

The Importance of People

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When We Reach for Assurance

Music came to me
Sang me out of grief;
Words were whispered
in my ear
That brought my heart
relief;
Love put arms around me
I was not alone—
So I retrieved my
sling
And chose a rounded
stone.¹

BEWILDERED, distraught, confused I sat at my desk trying to sort through the words hurtling toward me. Was I completely wrong? Was there no reason in my thinking? Others professed to be baffled at the stand I had taken. They had suggested that it was beyond comprehension. The loud angry words kept hammering at me. Their impact was almost overwhelming, coming as it did after sleepless nights and frustrated days. Perhaps this was the time to give up, to let it all go. I reached for a small paper weight—the gift of a co-worker and at this moment a symbol of understanding. Even this comfort was denied. My hands were trembling so that I was afraid to try to pick it up.

Then one of the older and wiser members of the staff came and sat beside me. In a clear but quiet voice he be-

gan to speak. His first words were lost within the turmoil of my thoughts. At last a sentence reached me. "Mary, I understand how you feel and I know why, but. . . ." In one sentence he had combined the magic of "open sesame" and "abracadabra." Tension diminished. Someone knew what it was like to be "me" in this instance. There *was* some validity in my stand, if not sweet reasonableness in the way I pursued it. For the first time it seemed that the conflict might be resolved. The words or act of love and understanding, at the right time, can make us whole again; make us strong to let us do what we must.

For Boys and Girls Too

Children often know how and when to reach for assurance and comfort when their worlds become confused. Anyone who watched "Candid Camera" one night last January saw a poignant example of this. The week after Christmas vacation a Santa visited a nursery school. He asked a young pupil, Cindy, the usual pre-Christmas questions. Hesitantly she explained that he had come to see her last week, that she had gotten all the things she had asked for. Again Santa pressed to know what she wanted for Christmas. For long minutes her struggle to understand and her confu-

¹ Harold Melvin. "Goliath Again." *The Christian Science Monitor*.

sion were mirrored in Cindy's face. At last it was too much for her. She began to cry, held out her arms, and Santa enveloped her in a warm embrace. Nothing else was needed. She had reached for help and she had found it.

Yet boys and girls do not always know when they need help. Poor Lee showed every sign of being too much managed. It probably started when he got out of bed in the morning and it lasted all the way to school. What "Dos" and "Don'ts" his mother didn't hand down, his sister did—right to the very door of the first grade room. No six-year-old was better prepared to turn a classroom into a battlefield.

A glowering pixie face, a chip-on-shoulder stance and Lee was ready to take on all comers. There can be enough turmoil in any group of sixes without the addition of a fist-happy warrior. And so we played a daily game: I would

say, "Can you keep from smiling while I turn you around three times? One—two—." We didn't need to go to three. The chip dropped away. The frown turned to a giggle. Lee was ready for a good day. He hadn't known the need for rescue, but I had read the signs.

On days when life at home had been too much for Ginny, I planned rhythms time early. I chose light and airy music which Ginny loved, music for dancing dolls and fairy queens. Cowboys twirling lassos and galloping on horses must wait for another day. The reward came when Ginny stopped by the piano to say, "I feel right gay."

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giving affection and faith, waiting until a child asks for help or until the tragic feelings are overcome. Ellie was cherished by her family. She was a friend to many of her peers and a joy to me. Living each day seemed to her a delight. Then suddenly Ellie showed every evidence of being in the midst of an overwhelming problem. She wept frequent tears at home and at school. She withdrew from play. She was unable to focus her attention on any kind of lesson. It was heartbreaking just to watch her struggle.

After conferences and informal talks, the school psychologist came to observe and advise. No real clues were ever found. All involved agreed that the only thing to do now was to stand by, ready to help, just in case. Actually Ellie was never really alone during these weeks; she was held fast and safe in the hearts of those who loved her. This in itself was enough of an answer. By May, Ellie was once more breezing through life on tiptoe. Apparently, this affection and support were enough to help her assimilate whatever had happened to frighten or disturb her.

Other People's Shoes

Children can catch glimpses of what it would be like to be in another person's shoes. They "hurt" as a loved pet is punished. They often reach to comfort a brother or sister starting to cry. The beautifully written best seller, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, has as one of its themes the growing-understanding of people. Near the end of the book,² Scout thinks of her father, "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and

² Harper Lee. *To Kill A Mockingbird*. New York: Lippincott, 1960. p. 294.

3 things about spelling

Every day a great deal of nonsense is written about spelling. Frankly, there are but three things you need to look for when you are examining spelling textbooks:

1. The word list; is it backed by sound research; has it been built from *all* the definitive studies available about children and adult word usage?
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walk around in them." Thus her feelings about a neighbor were changed. Thus the ghost of her thoughts of him which had grown to terrifying proportions was laid to rest, was reduced to the reality of a shy and kindly man too afraid of life to enter its main stream. Atticus adds one more page to the lesson as he says, "Most people are nice, Scout, when you finally see them."³

Isn't this what teachers are constantly helping children do—to "see" others and find them "mostly nice"? And children need help in finding the niceness and goodness in others. Most apparent to them at first is that Sally comes to school with some of yesterday's grime still attached, that David's bluster is like a forbidding wall, and that Ondus is just plain fat.

Ondus couldn't keep up with the others. It was his fate to be eternally last. All those extra pounds had him huffing and puffing before play time was even started. Neither Ondus nor his classmates cared that he was on a diet. He was a slow mover and a fast talker. Only a few words and he could beguile any small girl out of half a candy bar.

One day when Ondus was absent, I decided that the time had come for Spartan measures. As the cookies were passed, I bravely said to the puzzled helper, "No, thank you, even though chocolate chips are my favorites." I guided the conversation which ensued so that by clean-up time the boys and girls had considered: I gained weight easily and sometimes needed help in staying on a diet. Wouldn't celery and carrot sticks be a nice change from cookies? (There was reluctant agreement.) Ondus, too, was on a diet, but

³ *Ibid.* p. 296. Note: The present writer has put in the word *nice*. It is understood in the original sentence, rather than expressed.

An illustration showing a woman and several children of various ages gathered around a large sign. The sign has text on it. The woman is in the center, smiling, and the children are looking at the sign with interest. The sign is white with black text and a black border. The background is dark, making the sign and the people stand out.

**ride.. steer..
make it Go..**
- - and learn

Coordination as hands, eyes, master *real* steering wheels. Cooperation—riders, pushers taking turns. Learning—in dramatic play with school-tested Playmobiles. Write:

mor-pla

he kept forgetting about it. He might have more fun if he slimmed down a bit.

The pay-off came a few days later when John placed himself by Ondus in the lunch line and issued the challenge, "If you'll take two salads and no deserts I will too." Ondus, basking in the glory of being singled out by the class leader, resolutely passed up the Apple Betty. The cooks eventually had to revise their shopping list. Not just two children, but all 28, had become calorie conscious. So it was that they came to understand Ondus' problem and through group support helped him solve it.

Early one fall Jean spilled her bottle of milk. The proper little girls nearby pulled away with murmurs of "messy" and "I hope it didn't spill on me." For the moment, poor Jean was isolated in a sea of milk and misery. I noted that the children needed to grow in under-

standing of another's feelings. They were too quick to judge and disapprove.

During the next eight months, there were many evidences of an increased sensitivity toward others. More children seemed able to act fittingly in the face of some plight. They were quicker to protect the feelings of someone who had blundered. This came about as every six-year-old found himself in some difficulty during the year and appreciated the kindness of his classmates.

My tempering each pool of misery with the milk of human kindness may have helped.

All changes are slow, however, and new learnings are tenuously held. Many times I wondered whether all had been forgotten; but there were moments of reassurance.

Each April there comes a day when the infectious delight of spring wipes out all remembrance of the answers to

sums and the way to make a capital *E*. Gone completely is the power to read with comprehension what was easily understood a few weeks before. Even supposedly well established patterns of behavior disintegrate at the soft touch of an April breeze. This was one of those days. I thought, "Can it end without disaster?"

Then it happened. Jean, who was sitting close to me, spilled her milk. We were both liberally spattered. Quickly Nora Ellen said, "Nancy, go get a pan of water. I'll get the mop-up rag." Mary Sue clucked, "Accidents do happen." Howard said, "I'll get you another bottle." And Jean herself snuggled close to me to whisper, "Will your mother scold you 'bout your dress?"

All was not lost.

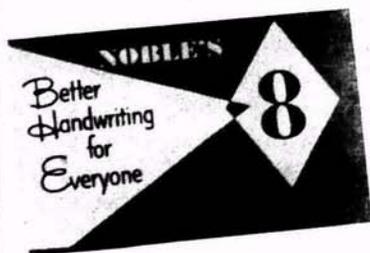
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