

The Importance of People

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On William Heard Kilpatrick's 85th birthday, November 20, his friends and colleagues met at Columbia University to honor the man who taught and inspired them. This month's column features a tribute to Kilpatrick written by William Van Til, who has worked closely with Dr. Kilpatrick on a number of educational projects.

Working with William Heard Kilpatrick

TO MOST of my generation, men and women now in their forties, William Heard Kilpatrick is the master teacher of philosophy of education who held them spellbound as his voice resonated reason to every corner of the barn-like Horace Mann Auditorium at Teachers College, Columbia University. To most of my contemporaries, he is the superlative interpreter of progressive education, the sage who converted every class session into a joust with ideas, the artist in human relations who made over each audience into participating individuals in small groups.

But the William Heard Kilpatrick whom I know best is the leader of organizations dedicated to human betterment. During my three years with the Bureau for Intercultural Education, he was chairman of the Board of Directors and thus my "boss"—yet how that flat word fails to describe the inspiration of his wisdom, the statesmanship of his leadership! For several memorable months, he was my mentor in a collaboration, the yearbook, *Intercultural Attitudes in the Making*. For the past decade, his untiring devotion and amazing insight during his continuing presidency have been given gen-

erously to those of us fortunate to serve with him on the Board of the John Dewey Society.

Others may best remember William Heard Kilpatrick tossing his lion-like mane of white hair as he clarified for them the principles of humane modern education from the platform of the Progressive Education Association or from the rostrum at Teachers College. I, too, left such sessions with high resolve and new insights. But I remember him best at the moments of crisis in the lives of organizations and men.

I can see him now as the relaxed and quiet chairman of a meeting in which men of good will are debating policy in human relations education with all the passion and intensity and eloquence that the dedicated can muster. He knows how to listen. He knows how to draw men out. Under his chairmanship less than complete honesty is unthinkable; no hidden agenda can survive. The crucial issues emerge in the discussion. Still he listens quietly and evokes ideas even when, in the earnestness of the quest, good human relations among the discussants seem, paradoxically, in peril. As chairman, Kilpatrick never scuttles from

hearing men out, never blurs the actual issues in the interest of a specious good feeling.

Then in a lull, when the issues are out but resolution seems far away, he begins to talk, calmly, reasonably. With clarity and invincible logic, with scrupulous regard for all that has been set forth with validity, he pulls together the separate strands of thinking. Under his reason-magic, a proposal develops. For the life of you, and despite your earlier partisanship, his proposal seems eminently fair and just and workable. More amazing, it also seems good to the man who has most vigorously differed with your earlier ideas. You talk over Kilpatrick's synthesis, supplement and modify it, but find no better way. The solution is so eminently workable, so sensitive in its recognition of what is achievable and what are the hard facts you must continue to live with, that, on leaving the meeting, you wonder why nobody thought of it earlier. In the weeks ahead, you find that the quiet man has helped you all to a decision that wears well.

When principles were involved, he stood firm. Expediency seems to be something that he has observed in other men but never experienced himself. A book that I once edited for the Bureau reported critical discussion by high school students of a then well-known cleric, later to be disciplined by his own church. A group of visitors, including people of influence, called as a delegation. Patiently, Kilpatrick heard them out for hours. A lesser man might have interpreted some of what Kilpatrick was exposed to as veiled economic threats and thinly disguised abuse. At the close of the session, Kilpatrick clearly reaffirmed the right of young people to use the method of intelligence. He thanked the delegation courteously and added memorably, "This

has been a helpful afternoon for me, for it has given me new insights into the sensitivities of some people." The meeting was over. The dedication of the Bureau to the free play of intelligence was unchanged.

I learned most from William Heard Kilpatrick when the John Dewey Society asked him to be chairman of a yearbook on intercultural attitudes. He called on the resources of the Bureau for Intercultural Education, and thus I became his associate for the book. His way of developing a yearbook was effective and inexpensive. He called together the best thinkers in human relations education within range of New York City. But this was not to be the writing committee, because he made a valuable distinction between high scholarship and clear communication. He asked the assembled thinkers to name the major topics and the best authorship anywhere in the country, present committee company not excepted. The planning committee met twice to do their work, and then disbanded with his and the Society's thanks. Recommended writers were invited and became the writing committee to prepare the yearbook within the framework laid out in person by the original committee. It was no accident that *Intercultural Attitudes in the Making* became one of the two most widely read yearbooks in the history of the John Dewey Society series. Kilpatrick's approach to preparing a yearbook worked.

As the chapters came in, Kilpatrick read them at home. His home, where we conferred weekly on editing, is a symbol of the man's life. The Kilpatricks live in an apartment high on Morningside Heights within walking distance of the university to which he brought fame. Below the big windows of his living room, the cliff of Morningside Heights

drops off sheerly. In the steaming city below are concentrated hosts of Puerto Ricans, Negroes, and Italians, plus a sprinkling of all the races of man from all the nations of the world. Throughout the long years of his retirement—yet this is another word with no application to Kilpatrick—his time has been dedicated to better living for just such people.

At these weekly meetings, he greeted his visitor with characteristic courtesy and reserve. He is not much given to small talk. The yearbook was part of a day invested in his two surpassing interests: writing for a variety of publications and working for such organizations as the Bureau for Intercultural Education, the Urban League, and the League for Industrial Democracy. He was ready for work, and immediately his precise mind was functioning and communication was flowing. Problems that had loomed large in my editorial office became smaller and manageable. His skill in problem-solving could scarcely be described; one thinks of the analogy of a machine, yet so much humanity is involved. Time passed without our realization, and suddenly I had a week of editorial work ahead, and he was turning back to his writing.

Year after year, I have watched this slight, frail-looking man preside over board meetings of the John Dewey Society, and, when nearby, over the annual meeting of the Society with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Always he shows the same mastery in chairmanship, the same respect for individual personality, the same stubborn integrity, the same precise critical thought.

Kilpatrick's capacity for taking the long

view, despite the rapids of the present, is ever amazing. Once during the anxious days of the 1950's when the attacks on the schools were at their height, I found myself despairing. Good superintendents and systems were being picked off one by one. The forces of reason had yet to rally for an onerous, unhonored, yet necessary defense. I will never forget Kilpatrick's counsel. He said, "These attacks on education simply show that the kind of education in which we believe is becoming more effective. They only fight us bitterly when we are making a real difference. Otherwise they ignore us. This is another campaign in the long struggle for democratic education. We will win." He was right. We did.

He stayed serene while vitriol was being poured upon him by segments of the press which I read while doing preliminary research for *Forces Affecting American Education*. Once he whimsically acknowledged a favorable comment from a West Coast newspaper sent him by a friend. He replied that he was especially appreciative since, as far as he knew, this was the only good thing being said about him by the press of that section of the country.

Let others more qualified write concerning William Heard Kilpatrick's scholarship and influence. To me, he is a great human being. This quiet man is a giant who will be long remembered by hosts of us after the pygmies of traditional education and shallow journalism have been forgotten.

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