

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

To Thine Own Self . . .

MAYBE it's only that this is written in August, when a "columnist" is too vacation-lazy to produce something original. But in going back to an old letter to a colleague (written from Pakistan while a consultant there), I prefer to think that I am doing so because it's as close as I've yet come to voicing a set of concerns which year by year seem more important to me. I should be delighted to have your reaction.

Dear Irv:

Let me bounce an idea off your skull and see how it (the idea) sounds.

For a good many years I've thought about the effects which schools do have and can have on what one might call the "ability to live." Since I've been here in Pakistan, the striking contrasts in cultures and in what schools commit themselves to do have jabbed me with extra-sharp needles. Watching a school system which has almost no commitment to personal growth enables one to see the American commitment more clearly—and admire it more than ever.

Marcus Aurelius once said, "Even in a palace it is possible to live well," and went on to elaborate the hint that it's hard to do—anywhere. It *is* hard; we know that. Thoreau's pithy statement that "Most men live lives of quiet desperation," is probably one of the most insightful lines in our language.

Schools have always influenced the way men live their lives. In the past quarter-century or so we've learned to step up the influence very greatly, by getting learning into the context of life and action. So American schools now commonly have an unprecedentedly large—and wholesome—influence on how people live.

But it strikes me that most of that influence is spent on how a child behaves *toward others*. That is why nearly everybody (except me) commonly takes it for granted that "citizenship is the number one target." We work very hard to teach the democratic ethic, with overtones of Christianity and vague rumors of religion and philosophy in general. Our teaching on conduct is generally pretty puritanic, based on subordination of self, and pretty moralistic as to cooperating with others and serving them.

By and large one applauds that. It is the foundation of much that is decent and inspiring in our way of life. And it is a good thing that we are growing fairly effective in getting it across.

But, as a guide to life, a too-exclusive concern for ethics-toward-others has one flaw. It isn't broad enough to cover the field. There is also the matter of how a man lives with himself.

Start with such a word as "happiness." Most people labor under a load of its opposite. Partly the reason lies in the sad

realities of life. But, if the realities are a constant, the reactions of persons to them are anything but a constant. I believe we can do a great deal about the quality of those reactions. Read for instance, Rabbi Liebman's *Peace of Mind*, especially his chapter on the handling of grief. Ever since I saw that, I've had a hunch that we could take various problems apart, as Liebman did the management of grief, and produce young people greatly strengthened to handle constructively the realities they must handle. Thus I remember a marriage counselor's experimental report that while one sequence of marriage counseling had not much cut down the rate of divorce among the counselees, it *had* cut down the "emotional debris" from divorce. In other words, the people involved had learned how to handle a problem which often wrecks others.

But far greater than the occasional time of outstanding trouble is the gnawing unhappiness that runs steadily through many—maybe nearly all—lives: Anxiety only remotely hitched to reality; worry, insecurity, loneliness, jealousy, hostility—and so on. Surely the psychologists and psychiatrists know enough so that we could do enormously more than we do to root out these cancers. Maybe it would be fairly easy to accomplish quite a bit if only we placed a higher value on the individual child's *happiness with himself*. I don't wish to make too much of a dichotomy of it, but isn't it possible that our zeal for the child-as-citizen—for his relation to *others*—is getting in our road?

But I don't want to dwell on the negative side. Remember the university professor who taught the armed forces their system for instant recognition of airplanes? Earlier he had also taught students to taste just as much sweetness

in coffee with, say, a quarter-spoonful of sugar as they used to taste with a whole spoonful. Couldn't we do that for the good taste of life? We do already, in some degree. But shouldn't we step it up?

I think what restarted this whole chain of reflections was realizing the enormous difference between American and Pakistani schools in the zest they create. There is an enormous difference in sheer *joie de vivre* between a roomful of American kids and their passive, sad-eyed Pakistani counterparts. But suppose we said to ourselves that this quality is one of the prime goals—and really went to work on it!

Consumer education—my old flame—is at its best an effort in this direction. Most of us Americans, it says, have enough income to achieve the physical basis of a really wonderful life. How many of us achieve the wonderful life itself? Where do we jump the track? How could we use our resources to live well in our homes? That's the heart of consumer education. Think, to take a simple example, how one could heighten the pleasure of watching a football game on television or at the field by more appropriate teaching. Yet, strangely, one of the greatest blocks to getting good consumer teaching lies in teachers' reluctance to adopt this positive, enthusiastic view of its purpose. They often distrust what looks like hedonism and are more inclined toward using consumer education to sell a Spartan view of life.

Well, those are just a few ideas that hit high in the lineup when I start with the word "happiness." Suppose you start with other words: "warmth," "strength," "peace," "integrity." Or you name it, sticking to what a person is, within himself.

The greatest problem, you often said,

is to release each youngster's creativity. Others might stress the development of vigor and independence in problem solving. In either case, the foundation has to be the youth's composure within himself, his calm belief in himself—for without self-confidence and self-acceptance there cannot be courage and vision toward the external world, or warmth toward others. It will be a tremendous job to develop a school program appropriate to the goal, for life in all too many schools is more productive of the hectic flush than of serenity. In subject-matter terms, it may well necessitate challenging the primacy of the social studies and *citizenship uber alles*, in favor of the deeper-running arts and humanities, for these go more directly to what is within us. At the least, it will involve modifying the social studies toward a more genuine "behavioral science" concept, using what psychology and philosophy and some

other disciplines have to offer. Beyond that, it will mean building into all our nervous systems the ideal of the personality psychologists call "healthy," alongside of (and, unfortunately, not entirely out of conflict with) our common teacher ideal of the person we call "good." Perhaps even beyond this, it will demand some shift in philosophical emphasis, to make duty toward oneself at least equal to duty toward others.

I can't spell it out much. But I think we've gone too narrow because we've stuck so close to *morality toward others*. We project here, I think, our own personal sense of guilt. It is very hard for each of us simply to accept himself, and even harder for him to understand the supreme importance of doing so. Therefore, it is hard to accept a "child for himself" view as a teacher.

Yet if we were to do this—without negating our ethical, moral teaching—

Announcing Language for Daily Use

FOURTH EDITION

by Dawson
Zollinger
Foley
Miller
Connell

This new, engrossing program is replete with exercises and activities that develop essential skills. Each major language skill is introduced, fixed, reviewed, and then retaught on a more mature level.

Why is it *enjoyable* to teach LANGUAGE FOR DAILY USE? The organization is crystal clear and pupils are genuinely motivated by interesting content and exercises. Attractive format is a result of distinctive typography, functional use of color, and charming illustrations. The complete Teacher's Edition includes many unique features that are time-saving and that greatly enrich the program.

Ready January 1959

WORLD BOOK COMPANY

Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York

Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Dallas, Berkeley

I'm sure we could produce a generation of youngsters who would be recognizably different in kind—averaging closer to Maslow's "self-actualizing people." I think there is a kind of power factor latent in a youngster, most of which never gets touched. I think we could produce big-souled, gently rugged, warm, accepting characters. I feel pretty sure a reasonably philosophical faculty over a period of time could spell out the wanted characteristics and experimentally work

its way toward curricular media for developing these. I guess this is most of what I mean by liberal education.

I know this is pretty vague. I won't excuse it by saying I just can't say it clearly. The fact is I just don't see it clearly—but I know it's out there!

Thoughtfully yours,
Fred

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

Announcing . . .

Fourth ASCD Curriculum Research Institute
in cooperation with
The National Institute of Mental Health and
The Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation

December 6-10, 1958

Washington, D. C.

Consultants:

WILLIAM M. CRUICKSHANK, *Syracuse University*
THOMAS GLADWIN, *National Institute of Mental Health*
MIRIAM GOLDBERG, *Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation*
RALPH D. RABINOVITCH, *Hawthorn Center, Northville, Michigan*

Institute Director:

ALEXANDER FRAZIER, *The Ohio State University*

Registration fee: \$40. Hotel accommodations at special rates should be obtained through the ASCD Washington office.

For information and application forms write:

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

Copyright © 1958 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.