

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

The Long Hot Summer

(The teacher writes the theme.)

When I was a youngster, my teachers used to show such a deep, personal interest in me that almost every one of them let me write her a theme on "How I Spent My Summer." In those days I didn't really have a felt need to do it. Now I have.

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ONCE AGAIN, this summer, after years of sitting in a college administrator's chair and seeing only my scholarly colleagues, I was a classroom teacher. Full time! Handling two graduate courses for experienced high school teachers.

It was a purely delightful experience! Any educator worth his salt would warm up quickly to these earnest, idealistic public servants. Every evening I bragged about them to my wife, gaily taking full credit for their high quality.

And yet, before long something began bothering me. It was hard to identify, but—after my years of little contact with public school teachers, perhaps idealizing them, perhaps building my image upon my collegiate colleagues—there was something that made it hard for me to get into the rhythm of their thought and feeling.

Eventually two factors began to stand out:

1. Quite a few of these teachers were not the easy masters of their subject fields that I had assumed they would be

2. There was in some of them a dark underlay of pessimism—almost defeatism.

Then I began analyzing my perceptions, checking on myself, hunting for possible causes. And now I'd like to take each factor separately, spin it out a little, and submit my reasoning about it.

Subject Matter Mastery

Let me make it clear at the outset that there were no incompetents in either class. Many were obviously the cream of their faculties; taken together, they would have made an outstanding faculty; and, in a way, they all "knew their stuff." But a good many of them seemed to know it in only one order, one pattern—roughly the order and pattern in which it had been taught to them, the order and pattern (and scope) of the traditional high school presentation. They couldn't play around with their stuff in the deft, nonchalant manner of the real master. They couldn't shuffle the deck, cut it any old way, and be comfortable playing the cards as they came up. They couldn't reach across big spaces and weave relationships, and they weren't relaxed when perfectly familiar material showed up in new syntheses.

There was another subject matter angle that kept bothering me: Very few of these teachers were venturing out to the frontiers of their fields. (Maybe you ought to check my observa-

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tion to see if it is valid: What proportion of the English teachers you know are looking into semantics or having fun with communications theory? How many social studies teachers are moving out into cultural anthropology and bringing back something of value to their classes? How many math teachers are on friendly terms with binary systems or the theory of games?) I don't think I ever expected to see them becoming highly expert in the new areas, but I had assumed an intelligent—even eager—general awareness.

Now, as you'll see in a minute, I am not about to write a diatribe against high school teachers. I like and admire them far too much for that. But the plain fact is that really good teaching demands a broader and deeper and handier knowledge of what they are teaching than many of our teachers have. And a high school teacher who isn't so

vividly interested in his field that he takes joy in reading and getting around and reaching out to the edges just simply cannot be as good as our dreams.

There must be a reason, for these are wonderful people. There is: "When I get through with five classes in a row—175 kids—I'm pooped! I'm not just tired; I'm dragged out. I don't even *want* to read anything—let alone the fact that I've got a stack of papers to do anyway."

There it is: a *real* reason, no factitious excuse. I said to myself: *This is the way it's going to be until we get these hard workers some tranquility in their lives, time for something of the reflective life.* The high school teacher is driven and driven and driven through his day; teaching too much, doing too many chores. If the American people want teaching that is released to be truly creative, they have some buying to do.

And yet—there are the vacations.

Maybe the one reason isn't wholly adequate. Are we professors of education adding to the problem? Are we, for example, making subject matter mastery seem less admirable than it is? (I caught considerable hint of this in my classes. Students seemed reluctant to mention "straight" subject matter. Time after time it was I who had to mention and defend the values of organized knowledge. I'm sure we don't *mean* to deprecate knowledge, but I sensed that many graduate students felt respectable only when they were talking about personal development—and didn't seem to see disciplined study of systematic information as truly a part of that development.) Maybe we need deliberately to play up the ideal of the teacher who knows his stuff so thoroughly that he can move about in it delightedly and delightfully.

Are our liberal arts brethren, who so

greatly love the ideal of knowledge, producing a program with closed ends, instead of an open-ended challenge to a lifetime of study? Are they failing to build in a love of adventure in new learning or to equip their graduates to do independent work? It almost seems so, for the mention of new possibilities all too often encounters not only indifference but also *fear*. Why in the world should a college graduate be scared to tackle something related to his greatest competency?

To look at one more possibility—are administrators and supervisors making teachers fuss so constantly with the minutiae of the day that they never get their heads up to look out to the horizon? Is the whole environment of a high school teacher as stimulating, intellectually, as we could make it if we tried? Somehow, I can't shake off the feeling that a great many teachers see them-

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protects
itself by
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selves as "little" people. If they do, who is teaching them to view themselves that way?

Far be it from me to see subject matter mastery as all a teacher needs! But I strongly suspect that many of the other developments we so greatly need—toward greater flexibility, for example—are inhibited by lack of sure-footedness whenever the old monolithic subject matter begins to shake and weave a little. I, for one, want social science teachers who can chat at ease with social scientists, and science teachers who can rub shoulders comfortably with professional chemists and physicists. I don't see that we in professional education have been stressing that sort of goal enough.

Pessimism

Whenever I deal with public school teachers, I am amazed again at the num-

ber who seem to see the world going to the dogs. They take for granted a "breakdown of the American home." They visualize a decline in morals. They see the school as newly imprisoned, frozen in a pattern of "conformity," no longer free as it once was to teach honestly and hard-hittingly. Above all, they view a large portion of the latest generation as unprecedentedly frivolous, resistant to study—or much, much worse.

No experienced practitioner can fail to sympathize with their complaints. We've all had to struggle with youngsters who lacked the brains to do traditional school work, who did not know how to read, or far worse, resisted our every effort to teach them. We have all been angry about homes that wrecked good children's chances. And, in the larger sense, we have all had our frustrations because the larger society negated so much of the school's influence.

But all this is no new thing. In fact, there is considerable reason to think today's homes healthier than ever, to see much in today's society that is newly praiseworthy. My sympathetic point is that many of today's high school teachers feel their problems largely *are* a new thing. At times they reveal a dark hopelessness. They seem to feel overwhelmed by a situation that is just too much for them. Sometimes they come close to losing their faith in the generation they are teaching.

I believe I am beginning to see what's eating on them. For what it may be worth here is my hypothesis:

Assume for the moment that the general public, now that it sends nearly all its children to high school, expects the school to do for all about the same thing it used to do for an elite. Then assume that the teachers have accepted that picture-in-the-head of what their target is. Let's say that hitting that target

represents their only *real* definition of success.

Well, *that is an impossible, overwhelming situation*, isn't it? Any conscientious teacher with only that definition of success would have to see himself as failing, in relation to many of his students—would have to see his school as a mess.

Oversimplified, of course, but I believe we have here a fairly good snapshot of the going state of mind. You won't see it at the casual level, for teachers, like all of us, cover up their fears most of the time. But I believe the hopelessness is there, a dark underlay that explains many surface phenomena. Our teachers have one basic definition of success: getting across the same kind of subject matter they have come to value. And—for a large part of their student body—that can't be done.

The road to neurosis!

And what have we to offer them? We've scolded them a-plenty, in our books and articles and conferences. We've produced a fine sense of guilt. Sheer mental hygiene demands that we come up with something more positive. The teachers won't settle for just relaxing and letting down the standards on the same old content—they're too good for that, thank goodness! We at the engineering level have got to build with them a school model that can provide authentic, recognizably genuine, success for all kinds of youngsters, and thus success for their teachers.

A large order! You will note that I shall grow vague at this point, where the solution ought to come. I cannot provide it. Frankly, I don't believe there are any leaders in American secondary education (specifically excluding elementary education) who *can* provide it. We get pretty smug at times, because our vision

is somewhat ahead of current practice; but we don't really have the answers either. If we did have them and could put them in clear, cogent form, they would be seized upon.

Let me put that more concretely: If some community were to come to the leaders in secondary education and say, "We'll give you the money and the freedom to develop the right high school program," is there any one of us who could give them a clear image of what we would aim at? Could we genuinely resolve the conflicting needs and demands upon secondary education, and properly serve all the amazingly diverse youth? I'm not so sure. I think we've been kidding ourselves a good bit, while we mentally derogate the principals and teachers because they haven't found the solutions.

But, at least, let's review the problem: Many of our best teachers feel hopeless, because the only objectives they accept as representing genuine success are clearly predestined to failure with the bulk of their students. They need to learn a truly and justly satisfying set of objectives which can be achieved. Then they need to work in an institution which values those objectives and makes their accomplishment possible. When they do, they will be happy, they will relax; and then, by one of those anomalies so common in human affairs, they will succeed in doing much that they now so heart-breakingly strive for.

. . .

And so, you see, I, who began the summer mildly scapegoating teachers, ended it blaming myself—and others like me. I got pretty worked up about it!

—FRED T. WILHELMS, professor of education, San Francisco State College, California.

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