

The Importance of People

Myrtle Finn Sugarman

Illustrations by Alvin E. Sugarman

SOMETIMES I HATE SCHOOL

BETH STANDISH closed the door and prayed to the patron saint of weary schoolteachers that nobody would come in with a problem. Even through the closed door she could hear Miss Dodge booming away at some miscreant. Miss Dodge called these sessions "little guidance talks." In spite of herself Beth grinned, imagining the lanky adolescent now being harangued on the fearful consequences of neglecting his Latin. Faint phrases came to her. "Classical culture"—"owe it to your fine parents"—"golden hours never to be recaptured." Miss Dodge held no brief for non-directive counseling.



Oh well, thought Beth, maybe it would be comforting to be as sure of absolute rights and wrongs as Miss Dodge seemed to be. Beth was tired and depressed and not sure of anything. This had been a bad day. The final straw had been another committee job handed her by Mr. Norton, the principal. And he was so blithe about it. "I just look for the busiest person in the building, and ask him to do one more thing." Drat the man.

As she was about to leave her room on the exact dot of departure time, the back door opened. Beth hoped it would be no adolescent crisis requiring long listening. "Please," she yearned inwardly, "just overshoes left in the locker—nothing to be *cooped with*."

Then she smiled. She was never too tired to talk to this girl. Muriel Morgan, whom the gods of heredity and environment had given sensitivity and wit and joy

of living, could always laugh. But today something was wrong. Beth had seen too many high school girls not to recognize the traces of tears hastily erased in the girls' lav.

"Hello, Muriel. Why aren't you home like a sensible citizen on a gloomy day like this?"

"Oh, I can't go in Miss Dodge's room to my locker. I can hear her working somebody over and I don't want to go in, even for my coat."

"Then sit down. I need cheering."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a comedian tonight, Miss Standish. I'm all mixed up about things."

"Who isn't? I find myself getting all tangled up over a newspaper headline or a chance remark heard on the bus or almost anything these days. Maybe they're mixed up times. What's derailed your train of thought?"

"A book, mostly. My folks and I have been reading it. It's about anti-semitism. And I've met so much of it that it seemed the author was writing about me on every page. Everybody doesn't feel about people the way you do, Miss Standish. Sometimes I *hate* school!"

Beth was genuinely shocked. Muriel was obviously fighting tears again. What discriminations had she found here in school? The principal might be given to unfair distribution of extra duties for the faculty, but his belief in a square deal for kids was beyond question.

"What has happened to you, Muriel? Believe me, if there has been injustice, Mr. Norton will take definite action. Only today he appointed me chairman of a committee to evaluate school activities from the standpoint of democracy. We want no closed doors or unfair practices."

"It isn't that kind of thing, Miss Standish. I'm welcome in any school club. Of course I'm not asked to join the social clubs outside of school, but the faculty can't be blamed for that. Lots of times the hurt comes from little things that people say without ever thinking they've been tactless."

"What, for instance?"

"One of my favorite teachers asked me to tell about the strange customs of my religion. I wish she hadn't. My family is Temple or Reformed Jew. We don't practice the customs the teacher was thinking about. Why should she have been so stupid?"

"I don't think many people are informed about your faith, Muriel. Perhaps you—"

Muriel, intent on her own hurt, broke in without hearing. "And I get so tired of having teachers in current events assume that all Jews believe in the Zionist movement. We're all supposed to think in the same way. Actually many Jews are bitterly opposed to being set apart as a separate nation. And another thing, people here in school go on talking about 'the Jewish race' just as the scientist in that book complained about. I've tried to repeat the facts about 'race' until people think I'm a fanatic."

"So far, Muriel, these aren't really personal things. You're ordinarily a good thinker and analyze situations involving ideas. There's something very personal that has brought all this to the surface. Do you feel like telling me? Have we teachers done something to make matters worse?"

"I'm not blaming teachers for anything, Miss Standish. They can't follow kids around all day and censor everything they say. I was hurt this afternoon. We won our debate and I was feeling awfully good about it. Then in the hall I heard somebody on the affirmative side say, 'What chance did we have? You can't beat a smart Jew.' That wasn't any teacher's fault, but the debating is spoiled for me now. I'll think everybody is taking for granted that Jewish kids are the talking type."



"I know this is no time to tell you to be detached, Muriel. The wound is still raw. But later you will see that remark as a very human kind of thing, prompted by defeat and the urge to hurt the winner. It will help in the future if you can separate in your mind cruel remarks based on really vicious hatreds from those prompted by passing grudges."

"My mind knows that, but my feelings don't. I'm not the only one who suffers. Take Sam, for instance. He's not a politician or a debater or an actor like a lot of us. He's won more than one basketball game for the school this season. But he's always hearing somebody who couldn't play ping pong say, 'Sam's a pretty good athlete for a Jew!' One day Jewish kids are supposed to be intellectual and the next day I hear Selma, that boy-crazy girl who wears eye shadow, called a 'typical Jew.' What's the score?"

"I don't know. Not today, anyway. You've told me too many things I've been trying not to see and you've given that democratic evaluation committee a reason for being."

From across the hall came a final boom, "Never regret Latin. There can be no culture without it."

Muriel grinned and Beth grinned back. The tears were gone. Muriel even giggled as she recognized the hapless classics student as Sam.

Beth decided the school must be one corner of Muriel's world where her laughter would not be killed by careless words and unenlightened attitudes. She'd better call that committee for tomorrow instead of Thursday. There was work to do!

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