

# LIKE NOT LIKING MR. CHIPS

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IN THE high school years, students reach out for human experience, for knowledge and understanding of their apparent adolescence, for truth and intellectual stimulation. What happens to the boy or girl who is able seriously to engage in learning as a process of inquiry? What happens to the boy or girl who fritters time away seeing no serious purpose or challenge in his studies? What makes the difference?

The dilemma is this: dehumanization occurs when one loses one's unique identity and joins the ranks of the numberless numbers. More specifically, many high schools have too many students with too few hours in the day for personal touches. We must rescue the student from the depersonalization of our modern schools, just as we must relate him to the group of which he is a captured member, his "school." Students rebel against the growing tendency of modern science that would reduce them to a number. They feel as most educational philosophers have long insisted, that the sovereignty of the individual student is the keystone of the arch of the educational system. Each boy and girl realizes his potential as a human being only in relationship with others. It is not in isolated piety (or cubicles) but in everyday human relationship with his peers and his teachers that the student comes to know himself as a person.

## Individual Worth

A student upon his graduation from high school put it this way:

In getting each student *to be* someone, education must do more than impart information, or simply teach skills, or adjustment, or individuality, or even citizenship; but to all these must be added the more basic responsibility of trying to effect, even under the most discouraging circumstances, a net increase in the role played by the intellect, and more especially, in the quality of its influence on one's life. There is involved here a necessity to give precision and control to thinking, but even more, increased awareness, wider concern, and some *imaginative* grasp of the heights and depths in human experience.

The explosive force of depersonalization has blown the fabric of education to bits for many students in our high schools. They drop out. Others have been known to destroy themselves when depersonalization exists in the home and in the school and thus their lives.

The problem is twofold. Most high schools are pervaded with an atmosphere of depersonalization (as read on *student barometers*) while in actuality the *system* is one which caters very much to the individual. It is true that few administrators get to know personally many students, a fact which (I recently discovered) is irritating to many high school students. One youngster said to me:

In all fairness it does seem a bit shameful that a college or employment reference sheet calling for the Headmaster or Principal to fill it out must be completed by someone else and on the basis of impersonal records and teachers' personality ratings.

Most administrators can show how the system caters to the individual. Schedules are made on an individual basis. A wide choice of curricular electives is possible. Each student is assigned to a counselor. Sections are designed for gifted and slow students. The school plant has been designed with space for independence. The extracurricular program is further evidence of how the system caters to the individual.

A student leader commented on this as one of the humanizing aspects of the school, when he wrote,

The broad base of the extracurricular (after school) program is one which is tailor-made for individuality. A student can find outlets for his interests in many groups, organizations, committees or teams. The

program is a wonderful one which should, however, be brought to more students. The extracurricular program welcomes and needs them.

But what makes the difference to the student is, *who knows me* and *who can teach me!*

There are many ways of treating the student humanely, of making him feel that the school wants to help him. Yet most of these ways are only useful if the main force for humaneness is present. This main force (as read on student barometers) is something most schools have immediately available but unfortunately usually fail to discover, and if discovered usually fail to value sufficiently.

Why is the student told he must come to school? *To learn.* Who has the responsibility for carrying out this most important function? *The teacher.* It is the teacher who represents school to the student. The teacher is the one person whom the student sees more than any other staff member during his schooling. The teacher shares knowledge and values with the student; but more important, the teacher must impart to the student the satisfaction in knowing how to think; the reason why high school should be an important and useful period of the student's life. The teacher imparts these by general attitude toward his work, not by particular explanation. If the teacher is not an intense, dynamic, outgoing person, how is he going to transfer the intensity and dynamism of his knowledge and values to his students? If a teacher reels off course material and his ideas in a dull, unstimulating manner, the student will quite naturally feel dull and unstimulated.

What if the student is unstimulated? The school has failed in its job. The student is told constantly that he is in school to learn, and that learning is a wonderful experience; but the minute learning is not exciting for him, he begins to lose interest in the school. The teacher may try to converse with the student as an individual, but how can the student be expected to respond to a "dull" teacher? Teacher and student soon drift far apart, doing irreparable damage to the student's innate curiosity and willingness to learn. The student no longer feels he is treated as an individual by his teachers. As a result, he feels the school has lost interest in him (and so he quickly loses interest in school). If I do not miss my guess, many students in high schools throughout the nation find school an unhappy experience and may even drop out because of lack of human communication as well as academic disinterest. From the student's point of view when the teacher fails the school fails.

### **The Humane Teacher**

One high school boy portrayed dynamic teachers in the following ways:

I can give three examples of the dynamic teacher from my own experience. The first, Mr. X, taught me math in tenth grade. He is the most dynamic teacher I have ever met. He was a real showman. He came into a class he had never met before, not knowing what the kids were like, and cracked jokes all period the first day. He got everyone to relax. The one time during this first day he was serious he said something like this: "You kids may not all agree with the way I teach—the way I crack jokes all the time. But I feel that this is the best way to teach for most of you. Undoubtedly there will be some who will not benefit by my

method. I don't know what to tell them—only that I'm sorry. This is the way I feel is best for most people." Mr. X, besides being a great showman, knew what he was doing. True, Mr. X unfortunately alienated a few. But if the class was moving too slowly for them they could have worked ahead on their own. I'm sure he would have helped them after school and probably during class, too.

How did Mr. X's sense of humor help his teaching? Obviously, it kept our minds alert. We'd never quite know whether to expect a joke or a new concept, but soon found we were keeping our ears open for both. He frequently did both at the same time. For instance—he took two groups of new theorems we had to learn that were very cumbersome linguistically as presented in the book. As he explained the first group he took the initials of the three important words in the group and called it "wee wee." The second in a similar fashion he christened "wet." Needless to say, he made quite a bit of to do about "wee wee" and "wet," but it served his purpose. We learned those theorems and we learned them well.

There came a point near the end of the year when he had to teach something without joking—the inductive proof, probably one of the most difficult high school math concepts. After three days virtually everyone in the class understood it and many could do one on their own; after four or five days most could do it. This was a regular academic class—the students were mostly non-honors caliber—but we all learned it. (This is not to insinuate that non-honors academic students aren't bright. On the contrary, Mr. X proved to me that with the proper instruction they can handle the most difficult concepts that are normally only fully grasped by honors and near-honors students).

My second example, Mr. Y, taught me English. Mr. Y is a dynamic young man but not at all like Mr. X. Mr. X is a showman, and depends heavily on his ability to make his students relax to grasp the con-

cepts he teaches. Mr. Y presents a more intellectual atmosphere—polished, if you will. He's all for fun and games but his humor is far more mature and subtle than Mr. X's. Mr. X works with his humor to relax his students and then carries over into his subject matter. Mr. Y works with a relaxed atmosphere *inside his subject matter*. The interest, the dynamism he generates comes mainly from the stimulation of a class discussion of "What is Truth?" rather than from a slapstick type of humor. I am not placing a value judgment here—each type of stimulation has its proper place. One is not necessarily "better" than the other.

We have moved from extreme dynamism through slapstick humor to dynamism through humor and informality generated by and emanating from the teacher within the frame of the subject matter.

My third example, Mr. Z, is an excellent history teacher who is clear, well-read, and stimulating. However, he stimulates the class not so much by humor as by the transmission of new and challenging concepts. Don't get me wrong. He doesn't mind a good joke at all—but the class supplies most of them. Mr. Z is dynamic because he is able to hold our interest almost totally through the material he teaches. This, I feel, is because:

1. His current subject matter—The Concept of Alienation—is very challenging.
2. He presents it in a polished, intellectual fashion.
3. His students are, as a rule, mature enough to appreciate this type of presentation.

These men are not all alike by any means. But three of them have an informal, dynamic, emanating, outgoing, generating air as well as their other talents. To my mind, dynamism is a definite criterion of the good teacher. Certainly the teacher must have a good background in his field. But the dynamism must be there. Dynamism takes in

such qualities as sense of humor, sense of purpose, love of teaching and of kids. Excellent background means nothing without dynamism.

## The Humane Curriculum

Another student responded to my inquiry about humanizing through his experiences with the curriculum.

I think that those times in which I have been given a maximum of individual academic freedom have been the most meaningful and worthwhile for me. I shall attempt to describe each of these "peak moments" of academic worthiness in some detail.

The most memorable, and I guess most meaningful of these varieties of academic experiences, is notably the one that occurred the longest time ago. This was in Mr. A's honors world cultures course in 10th grade. We were working in a group manner with the other class in team teaching. We had finally gotten around to examining the "cultural" portion of World Cultures. The unit was concerned with the literature, music, art, architecture, and the like, of contemporary Western Civilization or something like that. Mr. A and Mr. B allowed us to choose the area in which we wanted to work and develop a presentation of it, or an aspect of it, in any way the group (3-4-5 people) agreed upon. Bruce, Kalman and I worked on Theatre of the Absurd. Bruce and I agreed to read as much as we had time for, and then attempt to write, direct and act an absurd play. It ended up with Bruce and myself each writing separate plays and Mr. A deciding which one was to be done. My play was produced.

The total experience of reading these provocative and diverse works, trying to define a common characteristic of the Absurd, and then to imitate it in such a way as to make it a creative and instructive class program was perhaps the most chal-

lenging thing I've had to do in school. Every step of the process was creative and developmental for me. I related to what I was doing fairly easily—with my teacher's guidance. This was most essential; we talked and worked out ideas together, reworked and rewrote many times until I felt we had an acceptable product.

Looking at the play now, it is fair, maybe good. It is not really Absurd. But it accomplished its purpose in that it provided a most wonderful experience for me, and taught the class the basic idea of the Absurd.

I have had a series of similar experiences with three teachers, which have been very satisfying. These involved the writing of research papers. For my Biology and Chemistry courses with Mr. S, I had to do an original research project. The first year I did a project concerning the uptake of water in rice seed as a function of the surface tension of the water. In chemistry I did a project concerning the chemical inhibition of plant growth with an experimental herbicide. Both of these projects involved a survey of the literature available, a posing of the problem to be investigated, a working out of a successful technique or experimental procedure, an analysis of the results, conclusions, etc. They applied scientific methodology to problems of significance (in that they both demonstrated or involved very basic, yet complex, biological and chemical processes). I not only learned the scientific technique of attacking a problem, but I learned significant concepts of biology, physics and chemistry that cannot easily be taught in regular classroom procedure.

With Mr. T in American Literature, we devoted a report period to the development and proof of a thesis relevant to American literature. Mine concerned the large volumes of one Thomas Wolfe. I liked this experience so much because it allowed me to pursue a long standing interest in Mr. Wolfe's works, express a strongly felt opinion about them, and use some of the vast

resources of literary criticism to support my argument. It was great reading Wolfe. I learned much about Wolfe—and about literature in general (particularly in the areas of criticism). I was allowed to express myself freely, and I had lots of fun writing a kind of polemic—something I'd never had a chance to do before.

For Mr. L in American History, I wrote a long and comprehensive study of Thorstein Veblen. Veblen's character appealed to me, so I decided to investigate him. I read all of his major economic works, some of his social and political criticisms, and a great deal of criticism about him. Mr. Veblen has been discussed in almost every field of social science, so that I was able to find a diversity of ways of looking at him, as well as opinions about him. It was really a learning experience in an area before totally obscured to me.

My thesis is that the best experiences in school are those which allow the individual to work creatively and alone, developing what he will. I feel this will allow greater depth of coverage of material—and thus, hopefully, greater understanding.

## When Is a Teacher Good?

Who is to say whether or not a teacher is good? We are really asking only half the question, according to the insights of my next student commentator. He relates:

It is difficult to say whether or not a teacher is good; each teacher is good for some classes and not for others. My favorite teacher last year has a class this year that thinks he's not very good. To me, this is so like not liking Mr. Chips. It seems that his personality does not mesh as well with his new students as with last year's class, and, hence, to them he does not seem as good a teacher. There is no absolute scale for such things, and so I have no answer to such a problem.

A senior in high school has no answer to such a complex problem, however the professional educators should be coming up with some answers. We cannot dismiss the problem with, "C'est la vie." We cannot continue to leave to chance and the digital wizardry of a computer scheduling every teacher and every student in the traditional ways. Herbert Thelen deals with the problem by proposing a humanizing system worthy of consideration.

The idea that each teacher would do a better job if he had a congenial and manageable class seems rather obvious. And the notion that a teachable class for one teacher might not be the same as a teachable class for another teacher using somewhat different methods seems reasonable, too. The notion that the teachers themselves, with suitable help, may be able to define the kinds of students with whom they are most and least successful could provide the basis for an action program that might very much improve education.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly we have evidence that learning is fostered by the relationship which develops between teacher and student. We need to know and respect the uniqueness of our students; we also need to know and respect the uniqueness of our teachers. Once we value teachers and pupils for their individuality we cannot help but design better ways to humanize the climate of our high schools. Today our schools are faced with the complex problem of educating a large and more diverse student body than ever before.

One thing seems to emerge over and over again as I read on the student barometers the indicators which heighten

<sup>1</sup> Herbert A. Thelen. *Education and the Human Quest*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960. p. 204.

their individuality and learning in school. *They learn when the teacher is in communication with them.* Communication may be established in a variety of humanizing ways, and in many school settings (individual conference, class discussion, large-group situations). When the human quality is functioning, it develops a warm and serious atmosphere of inquiry between teacher and student or group, serving to stimulate and to shape their education and their lives. The homework assignment which is a major activity of learning and inquiry can limit or extend the curriculum in lively human ways, the students tell us.

It is important to the adolescent that his teachers know that he can think, that his ideas and judgments are worth expressing, and that the process of inquiry requires this respect for his individuality. This gives the student a sense of attachment to the curriculum as well as a sense of being. We could probably create the educator's barometer to study and assess the climate of our high schools by analyzing the homework teachers assign to students. Better yet, ask the teachers to make the study and the discovery. The comments of my students about their education are new only because the students have recently experienced school and learning in the ways they described.

The students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development. It follows as a corollary from this premise, that teachers also should be alive with living thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead. *The Aims of Education*. New York: The New American Library, A Mentor Book, 1949. Preface. Reprinted with permission of the Macmillan Company © 1929 by Macmillan Company.

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