

The Importance of People

Column Editor: William Van Til
Contributor: Myrtle Finn Sugarman

Shining Doorknobs Not Always the Answer

The tenant this month is no stranger in the house. She had no trouble locating the typewriter, an idea, and the air-mail stamps. She's quite at home for she lived here during the 1947-1948 publication year. By the fireside in the dead of winter, old residents of the region recall the gallery of faculty members she created for The Importance of People. There was Sarah Perkins, growing old, yearning to belong—but no teacher nor any workshop helped her to find what it took. There was young middle-class Betty Dawson, new teacher, who discovered that the Spanish-American youngsters she feared were, after all, only adolescents. There was the fighting schoolmaster, George Roberts, war veteran, who asked the witch hunters who investigated his school, "Doesn't it ever occur to you that you may stand for the same kind of one-track thinking as the Communists?"

Welcome back, Myrtle Finn Sugarman, Department of Publications, Denver Public Schools, with a new fictional creation. This time it's Bill, who didn't get the job.

William Van Til

"MARK REILLY GOT THE PROMOTION," yelled the faculty news hawk to the after-school bunch in the social room.

First there was silence. Then a delighted babbling arose. Mark had been low on the rumor list, not being his own press agent. Even confirmed misanthropes expressed pleasure.

After the celebration, the conversation took a new angle. "How will Big Shot Bill take Mark's promotion? I thought Bill had it in the bag."

The floodgates were open. One remark piled on another.

"Bill's polished enough doorknobs to be ruler of the Queen's Navee."

"I wish he'd step off the faces of his friends and associates for a change."

"The only miracle I ask is that he forget working the angles long enough to do an honest job of work around this school."

"They always come to The Boss for recommendations, and he had Bill's number the first day he saw him in action."

Meanwhile the target of their talk was sitting miserably on a bus stop bench near the school. Bill Andrews was facing the unpalatable prospect of telling his wife that he would not be supervisor of testing and research in the Center City public schools. He had not hidden his willingness to accept if called.

At least, Ben Tatum had called him into the principal's office to tell him privately that he had *not* been called. That was decent of The Boss. Otherwise, Bill saw himself receiving the news in the social room and smiling his face stiff to show he was a good sport. How had Mark done it? He wasn't "in" with The Boys Downtown. Did Mark have a new angle?

Bill Faces 'The Boss'

Bill had to know. Back he went to school, hurrying to catch Old Hammerblow Tatum in his office, a sanctum from which nothing but the unadorned truth could be expected.

Ben was finishing a lengthy phone

call from an influential mother who was deeply distressed over her son's physics grade. Ben had listened to flattery, hearts-and-flowers, and finally threats. He ended the interview by saying crisply, "It was very kind of you to call me, Mrs. Foster. The grade will remain a 'D.' Goodbye." Then, seeing Bill in the doorway, he greeted, "Sit down. I wondered if you'd come back."

Bill, rendered temporarily undiplomatic, blurted miserably, "Dr. Tatum, what happened? I thought that job was mine. I really worked for it."

"Do you want the truth? Or do you want sympathy?" asked Ben.

Bill managed a wan smile. "I want the truth. I can take it."

"Here it comes, then. Up until now, you've never stood still long enough to listen. In the first place, how did you ever get into teaching?"

"I was interested in boys and girls," parroted Bill. But the look on Ben Tatum's face froze him to the marrow. Thus chilled, he finished lamely, "Because we lived in a town with a teachers' college. In 1933 my parents couldn't afford anything else. For a while I hated going to a teachers' college."

He was rewarded by a smile like a gentle chinook in January, although no thaw warmed Ben's words. "Bill, I suspect that's the first honest thing you've ever said to me. Well, did you go on hating the idea of being a teacher?"

"No, I got used to the idea that I wouldn't be a business executive or an advertising man or anything like that. I went all out for campus activities and made a good place for myself. What's wrong with that? Aren't we always making a pitch for personality adjustment?"

Second Choices Are Rationalized

To Bill's surprise Ben's smile remained warm. "This is also the first

time you ever talked back to anybody on my side of the desk. I like it. Now, about adjustment. Of course, it's wholesome to minimize frustrations, but something peculiar happens to you, Bill, when you adjust to a second choice. Invariably you go through a process of rationalization that ends with your believing that the substitute was your original choice. I've seen it happen so many times."

"In other words, you're saying I'm shallow and insincere."

"Not deliberately so, Bill. In spite of certain observations, I don't think you put on a completely calculated act to fool others. You believe in your own act, and that's dangerous. It can lead to permanent self-deception."

"Go ahead. What do I do in this act?" persisted Bill, strangely eager to see himself through another's eyes. Usually he avoided self-questioning.

"For one thing, you've hopped on every educational band wagon going by. You've picked up the catchwords and become an overnight expert. Visual education, general semantics, vocational guidance, life adjustment. You tried them all, according to which way the wind seemed to be blowing. This last time you licked your finger and went in for evaluation in a big way. Why?"

"I like to keep up on things. You're always telling us not to get in a rut."

Building Starts From Foundations

"There you are, giving yourself a line again," said Ben unsparingly. "You know that all this educational hedge-hopping has been to move yourself ahead. Not that ambition is wrong. But the weakness in your case is that you're trying to build a career from the penthouse down to the foundations. It doesn't work that way. Speaking of foundations, what exactly do you believe about education?"

"Well," floundered Bill, "I believe in a sound background of fundamentals, and yet I think education must meet the times. And, of course, I support equal opportunities for all children. Plenty of guidance—"

No smile warmed the air as Ben inquired in glacial tones, "May I also assume that you approve of the alphabet?"

"Dog-gone it, sir, people can't answer what they think about education in a few words. I've always gone in for action more than philosophy. A person has to think a while before answering a question like that."

The interview was over. Bill knew it from the way Ben rose from his chair and reached for his hat. He wore the face that had given him the grapevine nickname of Old Hammerblow.

Beliefs Stated with Conviction

"You're right. You'll have to do a lot of thinking before the system sees you as a candidate to recommend for pro-

motion. Mark Reilly got this job because he knows his beliefs. He states them with conviction, but without dogmatism. He's been building from the foundation up. He's worked steadily away on a long-range research program for our schools for he recognized his strength in evaluation and research and stuck to it. Mark did so well that when the time came, people saw him. You've blinded the same people by your flashy neon lighting. Goodbye."

Bill's look of utter dejection brought a softening remark. "At thirty-four you're hardly a has-been, Bill. There'll be something for you when you find solid beliefs and build on them. Only adolescents think sincerity naïve."

On the way home, Bill questioned for the first time his religion, the Getting Ahead cult he had worshipped for as long as he could remember. Were there other faiths, more substantial altars, more satisfying credos? Being Bill, he couldn't help wishing he had discovered this honesty angle earlier.

Curriculum Bulletins

Column Editors: Edward A. Krug
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'Where Do We Begin?'

ANY GROUP attempting to bring about curriculum change soon comes to realize the importance of the human factor. Teachers will meet with other teachers, curriculum coordinators will meet with school staffs, or lay people will meet with principals and teachers. All such combinations interested in bringing about successful curriculum change become involved in the process of human interaction.

Also, any group involved in a curriculum program soon realizes the need for an intelligent beginning to the proposed program of curriculum reorganization. The main question asked is, "Where do we begin?"

Curriculum Bulletins Can Help

Curriculum bulletins concerned with developing such programs and improving the process of group action are im-

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