

The Importance of People

Column Editor: William Van Til

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Of Time and the River

This Fred T. Wilhelms is a very fine man. Pats stray dogs, kind to his family, sympathetic to consumers, and all that. But he's really a very hard man to get a column out of—or, to put it more awkwardly, out of whom to get a column.

Maybe he's too busy for a column. Formerly director of secondary curriculum for Nebraska's university extension division, director of publications for a U.S. Department of Justice citizenship program, associate director of the Consumer Education Study. Writing commitments left over from these posts maybe. Now chairman of the Education Department of San Francisco State College. Supposed to be writing a community civics book with another fellow; other fellow only hears from him through letters.

He tried the same approach on me when I asked him for a column on anything he wanted. He wrote a letter instead. I think I'll use the letter instead of waiting for the column.

William Van Til

Dear Van:

Thanks for inviting me into your column. But shades of Sugarman, Cunningham and Corey!—how can I compete in that championship flight of insightful wit?

About the best I can contribute is a novelty; I'll make it a piece on the *importance of people*.

Since it suddenly occurred to me last summer that I'm now beginning to be one of those "older teachers" they're always worrying about, how about my doing a thing on the importance of *old people*?

Like when we older teachers get a new principal—one of those nice kiddies with about two *idées fixes*. They're generally pretty good ideas, though slightly on the trivial side, not quite husky enough to build a whole school system on.

Well, he's usually an appealing chap with his own hair and teeth and a winsome enthusiasm. And we bifocal fogies, carried back to our own distant youth, know he's probably scared underneath.

So we're anxious to help. Anyway, we know we can keep the school's innards working while he raises some dust on the surface. Most of us figure the dust-raising will do some good, and hope he'll dig pretty deep.

Then we begin hearing how he's telling folks he could get somewhere if it weren't for us "old fossils" and "old biddies." (It's nice, at least, that he doesn't consider teachers sexless!) And so help me, Van, even though we're sort of used to it and halfway expect it, it makes it awfully tough to pitch in and protect him.

Communication Lines Go Down

Besides, even if in our ancient serenity we're mature enough not to get mad, we're still human enough to get a little scared. We've worked here a long time, picked up a smidgin of status now and then along the way, and we don't want to get busted back to privates. It's amazing what trifles we can get defensive about, once we're frightened.

And so the lines of communication go down, snapped by the growing weight of ice. And there is ice around our hearts, too, and we are all a little unhappy, showing it variously in over-submission, withdrawal, aggressiveness or plain pettiness.

Why do they do it? Because experienced teachers have straggled hopelessly behind the march of "new ideas"? Piffle! It may take a few hours a year to keep up with the ever-shifting *new words* that go the rounds of the teachers' colleges. But the real adaptations at the action level haven't come fast or frequent enough to befuddle any competent, experienced teacher who's given half a chance to learn. Give him a star to steer by and he'll steer pretty straight—though he may not like steering by the luminous haze of a nebular gas cloud.

The plain truth is that a lot of talk about teachers' not knowing "the new" is a combination of the speaker's vague, wistful assumption that he does know it and a good bit of scapegoating for his own failure as a leader. Another plain fact is that educators at the engineering level—who have valuable ideas and fine, if often inchoate, vision—have done a miserable job of communication. Endless articles that don't really say anything; endless speeches that seem endless.

Professional Growth a Lifetime Habit

Well, Van, if I do a column, I don't much want to spend it on placing blame for shutting out older teachers from rich growth experiences and then railing at them. It will be hard not to ridicule the manners and the inadequate common sense of rigid young administrators and supervisors who impute all

the rigidity to others; administrators without the maturity or skill to take teachers where they are, appreciate their resources and their problems, and work forward with them; administrators so blindly infatuated with a paltry few "new ideas" of their own that they value no others.

But what I want to point up is the tragedy of the whole mess. It isn't a pleasant thing, toward the end of a service career, to be made to feel unwanted, guiltily incompetent. It isn't easy for a man to work enthusiastically with "leaders" who make him feel he has frittered away his life's time in bad methods and on worthless content, even harming the boys and girls he was so devoted to. And every year thousands of our older teachers are put in that spot; don't think they don't sense it.

It's all so unnecessary. Professional growth is a lifetime habit. Some of the most rigid persons I see are in their twenties. Some of the most eager, visionary experimentalists have gray hair—or none. Under thoughtful, mature leadership, as I've seen it in many a school, the grayheads are bulwarks of quiet strength. They not only learn their jobs better and better as they go, but they encourage the young and the uncertain to new ventures as well. If, perchance, they have lost some of the fire and vigor of youth, they balance it invaluablely with perspective and wisdom—and courage.

Do you think a column along those lines might help a few good young leaders to avoid blunders that grow out of callowness and a cheap tradition that's all too prevalent around them? If so, I'll be glad to work one out for you.

Faithfully yours,

Fred.

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