

The Importance of People

Column Editor: Arthur W. Foshay

Ruth Cunningham 1907-1956

THERE are those who will read these words who do not know that this column was first written by Ruth Cunningham, who once was the Executive Secretary of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and who later became a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a relatively young educational organization. It still bears the stamp of those who first brought it to life. Prominent among these was Ruth Cunningham. Eminent in her character was the importance she ascribed to people.

I first met Ruth when I was finishing my graduate work at Teachers College, and she invited me to attend a seminar she was conducting. I was to report on the Lewin, Lippitt and White study, then only eight years old, that contributed the concept of classroom atmosphere to the educational literature. I remember well how she drew me out and made me feel important, and how skillfully she led the discussion that followed my report. Later, three members of the class published studies of their own on this matter. I learned later that her seminars typically were productive in this fashion. Ruth Cunningham had a talent for bringing people's minds to life; for making them important.

Nowhere is her talent better represented than in the book that she wrote with Anna Elzi, James A. Hall, Marie Farrell and Madeline Roberts, *Understanding Group Behavior of Boys and Girls*. The book was published through the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute; in the ensuing years I have had reason to follow its distribution. There is no question but that the book goes right on helping thousands of educators understand the importance of people.

To Look with Love

Every month we receive requests to reprint one or another of the instruments she and the Denver teachers invented, contained in the appendix to the book. I still remember how her eyes lighted up when she showed me the picture of two little boys in a tussle (it is reproduced on page 283), and explained her delighted surprise at the typical response of children who look at the picture—"Is it a play fight or a mad fight?" She had not thought of this—but she never forgot it. It helped to deepen even more her capacity to look with understanding and love into the lives of others.

She was a woman almost wholly lacking in guile. She did not understand the little pretenses that people carry on in the course of their normal relations with one another. She was incapable of such

pretense, and everlastingly amazed to find it in others. She was reared in Japan, and did not come to the United States until she was eighteen and ready to attend college.

I asked her once how the United States looked to her when she first arrived. She said a surprising thing: "Everybody looked so solemn. Nobody smiled. Everybody was so big." I have often thought that Ruth's problem arose from the fact that she entered a solemn world, where everybody looked so big, when she was full of smiles and lightheartedness. Perhaps because of her Japanese childhood, she always preferred tea, and afternoons when there was time she always drank tea in the College cafeteria. She was a gay companion, and others gathered around her on these occasions.

Once she announced that she wished that she had a million dollars. She solved her problem by inventing on the spot

a book that would surely sell fast enough to bring in the money. It was to be called "The Webster-Cunningham Democratic Child Development Speller" (we had been chuckling about Bennett Cerf's spoof on best seller titles—"Abraham Lincoln's Doctor's Dog"). The book would be bound in blue paper. Inside, there would be blank pages—nothing at all. That was the "democratic" part, she said. Another time we got to talking about learning facts for facts' sake, and she invented a game called "Useless Information" which she immediately won by reciting the height of Fujiyama in feet. (I later tried to top it by reciting the name, the height and the weight of the statue on the Capitol dome in Washington, but she topped me again with something like Macaulay's middle name.)

We worked together on an Institute project in Springfield, Missouri. I came down one morning to breakfast, found

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that she was already in the hotel dining room having her first cup of tea, and joined her, half awake. She never ceased riding me for what she said I said. She asked me what got me up so early, and she said I said something about the damn birds singing outside my window.

Ruth knew a good deal about projective devices. I have always thought that she projected her personal view of the world in the little cartoon-like drawings that accompanied most of her work. These were open-faced, child-like figures. She used them to adorn bulletins she wrote to the teachers that were working with her on the various cooperative projects she engaged in. Lots of them appeared in the issues of *Educational Leadership* to which she contributed during the late 'forties and early 'fifties. It is as if they represented guileless Ruth, looking in on the human folly that produces the problems that concern behavioral scientists.

The one overriding value in her life

was people—their integrity, their importance. I only saw her weep once—when she was trying to tell me of having seen "Cry, the Beloved Country," the play about human tragedy in South Africa. She could not finish telling me about it. Others have their own perceptions of Ruth's impact on her students and her co-workers. Mine is that she permanently impressed on ASCD the importance of people. The times have changed since her death, and we are talking about things now that were not current during the period of her active service. It is unlikely, however, that having been set in the path that she helped to form, we will ever abandon our central concern with what was of greatest importance to her.

That is why, whenever I think of the "importance of people" I am reminded of the importance of Ruth Cunningham.

—ARTHUR W. FOSHAY, *Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York.*

Psychological Dimensions

(Continued from page 191)

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