

The Importance of People

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WANTED: MIDDLE GROUND

IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU, Dr. Blair," said Dave Hammond, settling himself in a red leather armchair that invited the visitor to long talks. "When I knew I'd be at the University this weekend, I began to imagine what it would be like to talk with you again."

"Well, I'm greatly flattered. I've missed our talks as one of the pleasanter things about my old job at Mansford High. How are things getting along? And none of the conventional nonsense about the faculty mourning its loss. Has the new man corrected my sins of omission?"

"First tell me how college teaching agrees with you."

"I'm having a wonderful time. In a way I've completed a circle in my life. Once I left college teaching for the public schools because I felt removed from the realities. I liked my high school work. Then I was made a principal because the school board evidently thought that a man who had written a book on English literature was also an executive. Now I'm back again where I can teach the eternal verities, work on my Spenser notes, and raise gladioli."

"You're making too strong a case for the ivory tower, Doctor. You do have remarkably fine executive qualities. But you were often bored with details because the teacher training and counseling with young people were outweighed by the

requisitions for carbon paper and pens."

"Not to mention the endless crises with the heating plant! Yes, I'm afraid I did neglect the requisitions if I could help some bewildered teacher think through a difficult situation, or some confused boy or girl gain perspective."

"After all, people are my specialty. I don't see war as an economic or strategic problem but as the cry of the Trojan women. That's why I couldn't be enthusiastic over the typing and metal shop and bookkeeping classes. Schools should help young people learn those things they will have no chance to learn anywhere but in school. To help them feel the ebb and flow and high tide of the human spirit in literature and history. To know the painful accumulation of knowledge that ends in great scientific discovery. To make of one's mind a place of peace and refuge from the vulgarities and mean strivings of the current scene. That's what education will always mean to me. Human values, decency, the humility that comes from knowing one's self as only a part of the infinite stream of human living since time began. You moderns and your insistence on functional knowledge! I'm afraid I was a little rough with you at times, David. Have you forgiven me?"

"For being an idealist, yes. For deflating my ego, I'm not sure," answered Dave. Had it not sounded awkward, he would have liked to tell Dr. Blair how much he respected the kind of idealism in education the older man represented. Not a pseudo-idealism defending traditional courses for their own sake. Not a neo-classicism, for Dr. Blair was a man whose quest for learning had gone beyond pedantry and erudition, even beyond fine scholarship, to wisdom. Dave wondered if he



would ever have a chance to say these things.

"But enough of solemn sermonizing. Is my successor putting the place to rights? And hang ethics—let's gossip."

"It's hard to tell you just the right things about him. When I talk to you I'm always concerned about balance and selectivity. Anyway, Don Morgan is not given to philosophy. He says he majored in administration and left philosophy to those who had time for it.

"He immediately enlarged all expenditures for the commercial classes and the shops. I know what you're thinking, and I still disagree with you. A lot of those kids don't go on to college and can't afford much vocational training. They need usable skills. I can't feel there is anything wrong about that kind of education, but somehow I wish it would be possible to do it without losing a place for the spiritual values you stressed."

"Perhaps so. What else did he do?"

"He wants everything streamlined. For instance, he took one look at Miss Jackson's room—just one look! Next day there was an impersonal notice forbidding potted plants in the rooms and curtailing the use of personal furniture or ornaments except for 'temporary instructional purposes.' By the end of the week Miss Jackson and everybody else had hauled home their curios by the ton."



"Poor Miss Jackson. I never found her room exactly an uplifting, aesthetic experience, but it was the only home she ever felt was really hers."

"And he also took one anguished look at the teachers' meeting room, ordered the wicker furnishings removed, and installed chromium and leather fixings as a surprise for the faculty."

"Were they surprised?"

"They were overcome. Then they were angry. It was an outrage that *your* favorite chair had been removed where *you* sat at meetings."



Dr. Blair roared, "What a joke on me. I tried to instill spiritual values, and they deified my armchair!"

"The faculty meetings are exactly thirty minutes long.

No Mark Twain or Robert Benchley or Shakespeare readings and the reports forgotten."

"Touché. That sounds like a popular innovation."

"Trouble is, the business goes through so fast you haven't time to think things through. Like the way we 'voted' to join that Group Planning Study."

"Weren't you pleased, David? You were decidedly disappointed when I refused to consider that nonsense. I can't see drawing diagrams about human relationships that Jane Austen could have analyzed in ten minutes."

"But we aren't all Jane Austen. I still believe there is much to be gained from such studies. But I can't see our entering a Group Planning Study with so little group planning involved in the decision. Morgan is sincere and honest. He's no dictator by design, but he can't see beyond efficiency expert methods. And those don't work with people—at least not to my way of thinking."

"Perhaps a young man like you, David, will be able to combine smooth-running administration with the humanities. Possibly that's one of the important aspects of democracy. And now what do you say to visiting the greenhouse? I want you to meet a white gladiolus that makes all philosophizing seem futile."

"I'd like it very much, sir. Let's go."

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