

# The Importance of People

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*Current attacks on education call for various kinds of action on the part of educators. Important among these kinds of action, are our attempts to look at what is happening in as wide a framework as possible—one which can include the many reasons democracy's schools are under attack by democracy's citizens.*

*Dr. Story's look at what is happening comes by way of an invitation to find perspective in a long-range point of view and a sense of humor.*

PEGGY BROGAN

## The "Backlash" Theory of History

IN RECENT years Messrs. Toynbee, Spengler and various others of their distinguished ilk have theorized mightily about the recurring "cycles of history" which civilizations apparently undergo in a kind of relentless rise-and-fall pattern. While this popular *cyclical* theory of human history undoubtedly has an intriguing validity on a global scale, I should like to postulate a simpler and more direct theory in the single realm of educational history. Whatever the merits of the "cycle" idea, it seems clear that the progress of education is more typically marked by a series of disconcerting occurrences which are known universally among fishermen as "backlashes."

Those who are cursed with piscatorial inclinations will be among the first to nod in quick and astonished agreement with this especially lucid and felicitous insight into the nature of educational progress. The fisherman's "backlash" occurs typically when he has made a particularly ambitious

cast and results, of course, in a line so tangled, so thoroughly fouled and snarled that he is often completely thwarted in his woe-begone efforts to untangle it. That this irksome phenomenon should be so aptly identical with the educational experiences of the race seems to be clearly more than a mere coincidence. Recognizing the full and clarifying insight of this mystery-dispelling discovery, we can, at last, predicate our planning on a truly scientific understanding of the inherent conditions which limit and govern educational progress in all ages.

For instance, the "backlash" theory explains with an astonishing simplicity the recent extraordinary incidents of educational reaction which have occurred in certain cities and regions throughout the country. The fault, of course, has not been with the fishermen themselves. These have invariably been known as the ablest and most highly skilled casters and trollers in the business. Nor has the equipment it-

self been faulty in any known instance. The well-established fact is that the fisherman in each case was *deliberately interfered with* by irate natives who were standing by any who bitterly resented not only his newfangled equipment but the audacity of his departure from the locally prevailing notion of a proper way to fish.

It is interesting to note, in studying these various instances, that they reveal three distinct older traditions of fishing which are still much held to by various proponents who are, of course, determined to perpetuate them. There is, first of all, the *conservative* or "cane pole" coterie, who are not only plentiful but who are especially unyielding in their devotion to their ancient bamboo artifacts. A second group is the *ultraconservative* or "bent pin" clique who apparently object to any ostentatious refinement of the time-honored simplicity of the fishing process. The third group, who may perhaps be thought of as *neoprimitives* literally desire to revive that long-lost art which was described so memorably in recent years in *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*, namely, "fish-grabbing with the bare hands."

It is, of course, the *effects* of such deliberate intervention by these guardians of time-honored custom which give such a magic authenticity to the "backlash theory" of history. The fisherman is faced with two hard alternatives. He may, for instance, throw away the rod and tangled reel in disgust and resort resignedly to the older technique which the natives are so anxious to thrust upon him but which he painfully knows to be hopelessly outmoded. Or he may doggedly choose

the dismal job of untangling the whole mess in the hope of resuming his former practice while inwardly resolving to make all further casts with the most painstaking caution.

Of course he can always turn to his professional fishing colleagues for advice. This, however, is often the most bewildering path he can choose. Those of his contemporaries who are *Reconstructionists* will advise him to modify the stream itself and to revise the very *habits and customs* of the "finny tribe." His *Experimentalist* friends will tell him that he must "grow" as a fisherman and set him to analyzing the "meaning" of his unfortunate *experience*. They will also thrust new equipment, such as "spinning reels" or other gadgets upon him. Colleagues from *Developmental* or the Fish-Study group will tell him that he is not just fishing, but that he is fishing for *fish*. Thus his cue is plainly to learn more about *them*. His *Perennialist* friends will, of course, send him to Izaak Walton and to other revered classics for the time-honored answer. He may have an *Essentialist* acquaintance, who will put him to memorizing the "ten steps" to fishing excellence.

The sad point is that, irrespective of the course he chooses, *he must inevitably expect, sooner or later, the certainty of another disheartening backlash*. This is, of course, the simple essence of the theory. We continue to make educational progress only because an indomitable spirit characterizes the true and devoted fisherman in all times and in all ages.

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