

The Importance of People

William Van Til

He Went Back

WHILE CLEANING THE ATTIC, he found some of his early writing in an unprepossessing Campbell Soup box. The broom forgotten, he leafed fondly through the dried-out pages. Here were term papers, prepared for dimly recalled professors and for purposes now inscrutable. Here was the unfinished novel, a mute and dusty souvenir of a dormant ambition. Here was the first draft of his first article as a professional educator. Here were his first book reviews for that most nostalgically remembered of all defunct educational magazines, the old *Social Frontier*. And here was a brief something called, "He Went Back," written more than fifteen years ago.



For a moment, he couldn't recall it at all. "He Went Back." Then recollection came dimly through. Himself, two years out of college, teaching school, returned to the metropolitan high school he had attended to see how it had changed. He sat back against the attic wall and read.

"It was all the same. True, the building seemed smaller, the corridors more cramped, the ceiling pressed nearer the floor. But he had expected that, having

seen bays and hills and people he had loved shrink in size with the movement of time. Miniature, his high school remained the same, just as he had last seen it six years before.

"Lama-like, the principal sat in remembered lone dignity behind his yellow-curtained office door. Surreptitiously, miscreants in the discipline office regarded the clock in its slow course. Members of the Service League walked importantly to their posts to direct the traffic of the great city school. The walls were yet festooned with photographic tributes to long dissolved football teams whose members now clerked or gratefully accepted doles. Even the little things were as he had left and as he remembered them. The drinking fountain still feebly spurted tepid water; the notes sounded by the bell were fierce and clamorous; the halls mingled the odors of cleaning disinfectant and young girls' bodies.

"There were more teachers than six years ago. Yet it seemed to him that miraculously his teachers had reproduced their kind (possibly by fission). All seemed stamped from the same molds. They were either old, graying, and slow-moving, or young and hard-faced. The young spoke brusquely, hurriedly. The old spoke hesitantly as though unused to human speech divorced from recitation. He remembered what Henry Adams had written, 'No man can be a senator, a teacher, or a priest for ten years and remain fit for anything else.'

"The old ones were kind to him and gentle and confused. Those who remembered him called him William and asked him when he would graduate from college, and then exclaimed rather strickenly and pitifully on the passage of time, and when they did this he could not feel

that they were truly glad to have seen him again.

"He went with his former teachers to their classes and they taught slowly, laboriously, and lifelessly as they always had; their students sat mute, indifferent, and restrained, as they always had. The students rose when they were called upon and recited. They answered the teacher's questions on yesterday's assignment, then relapsed gratefully into their seats. They parroted the phrases of scholars. They stared gravely at the teacher or vacuously out the high windows at the grey gas tanks that rose pudgily on the marshes.

"Bells clanged and the teacher bent forward, gathering up books and papers. Noisily, the class eddied and surged through the doors. For tomorrow they took the next chapter. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow crept in this petty pace from day to day till the last syllabus of recorded subject matter.

"So he went down to the office and past the yellow-curtained door into the sanctum to which he had never penetrated in his four years in high school and he said, "Why?" in a high impatient voice. And the principal heard him out and nodded sometimes. Then the principal said polite meaningless things and looked at the clock. The young man understood. For the principal, though young, was tired too and didn't particularly care any longer. And the young man went away from the graveyard."

* * * * *

He had never gone back again.

Via the yellowing paper, he looked down the corridors of time. He saw again the unhappy adolescent lost in the flood of the big school and mindlessly

memorizing the meaningless. He saw the angry, cheated young man in the principal's office.

Time and the river had slipped by since then. The human erosion of the great depression. The brutalization of fascism. The exterminations of total war. The ugly tyranny of communism. The race between education and catastrophe.

Also, the drive toward curriculum revision. The emphasis on the social scene. The Eight-Year Study. The Regents Inquiry. The heyday of the experimental laboratory schools. Teacher-pupil planning. Study of child and adolescent development. Bridges between school and community. Education for democracy as a way of life. Life adjustment programs. Public school experimentation with common learnings programs. Intercultural education. The state curriculum programs.

A ghost from the faded paper haunted him. Suppose he went back again now—back across the nation to the high school he had attended. What would he find? The same meaningless school he had experienced and revisited, a school where life begins at 4 p. m.? Or a school increasingly dealing with social realities, meeting the needs of adolescents, and clarifying value conflicts?

What would all the educators of America collectively find if they went back today to the high schools they attended? For a brief moment, while he returned the paper to the box, the collective answer seemed to him the crucial test of the effectiveness of curriculum revision, of the usefulness of thousands of lives.

If he went back. . . .

If *you* went back—what do you think you would find?

THE LISTENING POST

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traditional practice of many educators. . . ."

It seems a fair estimate that the articles represent in a rough way what the American people want. Politicians have made

a "mandate" out of far less. And we professional schoolmen may well take the heart to be bold.—*Fred T. Wilhelms, Associate Professor of Education, San Francisco State College.*

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