

The Importance of People

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Illustrations by Alvin E. Sugarman

DEAR PAT—So you think you might change your major from education to business administration with emphasis on advertising. You don't know whether you want to make the change. You ask me for advice. It seems the only stumbling blocks to being a teacher are certain moth-eaten clichés that scare you away from the profession. What would I do if I were you?

Now, Pat, I shy away from advice-giving because I don't relish making road maps for other people's lives. And I'm sure I don't know what I'd do if I were you because each person interprets life within his own frame of reference. However, you being one of my favorite young people, I'll tell you my way of thinking and let you make up your own mind. Shall it be writing paeans to the Saturday bargain event; or tackling the exasperating, zany, demanding, and always eventful job of educating the young? Only you can say.

Cliche No. 1. That phrase, "like a school teacher." How well I remember. People thought they were being courtly if they remarked that I didn't look like a school teacher. At first I was mildly triumphant to think I had escaped occupational earmarks. Then my dormant sense of self-criticism awakened, prodding me into some serious thinking. If I were so delighted at being taken for a buyer, a newspaper woman, a this or that, why didn't I become one of those? I chose the profession of teaching and earned my living at it. If I couldn't be proud of it and delight in it away from school as I did at school, changes were indicated.

I was never one to be obligated to persons or institutions I didn't respect. So come summer vacation I got an experimental job in the book department of a store. I observed people to see how school teachers were supposed to look and act. I



inquired, not too adroitly I fear, about people's identity. Of course I met a few sharp-tongued, dowdy, cantankerous, sour-pussed teachers. I also met some sharp-tongued, dowdy, cantankerous, sour-pussed housewives, clubwomen, nurses, department store clerks, and authors of juvenile fiction. I met large numbers of pleasant and attractive people in all aforementioned categories.

This research was continued in September when, back at school, I missed the content of all professional meetings in my effort to find out more about teachers.

And do you know what conclusions I came to? School teachers look and act just like people! They come in a large variety of shapes and sizes.

Pat, dear, nobody knows how teachers, Negroes, millionaires, college professors, or newspaper reporters should look. Except perhaps comic strip artists who perpetuate dreary stereotypes; graceless comedians who would no longer be paid for their buffoonery if said stereotypes were eliminated; and garden variety dullards who cannot accept the marvelous variety of mankind. Nowadays

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when somebody says that I do or do not look like a school teacher, I answer some comparable banality and have done with it. Or, if it's one of my crusading days, I look the inquirer in the eye and ask him how in his opinion school teachers *do* look, leaving him to struggle with confusion. After all, if he stops believing that all school teachers are acid-voiced and angular, wearing pince-nez and sturdy, lisle stockings, he may be forced to examine some of his other cherished waxworks.

Cliche No. 2. "Those who can, do—those who can't, teach." I'll let you in on a little secret, Pat. When teachers themselves use this lame-brained, weak-kneed, cotton-mouthed, pusillanimous excuse for their own mediocrity, they are probably the kind who don't do much teaching either. Anybody who does a satisfying job of work in the classroom is not in a coma. Nor does he confine his efforts to sitting behind a desk giving out dismal textbook assignments and checking stacks of papers.

Teachers sometimes use this apologetic gem to excuse the fact that they see no importance in their work with children or that they regard other jobs as having superior status value. I have little patience with these people, Pat. If people honestly feel that their profession is not worth following, why don't they seek satisfaction elsewhere. They are like medieval wearers of the hair shirt, revelling in their martyrdom.

Strangely enough, when people outside the teaching profession parrot this inanity, I'm not quite so hard on them. After all, it requires rather subtle thinking to comprehend doing that is not done with *things*—but rather with ideas, processes, and symbols. Behind all the technological advances so dear to the heart of Joe Average are painstaking technicians, research men, and men of "pure" science and mathematics. And behind them are teachers who give the first keys that unlock ever-widening doors of discovery. Only the obvious mind sees doing as taking place only with finished products.

Take one of your favorite doers as a case for illustration. Did you know that your eminent Uncle Dan first started to

explore radio in a high school physics class? He had a teacher who somehow found time to encourage a kid with ideas beyond his technical skill. Dan still consults that teacher when the knots get tangled in an important research problem. Which is the doer? It isn't really possible to make a sharp distinction.



Cliche No. 3. As for "teaching brings teachers down to the children's level"—don't let it be a stumbling block. Teachers who complain of this deterioration usually weren't Erasmus at the beginning of their careers. Most of the teachers you'll meet

have gone in reading and thinking considerably beyond *Winnie the Pooh* and *Buck Rogers*.



On the other hand, Pat, if some of the qualities of childhood were to rub off on you, it would be no misfortune. Their wonder at a new experience, their absorption in a fascinating task, their willingness to try anything because they have not tasted defeat, their laughter, their acceptance of people without the grubby suspicion that a profit-motive is somewhere involved in a friendly gesture, their swiftness to forget a grudge. Behavior "down" on that level never hurt anybody.

Well, there are some answers. Frankly, I don't think the high-keyed, competitive pace of business would appeal to me, but I'm not you. If I had my choice to make again, I'd go on teaching. Me and Chaucer's clerk, gladly would we learn and gladly teach. Only I'd do a better job than I've done.

Yours with crossed fingers, Julia.

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