled with fear. She was sure she couldn't live through it. She was sure she would never become a teacher.

"You mean to say," she interrupted her aunt, "that you never get over it? You've been teaching all these years and you're still scared of the kids?"

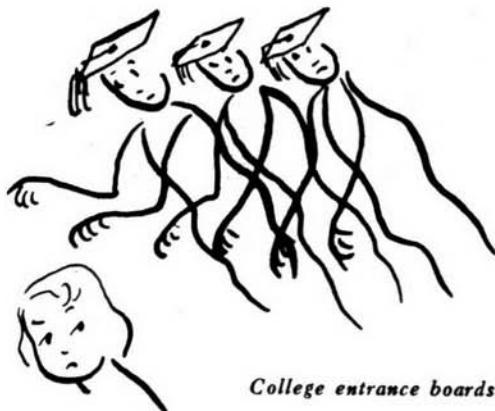
"No," answered Alice. "I'm still afraid, but I've learned to be afraid of some different things. I suppose every young teacher is afraid of youngsters at first, but you soon get over that when you get to know them. I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. Just concentrate on getting to see them as people, instead of thinking about the impression *you* are making, and you'll find it's easy."

"When I was a young teacher, I soon learned another fear, one I'm not very proud of. I was afraid of college entrance



Dali painting

"Aunt Alice!" she suddenly said to herself, "Why haven't I thought of her before? She'll know what to tell me to do. After all, she's been teaching for more years than I've been alive. She must know all the answers. I'll go to see her right away."



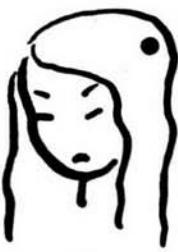
College entrance boards

boards and regents' examinations, and even of scores on standardized tests. I was afraid of principals and supervisors who tried to help me. And I was afraid of the teacher to whom my children went the next year, —afraid she'd blame me if they weren't all good readers, or obedient, or fine penmen.

"It took me a long time to get over that fear. It's a silly fear, isn't it? I hope you'll soon learn that it is. But the next fear I learned is the one I've never outgrown, and I hope I never will. It's not a fear of what will happen to me, but a fear for what might happen to youngsters.

"For example, I'll always fear what shame does to a child. I fear things and people that make him be ashamed when he shouldn't. I'll always be afraid I may help create such shame, or not give help in destroying it.

"I'll never forget Sue Thomson." Alice's eyes wore that far away look of seeing the long ago, and they were troubled. "Sue was in my class the first year I taught. She didn't learn very fast, even though she tried. I made her ashamed that she didn't learn fast by my prodding and ridicule and by forcing her into competition with faster-learning youngsters. I taught her to be ashamed of poor grades



Sue

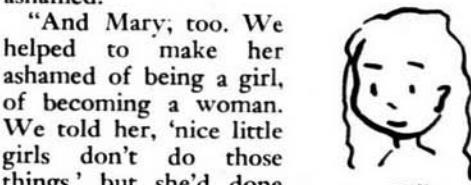
and miserable recitations and bad spelling. That's another way of saying I made her ashamed of herself. She learned in my classroom to go around with her eyes lowered and her shoulders drooping. She's a grown woman now, but she's still ashamed of herself for being 'stupid,' and I'm afraid she's beginning to be ashamed of her children for not being very bright in school, and she's teaching them to be ashamed of themselves.

"Do you see what I mean, Mary Jane? That's the sort of thing teachers ought to fear.

"Then there was Billy. He learned to be ashamed of his body. That wasn't all my fault, of course. His family and a lot of things in our society did their part, but I helped. We made him feel that having a body and letting it function normally and having a normal curiosity about it was 'dirty.' We gave him feelings of guilt that he's never outgrown. Even a little understanding a long time ago might have made it possible for him to be a happy husband and a proud father. We cheated him by making him feel ashamed.

"And Mary, too. We helped to make her ashamed of being a girl, of becoming a woman. We told her, 'nice little girls don't do those things,' but she'd done them, and kept on wanting to do them, so she began to feel guilty about being a 'tomboy.' She learned to be ashamed of herself and her sex.

"It was different with Sally, yet the same in a way. We taught her to be ashamed of being a woman by saying 'big girls don't do those things,' so to avoid feeling guilty, she never grew up. As a grown woman today, she's as lacking in responsibility as a child. She depends on



Sally

her husband as though he were a father and treats her children as playthings.

"We didn't help when Johnny began to be ashamed of his clothes and of not having lunch money, or money for model planes and candy bars. We didn't help him see that lack of money is not a shameful thing, or, more important, we didn't help him understand that he was not a shameful person because he lacked money. He left school to go to work as soon as the law would allow. I'm sure that further education would have helped him make a greater contribution to society.

"Milly learned in adolescence to be shamed of herself because she was a wall-flower and none of the boys asked her for dates. Rachel learned to be ashamed because of her family and her religion. John learned to be ashamed because of the color of his skin. Peter learned to be



Milly

ashamed because of his speech impediment. And we didn't help. We were too busy being afraid of youngsters, or of college entrance boards, or something else so much less important than the lives of boys and girls.

"So you see, Mary Jane, I'm afraid of being afraid of the wrong things. I'm afraid of not being *enough* afraid when important things are at stake. I'm afraid of such things as the wrong kind of shame, or misplaced feelings of guilt, or blind prejudice. I'm afraid of not giving help when help is needed. I hope you'll understand."

"Thank you, Aunt Alice," said Mary Jane. Her face was very solemn, but her eyes had lost that blind, scared look. "Thank you very much. You didn't tell me what I thought you would. I thought you might give me some tricks of 'discipline' so the kids would be sure to behave. I thought that was what I needed, but it wasn't. You are a fine teacher, Aunt Alice. Now I'm not afraid of children, I'm afraid for them, and I hope I'll always be afraid!"

The Changing World

housing and not only retain our freedoms but make them more meaningful.

Education must help people to see that labor, and especially labor leaders, have responsibilities to the rest of society. Labor has a right to work for higher wages and better working conditions. But if labor manages and conducts its battle for its own interests in such a way as to injure the rest of the population, labor is failing to live up to its responsibilities.

Education must analyze the problems of capitalism and private enterprise. The private enterprise system is on trial. It cannot live unless it exercises greater social responsibility. In our highly concentrated society, capital has increased responsibilities, greater even than those of labor, because of the power of our large industrial organizations.

Most important of all, education must have a constant overtone of concern for the welfare of all men. We are our

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brother's keepers. Every child should grow up in a school, home, and community atmosphere of social responsibility and social sensitivity. Cooperation rather than competition should be the spirit of education. But social responsibility, sensitivity, and cooperation can be taught best through action, through the daily processes of living. Failure to translate values into action makes them meaningless.

Other examples could be given, but perhaps these will suffice to indicate education's responsibility and the nature of the vigorous program in which we must engage if we are to be instrumental in saving freedom. This program must include work with the children in our schools. It must provide a community-wide education of adults. It must mobilize the civic organizations of each community. It must energize and revitalize that individual and collective sense of social responsibility without which freedom cannot live.

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