

# The Importance of People

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## THIS COULDN'T BE TRUE, OF COURSE

"AND I HOPE that the schools of Fort Slippery Elm are building a curriculum based on these needs, interests, and concerns of boys and girls and upon democracy as a way of life," concluded the Visiting Big Shot.

Everyone applauded. The spell of the Visiting Big Shot's persuasions was such that even reluctant listeners agreed he *had* something. Everybody, in varying degrees, thought he might do new and vital work himself, within reason.

And bless their hearts, they did intend to make something warm to the touch from the familiar philosophy. But along the way one thing and another caused implementation to be far from flawless.

For example, isolated critics felt that needs were not met in the junior high school when the discovery was made that the boys were passing pornographic pictures and gathering in furtive knots to snicker at certain joke books. Action aplenty was taken. The boys' counselor, the principal, teachers, and parents held an angry meeting. The town council was notified; stern searches of news stands followed. Fines were levied. Threats were made from bench and pulpit against despoilers of youth. Everything possible was done, critics said, *except to consider the basic need of adolescents for information about sex.*

Nobody applauded the Visiting Big Shot harder than Bob Mills, a first year teacher in the senior high school, but things were always happening to dampen his enthusiasm.

"Mr. Mills, why can't we talk about closing the auditorium to that speaker? Is the guy really a Red, or is the mayor all wet?" asks a junior in history class.

"If we have time at the end of the hour, we'll talk about it," answers the harassed teacher.

"That old end-of-the-hour routine," mutters the questioner. The end of the hour finds the class exploring the burning topic of the Missouri Compromise.



Mr. Mills is in a spot. He knows that the closing of the city auditorium tests the Bill of Rights, but county examinations and academic contests are coming up soon. Fort Slippery Elm has won blue ribbons and "firsts" in American History since 1923. *Interests and concerns of pupils (and teachers) must coincide.*

Miss Mellow, a fourth grade teacher, *knows* what interests children should have—including Billy, who brings a picture of atom bomb victims.

"Will there really be a third world war like my Dad says? We'll all be killed. I'm scared!" he says, hoping for comfort.

Miss Mellow takes his picture and puts it in the basket. Children are not to think of ugly things. They should enjoy gay stories, and folk dances, and imaginary airplane trips to see The Little Swedish

Playmates. Third world wars and such nonsense! What kind of parents would frighten Billy with loose talk? *She meets his needs by allowing him to work an extra fifteen minutes on the Hobby Fair.*



Here and there the democratic way of life is difficult to interpret. Early in April Miss Dill has a worried interview with her principal, Mr. Boggs. She had announced that anybody in the sophomore class could try out for any part in the annual historical pageant—surely a fair and democratic practice. But what happens! Mary Watson, a Negro girl, hopes to be the Statue of Liberty.

Mr. Boggs, sympathetic but worried, says, "Did you refuse her? If you made the broad announcement that tryouts were entirely open, you committed yourself. I can see where having Mary Watson in that part might offend some of our patrons who do not have our tolerant attitude."

"No, I told her to sign her name with the others, and the decision would be made later in the week."

"Good! You can decide on someone more suitable to the part, as it has always been done in our pageants. Then as a special opportunity for Mary you can write in a clever sequence about the underground railroad, or something. There's always a tactful way to handle these problems."

Miss Dill is grateful, *but less sure about the workings of democracy.*

Not so Mrs. Gay, who is absolutely certain about democracy. When meetings are held in her home room she takes a chair and becomes simply a member of the group, respecting the authority of the student chairman. Sometimes she gives just the right amount of helpful guidance. When two students are to be selected to represent the school at the Civic Club luncheon, for instance. Nominations are getting out of hand when she rises.

"Yes, Mrs. Gay."

"Mr. Chairman, I think we of room 215 should remember that the people we select represent *us* and *our school*. Their manners and English and appearance will reflect on *us*. I don't want to influence *our* decisions, but *we* must take this seriously. Thank you, Mr. Chairman."

"Yes, Mrs. Gay."

"Mr. Chairman, I nominate Marilyn," says a weary voice. Mrs. Gay beams.

"Mr. Chairman, I nominate Charles," is another dispirited response. *By majority vote Marilyn and Charles are elected.*



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In June the superintendent bade the teachers goodbye. His last words came in a rush. "\_\_\_\_\_ concerns and the democratic way of life."

The applause was deafening. The Boss really had a good idea there. Maybe there would be time next year to make it work right down the line.

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