

The Importance of People

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No contributor to The Importance of People will be more vividly remembered for his work in behalf of his belief in the importance of people than will the late Leo Shapiro. Nor can his appeal for people to develop what he called a high coefficient of awareness with relation to the fact ". . . that all God's children have problems," be made to a more appropriate group than to educators. We have problems! A great deal of what we do about them will be determined by our answer to the challenge stated so simply here—"What Is It a Problem?"

PEGGY BROGAN

What Is It a Problem?

SOME YEARS AGO when I was teaching Freshman English, a student of mine submitted an essay which he called "My Dog." I cannot remember the student's name or anything else about the essay except the first sentence—"What is it a dog?" It is hard to convey what seemed to me at the time the marvelous humor of this opening sentence. It became a *cause célèbre* in the university. An editorial appeared in the school paper with a two-column head, "What Is It a Dog?" The president of the university referred to it in a banquet address before his Board of Trustees. It was used as a kickoff line by a member of the university debate team during a debate with a visiting team from Oxford. And always these few words evoked a warm bellow of laughter.

I had forgotten about this tidbit until just this morning, when I was brooding again over a phrase which I have encountered so many times in my more recently chosen field of human relations. The phrase is, of course, a perennial one, almost as popular as, "Would you want your daughter to marry a

———?" or "I like them well enough and I think they ought to have everything that is coming to them, but I just don't want them as neighbors." The Number One item on my particular hit parade is, "But we don't have any problems." And so, thinking of my student and his dog, I must ask plaintively, "What is it a problem?"

There was the superintendent of schools of a fair-sized city in the midwest who once was chatting with me about the human relations set-up of the public schools under his administration. His opening gambit was: "It's a fine town and the people are very nice—friendly and plain. We just don't have any problems."

"Do you have any Jewish teachers?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered, "maybe one, but I'm not sure."

"Do you have any Negro teachers?" I went on.

"Oh, no."

"What would happen," I asked, "if you hired a Negro teacher?"

His answer came fast. "Oh, there would be hell to pay." Then he smiled

a little ruefully and nodded. "Yes," he said, "I guess I see what you mean."

I have told this story any number of times to illustrate various things. All the time, I have rather assumed that I did a good job of sensitization that day, that the superintendent's eyes were opened and he realized for the first time—etc. Recently I had occasion to meet him again at a teachers meeting. He had moved up in the world and was now the superintendent of a much larger school system with a celebrated reputation for its educational philosophy and methods and particularly for its creative work in inter-cultural education. I asked him how he liked his new situation. "Oh," he said, "things were so simple back there. You see, we had no problems, but here, there are so many problems."

What is it a problem? There was the amiable supervisor of a large industrial plant, the largest I have ever seen. He couldn't see that there would be any merit in having a human relations training program for his employees. "We don't have any problems here. We have all kinds of people in the union." After he had repeated for the third time that it was an accident that they had never hired any Negroes in the office, I asked my standard question, "What would happen if you hired a Negro girl for a clerical job?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Oh, I am sure there wouldn't be any trouble," he answered. "Of course, the other girls would have to get used to it gradually and I don't know whether we could get them to agree to the idea in the first place, but right now we just don't have any problems."

It's not just a matter of race relations, either. There is the nationally known director of an educational association. "Certainly," he says, "we don't have any human relations problems here. We

have Negroes on our staff, Japanese-American—all kinds. We have no problems that a little money couldn't cure." Maybe yes, and then again. . . .

Coefficient of Awareness

At this point I want to make my bid for immortality. You have heard about Broyle's Law, Gresham's Law. I now want to introduce Shapiro's Law. Shapiro's Law goes something like this: "The more you say no problems, the more you got 'em—probably." ("The more you say you don't, the more you do.") And while we are being academic for a moment, I would also like to introduce a new concept, or rather an old idea with a new twist—"coefficient of awareness."

Perhaps I can throw light on both the Law and the Concept of coefficient of awareness by borrowing an analogy from science. What is the most exact science? Is it the science which, like some, beats the drum for itself and keeps reiterating to anyone who will hear, I am an exact science, I am exact, I am exact. Or is it—as I think—the science that is most exact about its areas of inexactness, most precise about its areas of imprecision, so that it is able and willing to indicate its areas of inexactness and imprecision to so many thousandths of an inch or degree.

Similarly, who or what is the person, group, institution, community, country, that is in the best way with respect to its problems? Is it the person, group and so on that keeps pounding on the table, we don't have any problems, we don't have any problems. Or again, is it—as I think—a person, group, and so on that, genuinely aware that all God's children have problems, has the most precise knowledge and deepest understanding of its own problems—type, nature, effects, extent; the person, group or whatever in a position to say, "These

and these are our problems, they operate thus and so, they affect the following under these and these circumstances, and we are taking such and such steps by way of improvement or therapy."

And so it works something like this. Give me a person, group or what not that says "I have no problems," and he (or it) gets filed under low coefficient of awareness. (Alternate caption: You should only know. Second alternate caption: That's what you think, friend.) But to the degree that a person or group is able to indicate and delineate its problems and problem areas with increasing precision, the coefficient of awareness gets proportionately higher, the situation becomes that much better. Most of us, I fear, rate a pretty low coefficient of awareness. We have a comfortable rule of thumb: There are no problems in the absence of overwhelming and irrefutable evidence to the contrary. I am suggesting just the opposite kind of working principle: In any given situation, we may safely assume there are problems unless a persistent and thorough examination has revealed none. If we have to lean, I'd rather we would lean over backwards. We have been leaning the other way up to now.

The other side of the coin is equally interesting. That is, the same lack of insight that makes people or groups so blissfully sure they have "no problems" frequently makes them compulsively certain that everyone else is full of problems. You talk to certain people—some social workers, some office supervisors, some mayors, some school superintendents, some people—and if a word comes up like Negro or Jew or Italian, you can almost hear a click like that of a shutter. There is an automatic response—a signal response, to use the language of the trade—and we are no longer talking about people. Just problems.

Or take so many conversations or meetings about international relations, world understanding. Someone says Europe. Click—problem. China—problem. India—big problem. South Africa—click, click—big, big problem. What has happened to the people in these places—man, woman, children, babies? The shutter clicks, the people disappear, and all that is left are—problems.

What is it a problem?

—LEO SHAPIRO, formerly national director, Department of Education, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, Chicago, Illinois.

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