

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Fred T. Wilhelms

Wanted: A Peacetime Induction System

IF YOU had to deal with high school boys during the war, you know that they were terribly eager and anxious about their entry into the armed forces. That one looming fact colored all their thinking. I recall that while I was with the National Association of Secondary-School Principals we published a little guide called, "Getting Ready for Induction," and we could hardly keep up with the urgent demand for it. Our nation had a very efficient induction system for the boys in those days, when we knew how badly we needed them.

It's all less spectacular today. But, way down underneath, high school boys—and girls—are probably just as eager and anxious now about their entry into adult life. Only, where is the induction system? Where is the guide?

Initiating the Young

Is it unfair to estimate that among all nations of all times we may have the poorest system of progressively incorporating our youth into the world of the adult? Primitive tribes take very seriously their initiation rites—and even these are only symbols of an assimilation that has been going steadily forward through the years. Agricultural commu-

nities gather their youth into the adult circle as steadily and as naturally as season follows season. Among the poorer nations, the sober realities of need place responsibility—and with it status—upon the newly-strong shoulders of youth and maiden. Every one of the totalitarian nations has consciously capitalized upon the powers of its young people.

And we? Are we not almost saying aloud, "Run along and play awhile"? Or, at best, "Study your lessons like nice children; we'll see you later." And when some vigorous youngsters grow restive or make a nuisance of themselves, are we not chiefly diagnosing them as needing more facilities for recreation—which we then proceed to build *for them*? We seem scarcely to consider their possible need for work, for responsibility, and for the status which goes with making a contribution. Even less, except within some families, do we genuinely incorporate them into the council circles of adults, to be heard when decisions are made.

Maybe—just maybe—this is a root cause of that profoundly disturbing alienation of the adolescent subculture from the adult world, which appears to be growing by the year. Maybe not, for this is only hypothesis. But Heaven knows we need *some* rational explanation when

delinquency rates double in a decade, when juvenile crime is multiplied by eight in ten years, and when study after study, such as those reported by Jacob, shows even our college graduates turning their backs upon the problems of the larger community. It is silly to act as if such a groundswell just happens. It is produced.

A Need To Be Counted

In other times and in other cultures 16-year-olds have done sober work, sat among men and women, and counted. We have tended to pity them—and certainly we are fortunate that we can release our children from harsh, grinding labor, that we can afford them time to build themselves toward rich, productive lives; just as certainly our motives are kindly. But has it been only harsh necessity that moved adolescents into adult affairs? Or have those other cultures—including our own not so long ago—been closer-tuned than we are to deeplying, almost-instinctual drives and aspirations that grow in young people as naturally as their bodies grow into the greatest vigor they will ever know?

Put it bluntly: In our scheme of things, are we bucking against irresistible surges of inchoate, half-recognized aspirations rooted in the very nature of a human being? In virtually attempting to hold a big human being in the role of the "little," are we *outraging the organism*—and harvesting inevitable defiance? We all know the fiercely awkward battle any healthy adolescent puts up for independence from his family; is that all there is to it? Is he not announcing that he means to be a man? We all know how even an infant rages when his arms are held down; the blind rage implicit behind today's lightning flashes of youthful violence—

is it, perhaps, akin to the infant's struggle to be let loose?

Certainly adolescents love vigorous play; and it is good for them. But is that *all* they love, and is it *all* that is good for them? It is easy to see youth, in the herd, as merely frivolous; for the frivolity, thank goodness, is there. But in the intimate view the near-young-man and the near-young-woman are the most idealistic persons left in this tired, compromising, old world. They yearn—whether they know it or not—they yearn for something significant to do, for responsibility, for a place in the circle.

And we have shut them out. Oh, they can get hold of an old car, soup it up, and drive off to the drag races. They can start smoking cigarettes. But that is about all the adulthood we let them have. And then when, having no responsibility, they act irresponsibly, that is what we look at—and scold.

They are trapped; forced to be little when they know they could be big—when in cold fact only playing the big role can enable them to mature. It is not so bad for the serious college-bound and profession-bound among them. Their goal may be long deferred, and they may squirm with impatience; but they can see that they are doing something important just in getting ready, and their days have something—not enough, but something—of function. But all too many of the others see no real connection between what they do in school or out of it and their ultimate life. They see no real contribution this day's activity is making. They are only marking time. For them, today is an emptiness and they are a nothing.

And we are trapped, too, we school people. We have to live with these caged tigers, in quarters that give us precious little room to exercise them. Even if we

all united it would be hard to get public permission to give them greater life space. And the question of what we ought to do is so complex that we are not likely to unite.

A Rising Line

But we delude ourselves if we believe that we shall produce maturity out of a diet of immaturity. We have no real alternative. We must supply young people the makings of maturity. And we are not hopelessly without recourse.

Even within the space we ourselves control, opportunities lie largely unused to move youngsters up a rising line of work, responsibility, and status. Let a tiny example stand for the whole: Coaches don't really have to tend to the athletic equipment and make the training rules; the boys are big enough to do it. Look at a good kindergarten and see how large a thoughtful share of responsibility these tots carry in proportion to their development; if we could maintain that proportion through the senior year, what could our schools not do?

And we could be moving out into the community. Every community denies itself services and facilities it needs, on the grounds that it cannot afford them. A survey in my home city revealed a pressing need for child-care facilities, especially for the children from one-parent homes, where that parent must work. What could serve better to produce in adolescents the sense of responsible "bigness"—which they yearn for, and which society needs in them—than to help care for those children? Perhaps, viewed only financially, teen-age volunteer service will always be a modest factor. But the willingness of the volunteers will not be the bottle neck. The San Francisco Youth

Association has built up a sketchy system for getting youthful volunteers into service. It depends almost entirely on the initiative of the youngsters. Yet it has never failed to provide more volunteers than the agencies had the ingenuity to use—and they have made a splendid record. The possibilities are infinitely great.

But we shall have to go further. Ultimately we must raise the radical question: whether our pattern of full-time academic preparation till one moment, full-time adult role after that moment, is fundamentally sound. It is a dismaying question, dragging in train a host of complexities woven into our whole social and economic fabric. Anyone who has the nerve to raise it among practical schoolmen learns speedily about a spate of real problems.

And yet the thing to do is to look the question in the eye, and go after the answer with all the help we can get. It is always a mistake to get bogged down too soon and too compromisingly in the complexities of ways and means. We *always* find ways and means when we want them badly enough.

Right now the need is for diagnosis. Is the hypothesis set out above truly valid? Have we alienated adolescents by closing too many doors in their faces? Have we fallen so far behind their development that we keep them children when all their drive is to be young men and women? Are we flying in the face of Nature? If so, no amount of little tinkering will solve the problem. We have got to get back in tune with what people really are.

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