

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Arthur W. Foshay

Come Join Our Individuality

AS time passes, it seems clearer than ever that those who came to maturity before 1939, and those who came to maturity after 1945, can never really know each other. We of the 1939 generation will never know what the Depression and the War did to us. We are coming under the scrutiny of a group of strangers—our own children—who find us more or less simple-minded, or quaint, or at best out of date. Many of the questions we consider most important and most contemporary seem anachronistic to them.

Thus it may be with our question about the individual. Why talk about the individual? Isn't this one of those questions that grows directly out of the concerns of the 'thirties? Isn't the question itself really a form of sentimental nostalgia, asked by the ex-young? Isn't the more relevant question the question of survival? Our young look at us provocatively, and say, "Just stay away from the screamers, that's all."

"Little boy, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Alive."

"Little girl, what are your three wishes?"

"World peace, and that my Mommy and my Daddy have room for me in their hearts."

"Young man, what is an education for?"

"You have to have an education to get by."

Do I stereotype the young? Of course, if I write off their concern for survival as juvenile cynicism, soon to be outgrown. If we are to treat the young with the respect they deserve, we had better take their questions of survival seriously.

They stereotype us, too, of course. Perhaps I am one stereotype talking about another. When we talk about the importance of maintaining the integrity of the individual, we have to transcend the stereotypes, by recognizing what is valid about the concerns that underlie them.

I plead here that the young recognize what is valid about our concern over the welfare of the individual. I want to try to talk across the void of the years and the different conceptions of what is important in the world; I want to talk across the void that the stereotypes create. That is what educators are for, and I am an educator.

I think that we, the pre-1939 generation, the ex-young, have learned a lesson or two. As was ever the feeling of the older generation toward the younger, I hope that our children need not repeat all of our mistakes. For it seems obvious

to me that the young are about to be tested as severely as we were, and that at least one lesson we learned they will have to learn also. The lesson is to respect one's individuality. If they and we are to survive the strains that will surely appear during the 'sixties and 'seventies, we will have to learn how to have faith in ourselves. If we have not learned to respect our own individuality, our chance of survival as whole human beings will surely be reduced.

Being True to Self

That is the lesson: to be true to what makes us human; to be true to ourselves. That is the only way we can be true to one another. The message from my generation to the next is, "Come join our individuality," for there is really nowhere else to go. We have only ourselves.

What is it, to claim one's self? It is, above all else, to believe in one's self as worthy, to claim one's individuality—one's right and responsibility for fulfilling one's potentialities—and to defend one's individuality against those who would assault it. It is to claim this same right for others, having claimed it for oneself. The school, our most widespread, most imitated institution, exists to preserve and extend this right. It is this right and the feelings that go with it, that we share with the next generation, and they and we with the past.

Being true to ourselves was never easy. Like Matthew Arnold, we live in a world "swept with confused alarms"—a world in which need challenges privilege on every hand, all under the blinding light of the ultimate weapon.

No wonder some demand doctrinal conformity, and others keep their heads down. No wonder the great threat of our times is extremism—its hallmark being

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a tendency to stereotype one another instead of debating the issues. Of course it is important that we beware of the "screamers." We live in a time of inordinate peril, and there is no place for them.

Some say that the time for talk has passed. Of course, if "we are at war, we are infiltrated," there is no place for individuality except the individuality of combat. On the other hand, if the only threat to the country comes from the right wing, then, too, there is no place for individuality; the liberal and the virtuous have to close ranks and redemonstrate their unity by making a new conformity of superficial nonconformity, and join together in damning the apathetic.

The rest of us, who had thought rational analysis was the only alternative to disaster, seem caught in the polarized field we inhabit, like iron filings between the poles of a magnet; we often feel as

if our own thoughts and attitudes had been preempted by the extremists. It is obvious that they have only contempt for us moderates. What each extremist group fears most is that the other will take us over. This feeling of being preempted—of being a chip on the tide—is one aspect of our times. It denies our individuality.

Our individuality is being denied in another even more subtle way. We in the United States have discovered the efficiency of huge organizations. We have big government, big business, big labor, and big schools. We know that big organizations tend to rob their members of individuality. No organization, we are told, can long tolerate a troublemaker. The chief business of big organization is to maintain its stability. Even the creativity asked for by some large organizations has to be carried on within the framework



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of the needs and objectives of the organization.

No wonder some people, suspecting the schools of the ills of bigness, have made proposals for drastic reorganization and reshuffling, not because they have any specific improvement of teaching and learning in mind, but because they wish to shake up the monolith.

There is not a single thing happening in our society that effectively challenges this drift toward impersonality and loss of individuality. It will take all of the strength that we and our successors have to resist this drift, if we resist it at all.

A Separate Curriculum

Yet there are some new things and some old things we can do about this drift. For one thing, we can organize the school to permit a separate curriculum for each child. Not the same curriculum, with children going through it at individual rates. That is not individuality; that is merely a more detailed control. No; we can, if we have the nerve, organize a special curriculum for every one of the millions of children in school. These curricula would have many common elements, of course—especially in the fundamental skills. But the kind of attack to be made on these learnings, even the learning of the skills, can vary enormously from one child to another, as (for example) the programs of individualized reading have shown.

We can increase the amount and quality of independent study ten- or even twenty-fold. That's one promise of programmed instruction. We can insist that school libraries be continuously restocked. It is not unreasonable to buy one new library book for each child in the country each year. That's what the new ALA Standards imply.

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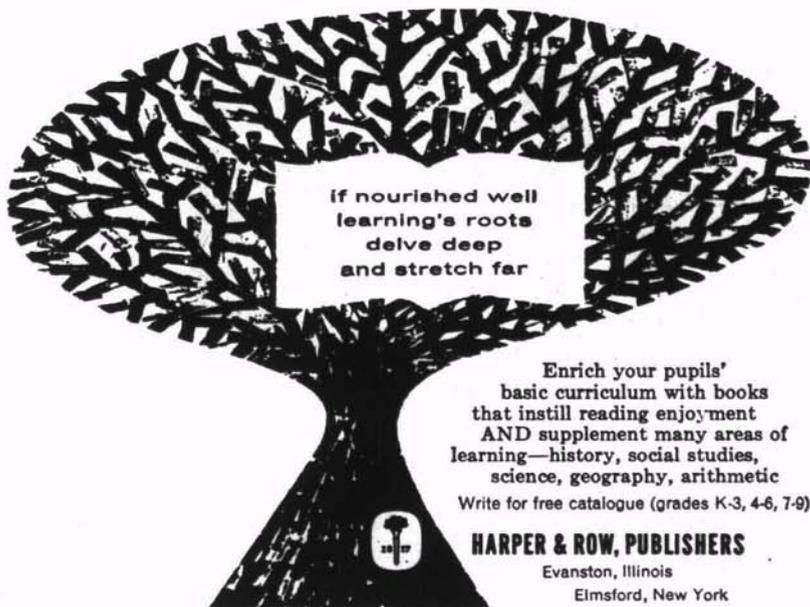
We can accelerate the reconception of the academic subjects, under way now in the sciences and mathematics, just appearing in English and the social studies. We can, in a word, offer our children the means for invention, and thus enhance their individuality. We can bring to an end the shocking qualitative differences among the schools, both public and private. It is appalling that it is still a matter of chance whether a child goes to a good school, a mediocre school, a poor school, or an intolerable school.

These are all things we know how to do now. Let us consider at least one other suggestion.

We can, for the first time in our history, give intensive and prolonged attention to that portion of the curriculum which deals most directly with the nature of individuality and the sanctity of the human soul: the arts and the humanities. Our tradition in the United States is one

of constant and unremitting neglect of the arts. We have never taught literature successfully. We have never taught composition successfully. If a small number of our students emerge from school with solid knowledge and a deep experience of literature, this is by accident. If some of them come out of school able to write well, this is by the accident of exposure to the occasional teacher—often at the junior high school level—who has opened their eyes to the possibility that writing is a form of reason and personal fulfillment, not a mere skill.

Our pedagogical tradition is shot through with fraud in this field. To call literature and art "expressive" is to stultify them—to make them stupid. To demand that they have social significance is to deny their intrinsic value. The function of literature and art is to bring us face to face with the human condition. It is to deepen our awareness of what



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it means to be a human being, and thus to be an individual. If we do not have a proper sense of our humanity, how can we hope to be more than the one-dimensional tool of those who do have this kind of sense?

We are caught in a time in which our leaders seem to be saying to us that the means of power are to be found wholly in the sciences and technology, and that the whole expression of power is in the economy. Yet if there was ever a country that was formed on something more than this, ours is that country. If there was ever a people who ought to know the power of an idea, powerfully developed (which means esthetically developed), we are that people. If we go on making the mistake we have been making as a nation in this field—the mistake of believing that power consists only of sci-

ence, technology, and economics, we will inevitably become more and more like the Russians, for this is the communist's basic creed. It is up to us in the schools to bring this stupidity to an end.

As I say, it seems clear enough that we are heading into a period of unparalleled national strain. Our only hope is to join with the younger generation and rediscover ourselves as human beings and as individuals. We have to give ourselves both the right and the means for self-respect and mutual respect, if we are to survive as human beings. We of the schools have the means, if we will, for reversing the trend that our country is in. If we fail to do so, we do not deserve the pity of those who will follow us.

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Achievement

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osophical discussions and group consideration of crucial issues (overpopulation, euthanasia, peace, etc.). Nor do they find adequate libraries and time allotments for independent study.

Most of this group are already committed to lifetime learning. Reading is at once their trademark and downfall. They read while teachers teach (not an endearing practice) and they often read advanced science books instead of preparing tomorrow's grammar lesson. Some of the students in our research do as much as 40 hours of extracurricular reading a week and can speak with encyclopedic depth on multiple subjects. Yet in terms of school marks, if we are to consider this to be the measure of achievement, these pupils often do poorly. They fare much better on achievement tests—probably better than any other group of

students—for, although memorizing facts is anathema to them, they do pick up a surprising number of these as they read and discuss.

Marks given in the usual sense and based largely on a single standard can in no way take into account the many factors that are aspects of achievement. If marks or ratings are to be used, the only fair standard is one based on the individual's present level of accomplishment and on his progress. A conventional setting of fact-learning (text-memorization-test), however, supplies only a fragment of what should be the whole of an education. Discussion, writing, reading, and all manner of activities that allow for self-instigated problem solving and creative work must be provided. These will give students opportunities to discover themselves, find ways of meeting basic needs, unveil and explore interests and examine values.

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