

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Prudence Bostwick

COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTE: *I'd like to say at the beginning that following Fred Wilhelms in the editorship of this column is going to be tough. When the invitation came, I had to wait a few days (or was it weeks?) and swallow hard before I could say I'd try.*

*There isn't a reader of Fred's contributions to "The Importance of People" who doesn't regret the end of his two years of service. As the new editor I am scared and searching. This may be one reason why I have chosen newness as the theme for my first effort.*

—PRUDENCE BOSTWICK

## What Is It Like To Be New?

EACH autumn there is newness in the air—a strange thing to accompany the fall of leaves and the coming of October. For millions of us, however, children and teachers alike, the year begins after Labor Day, and for some the year is very new indeed. A child who is coming to school for the first time or a teacher who is beginning his career—these are the ones for whom the autumn world is fresh and zestful and sometimes terrifying.

In a way newness makes cowards of us all. The need to hang back, to cling to the familiar, to find old comforts and securities almost overpowers the basic human drive for adventure and for change. In spite of the delight in looking forward, often the "heart is down and the head is turning around."

It is at this time that someone who has been there before can support our wavering spirits. In spite of the fact that

no one can learn for another, there is comfort in assurances that build increasingly justified confidence and give encouragement to a self threatened by events whose outcome is uncertain. Teachers who work with kindergarteners or other children or youth new to the school, and principals and coordinators who work with new teachers have special responsibility to provide continuous support and encouragement.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity of sitting in on a series of meetings in which a group of coordinators whose chief work was the induction of new teachers into a large city system met with one of the school psychiatrists to consider some of their professional problems. Over and over he stressed the need for the coordinators to remember that they were dealing with teachers new to their work and who were as much in need of constant reassurance as of food

and drink. To illustrate his point he told of a man who had entered a hospital ward preparatory to an operation. During the evening he rang for the nurse. When she reached his bedside, he asked her for some assurance that he would be cared for, that death was not an inevitable consequence of his ordeal. At frequent intervals thereafter the man summoned the nurse only to ask the same questions again and again. Finally in exasperation the nurse inquired of the doctor in charge of the wards, "How often must I go to him?" and the doctor replied, "As often as the bell rings."

It is not enough for a new teacher to wait for his first salary check as concrete evidence of someone's recognition of his effort. He must have early support from those whom he regards as responsible for the evaluation of his work. To be sure he needs help in a thousand ways, but it must be given with recognition of him as a human being, with courtesy and with faith in his power to grow in professional competency. It must be given with understanding of what it means to be new.

It is this understanding that is difficult to achieve. Experience has a way of developing in us habits and skills which reach at last a degree of familiarity that helps us to forget the pain and excitement of the untried. Once we have become proficient in a skill or secure in a discipline or theory, we not only resist change in habitual processes, but we also tend to forget what learning was like. What we already know and what we can already do seem easy.

We whose business is helping other people to learn have a responsibility ourselves to undergo at frequent intervals the rigorous process of learning, to be confronted with the need to build new



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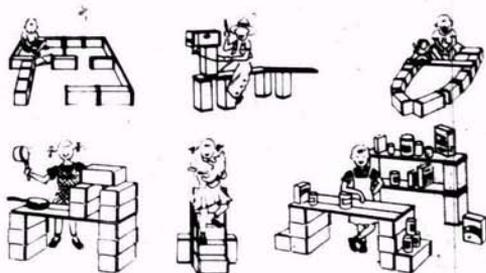
skills, habits, attitudes, and values which we have never built before. We need to know directly—not just remember—how it feels to explore a new city and be lost a block from home, to look on a new countryside, to live among people whose habits challenge ours, to gain a new skill, to learn a new language, to undergo the confusion that accompanies the rush of experiences before the configuration is achieved and the pattern clear. "We have lived so long," writes Arthur Combs, "with an accepted ability to write that we have forgotten how slowly and painfully the process of achieving these new differentiations was at the time we originally learned them."<sup>1</sup>

A number of years ago, in order to gain some insight into the nature of es-

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Combs and Donald Snygg. *Individual Behavior*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959, p. 191.

thetic experience I began to read such books as John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Max Schoen's *Psychology of Music*, George Santayana's *Sense of Beauty*, Carl Seashore's *In Search of Beauty in Music*, and Irwin Edman's *Arts and the Man*. In the process I realized that I could not read the material which dealt with the esthetics of music. The language was outside my experience. I had never been a student of musical form, only a listener with profound emotional response, an enchanted layman. So it was that in order to enlarge my experience and my vocabulary, I began the study of piano with all the insecurities of childhood and none of its innocence. From a small, red book for children I learned to read the accompaniment to "The Three Little Kittens," "Mon Ami Pierrot," and "London Bridge" . . . a humbling process that taught me new respect for learning. I worked to understand some of the intricacies of musical notes and scales and their manifold interrelationships. Sometimes I would grasp their significance, but more often meanings were lost in the foggy whole from which I had not yet been able to differentiate them. Slowly I began to find meaning in the language of musical esthetics and to be able to accept with serenity the hypothesis that the "listener is reaching up, not for the opening of heaven, but for high G."

There are many reasons for tackling something new. Each of us feels the basic need for adventure. As we mature and our drive for physical adventure lessens (skin-diving, skiing down precipitous slopes, leaping chasms, conquering mountains), our drive increases for adventure in the world of the hand, mind, and heart. Some of us may work in clay, wood, metal, paint, or the soil of gardens. If we find our medium, we grow in



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power to create what we have seen in our mind's eye, to give form to meanings we have at first only partially understood. Or we may be caught up in the search for ways to improve the quality of our relations with other human beings, sharpening our perceptions, testing these perceptions with the "reality" of other perceiving selves, and growing in the ability to enter creatively into co-operative enterprises.

Or our adventurous spirit may take us to the frontiers of thought, to the moving edges of man's exploration of his world, whether of the earth and the space through which it is being catapulted, or of human behavior and its intricate expression. We may read *The Universe and Mr. Einstein* with a chance of seeing the universe newly. We may share in the research that has gone into

the study of children's thinking or of their social values. We may, if our techniques are well sharpened, assist in the identification of new problems to be studied and the setting up of hypotheses and research design.

The invitation is everywhere to renew ourselves, to build new skills, to find new interests, to test out new ways of working and living. And in this renewing, we may grow in our understanding of the bewilderment that attends the effort to learn. We may appreciate the encouragement that comes from the support of others who know the way.

—PRUDENCE BOSTWICK, *Professor of Education, San Fernando Valley State College, Northridge, California.*

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### Creative Climate

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advantageously through the intellectual reexamination of the problem and the trying of new solutions. The freedom from anxiety over being wrong without fear of social or emotional punishment leads to further attempts to solve the problem creatively.

*Sixth*, the teacher would not consider rote memorization or imitation of textbook thinking as good learning. This teacher, along with the text material, his own explanations, and all other resources merely supplies the facts from which each student will derive his own insights and arrive at his own possible conclusions. Some pupils may give some very naive and simple applications; others may supply quite thoughtful insights. Requiring that pupils confine their thoughts to what the textbook says or what

teacher said is a certain way for producing conforming, non-thinking adults who may welcome anyone who will do their thinking for them.

*Seventh*, the teacher will provide procedures by which he can evaluate progress in learning that is commensurate with ability to progress. Instead of using every trial response by a pupil as a test of his knowledge, the teacher limits such testing to a specific time which culminates a learning period so that each pupil can try out many responses. The test consists of problem type questions to which each pupil can bring both the facts and, more important, his interpretation and evaluation of the facts. The teacher knows a mere listing of facts from memory is not a good evaluative device. Frequently, he will provide the facts and let the pupils solve problems of application or interpretation. But he does not limit himself to this. He uses oral reports, projects, acting out, debates, essays, and many other types of responses to provide for a wide range of creative abilities and understandings. By providing time for discussion and trial responses and certain specific times for interpretive types of testing, this teacher provides a beneficial climate for aiding creative efforts.

We need creative adults and democratic citizens who can think and feel free to think for themselves. The only way we can develop such citizens is to provide plenty of practice in a classroom where the climate is emotionally supportive rather than punitive. Give each child the freedom to learn by himself, with supportive guidance from the teacher, and you will have an adult who can think for and create by himself.

—ROBERT W. SCOFIELD, *Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater.*

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