

The Importance of People

William Van Til

Last Column

WRITING A COLUMN is quite an experience.

On receiving Arno's invitation to write "The Importance of People" during the 1949-50 publication year, I asked, "And what am I supposed to write about?"

Blandly editor Bellack responded, "Anything." (He's permissive.)

"Anything?"

"Anything," he insisted firmly.

I predicted that both of us would be sorry in the morning.

He'd be sorry when thousands of cancellations flooded in, each signed Indignant Reader, and each beginning, "Dear Editor: I have taken your magazine for nigh onto thirty-two years but this is the end. Of all the . . . !" I'd be sorry, too, when I lost face in our educational class system through writing like a columnist.

What to do in mutual self-defense? Perhaps use a pen name, such as Torquemada Antithesis? This would save my face, but not the circulation. There seemed but one thing to do. Make sure that nobody read the column!

A stratagem was hit upon for the abolition of readership. Put the column so far back in the magazine that it would practically be outside the cover. Print it in small type. Bury it in a sea of advertisements testifying to the healing power of sundry books and materials. I was overjoyed! A stroke of sheer genius!

But the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley. This strategy ganged a-gley—or is the past tense in Scotch gung a-gley?—because too many readers of *Educational Leadership* apparently were brought up on the *New York Daily News*. As the initiated know, the devotees of this paragon of contemporary tabloid journalism read it from the back toward the front. Thus, prior to

arrival at Times Square, *New York Daily News* readers thoroughly master Dick Tracy, Little Orphan Annie, the astrology forecast, and the fate that daily befalls the New York Giants. The international situation can wait.

Following this perverse reading pattern, a startling number of people found the hidden column. It was a distinct surprise. I am accustomed to having my works fall upon the ears of the palpitating public with all the crashing din of a rose petal wafting into the Grand Canyon.

Friends greeted me on the street, "Hello, Westbrook." In anguish, I protested, "Please! Not Westbrook—Heywood!"

Some of my faithful intelligence agents even reported to me that their *wives* read the column. This, of course, is the last straw. My loss of face is now complete. For any readers who are unwived, the role of wives in the educational culture may perhaps be explained by a traumatic experience which befell a faculty wife of my acquaintance. "My husband is working on a book," she told me. "The other day I read his latest chapter. A wonderful chapter, and I told him so. I said that even I could understand it. So now he's completely rewriting it."

Thus the strategy failed and the column is read. Since I have even reached the estate of being read by educator's wives, no face at all remains to look back at me from the mirror. I have nothing to lose. (Even the lowly proletariat still have their *chains* to lose.)

Consequently, Last Column will be devoted to three minor heresies which never grew into full-fledged columns. (I'm a tidy person and never like to leave anything cluttering my desk. Writers are a parsimonious lot.)

LAST COLUMN # 1
Nice Nellie,
The Beautiful Book Reviewer

Where are the educational book reviewers with fire in their whiskers? Let's not give temporary classics and balderdash in bindings identical tepid applause. Drama critics speak out loud and clear when they hail a Laurence Olivier or a Katherine Cornell or the Lunts. Nor do they hesitate to sniff a ham with a comment kin to the famous critique of a Shakespearean, 'He played the King as though he were afraid somebody was going to play the ace.' Similarly, the fiction reviewers saltily differentiate between Hollywood-aimed pot-boilers and memorably communicated insights into human motivations.

When we in education review an educational classic like *Education for All American Youth* or *Elmtown's Youth*, let's beat the drums and cry hallelujah unabashed. When we review pretentious nonsense, let's not hesitate to say so. Certainly it may be hard on the author, Dr. Gaseous P. Glockenspiel, but is the reader to be the forgotten man? Less gentility and more honesty, please. Suppose Glockenspiel *does* become your superintendent or dean some day? You can always join the army. . . .

LAST COLUMN # 2
Whatever Happened
to the Mason-Dixon Line?

Mysterious and mad are the patterns of segregation in education. In one northern city with a southern exposure, three high schools have swimming pools. In one of the schools, Negro students swim at assigned hours and white students swim at other hours. In the second school, Negro and white boys swim together. But Negro girls swim at separate hours from white girls. The third school has two pools. Your guess is that one is for white and one for colored youngsters? Or both open to both races? No indeed! A Solomon solved this knotty problem by decreeing that one pool

be for white boys and one pool for white girls. For Negro boys, no pool. For Negro girls, no pool. Same city, same school system.

In an American school in the far West, Negro students in school dramatic productions are not allowed to play the role of a mother or father of a white actor. But it's all right for Negro students to play the roles of uncles and aunts of the white performer. A truly fascinating genetic theory! That revolting noise you hear is Gregor Mendel turning over in his grave. . . .

LAST COLUMN # 3
The Rabbit Theory
of Administration

Once upon a time, there lived in the deep forest a father squirrel who was dissatisfied with the forest school system. Though his son went to school and the teacher tried hard to educate him, his son still persisted in acting like a squirrel. So father squirrel dropped an acorn on the superintendent's roof. The rabbit who served as superintendent of the forest system heard the acorn crash. He immediately concluded that the entire lay public of the forest was bombarding the school. So he lit out for the nearest rabbit hole. There wasn't room in the hole for both the rabbit and his principles (to say nothing of his curriculum director). So he carefully placed his principles under a leaf before he scuttled down the hole. He figured the principles might come in handy sometime if he needed a philosophy of education or had to make a speech. He was a rabbit, so naturally he didn't feel sheepish about this. . . .



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