



Human Sensitivity—and Schooling

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THE Velveteen Rabbit turned to the tattered Skin Horse to ask how to achieve realness. And from the depth of his wisdom the Horse said, "It doesn't happen all at once. . . . You become. It takes a long time."¹ Yes, for many "becoming" is a lifelong quest—exciting, rewarding, fulfilling. Others barely take a few steps along the way toward the realization of self and awareness of others and the world in which we live.

Those who are fortunate began their quest at an early age and have learned to gather more and more meaning, to be more acutely aware of all they see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. And for most of these it is some adult who has helped them to sharpen every sense, interpret each happening, and relate all of them meaningfully.

There is time in any day, school or otherwise, to look at the darkening sky, to notice scudding clouds and hear the depths of the roll of thunder; to catch the almost blinding glitter of a bank of snow in the brilliant winter's sun; to watch fall colors change from occasional bright splashes, to massed brilliance, to the softly muted shades of November.

If you give a child the gift of seeing the

intricate patterning of bare tree branches etched against the monochromatic world of snow and twilight, you have added richness to every winter of his life. If you share with him your reactions and feelings as you saw a star and a crescent moon caught just above the Wrigley Tower through the window of a plane, he may look upward on this or some other night and actually see the beauty in the sky.

One fall evening, Mother and I were at the pump just beyond the back porch. Suddenly Mother's hand touched my shoulder. Looking up, I saw, there etched against the sky, a V of wild geese winging their way south. The strange honking sound, the beautiful pattern of these wild things, the mystery of their instinct, in that one instant, became mine forever.

What is it that combines to bring moments of complete understanding, times of instant delight? Taking time to listen, to observe, to really hear, taste, and touch; gathering all possible meaning from the experience. These plus not being so everlastingly engrossed with meaningless trivia and dead dull routine that we miss every opportunity for beauty and awareness.

¹ Margery Williams. *The Velveteen Rabbit*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. Reissued 1969. p. 17.

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Children Teach

The teachers with whom I worked, my own teachers, parents, many books, and their authors all have helped in my "becoming" a teacher, a person. Yet it was actually the children who at an early date took my real education in hand and who taught so meaningfully that I have never stopped turning to them or their older counterparts for help. Each lesson is attached to a memory—sad or funny, startling or beautiful—and stored away for safekeeping and eventual use: For that which is good retains its essence of truth and rightness at any level in any pertinent situation. You simply adapt, modify, and change until it begins to fit.

Gradually I learned to talk less, that I might listen more; to observe carefully with both eyes and heart so that I could hope to understand; to be less hurried in response so as to give both myself and another time to gather a bit of wisdom; to hold safely in memory the good and happy times as insurance against the trying days.

As learnings accumulated there was increased awareness and sensitivity so that new learning might not be missed. Relationships began to emerge, new interpretations suggested themselves. Time was taken to mull over, to experiment, to play with ideas, and to gather more and more understanding.

Poignant and revealing experiences need not be firsthand; their essence can be captured as they are told, listened to, or read, for books can and do encompass much of human experience. Tears shed at Beth's death are not in vain, the lump in the throat as Skeeter says good-bye to Lady helps each child or adult who has lived with a special dog to know that theirs has been a rich experience worth even the hurt at its end. And somehow the reader realizes how important it is to give of one's self as Kenofer says to his queen, "I would hold my love before you as a shield for thy protection. I would lay

it at thy feet as a carpet unrolling before thee to guide thy steps. I would wrap it about thee as a cloak against the storms of life."²

The storms of life beset the young, the old, and all between; and too many storms are associated with that place called school—defeat, failure, dreariness, dull routine, anger, restriction—these are some of the things students come to know in the name of being educated. Yet they are a hardy lot and can endure a great deal. Think what it would mean if teachers surrounded academia with joy, laughter, sparkling excitement, eagerness, zest, serenity, friendship, compassion plus every kind and facet of love.

Lee comes to the classroom with a chip on his shoulder. A quick, "I'll bet you'll laugh before I can turn you around three times." Before the three whirls are over laughter chases away the pout.

Ginny, beset by multi-irritations, sheds them as she turns and sways to music.

Beth stays at the easel completely engrossed in creating a design, then is helped to see designs everywhere.

Remembering the book Jon made for you and speaking about it weeks later.

Exchanging a wink with another who also got the message.

Gently touching someone on the shoulder to show that you understand and care.

Reading aloud the well turned phrase or apt paragraph from a student's writing.

Taking time to help an eager student find the reference he needs.

Helping Carl overcome his shyness by talking for him—for a time.

Being unwilling to accept a product unworthy of the student—yet letting him know that this is only because you realize his great potential.

² Lucile Morrison. *The Lost Queen of Egypt*. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company. Renewed 1965. p. 297.

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Sharing jokes and laughter.
Being a friend.

A quiet nod, a swift smile, a bit of well deserved praise given subtly and quietly—all of these say, "I am aware of you—and you I value highly."

Their Older Counterparts

It sometimes seems difficult to get to know a group of students as individuals, particularly if one meets several large classes. Yet each student needs to be known and understood—name, face, plus some of the realities of his or her living and working. I frequently ask each student who has reached an age for writing to keep a two-week diary for me. True, a few can avoid saying or dictating (for tapes will do) much other than generalities, but most of them give me a background with which I link a kind of life style and some notable incidents, a name and a face. These are recorded on an ever growing set of cards, and when I write an appreciative or questioning note on a folder of work I can make my comment both appropriate and personal.

Living with sensitivity and awareness in the *now* world is most important for all age groups. And so assignments frequently have to do with: articles from the daily papers and magazines, reactions to the newest types of advertising, going to see the latest exhibit at the museum, watching for telling bits of nonverbal communication at home and at school, seeing the ballet version of "The Tale of Peter Rabbit," actually listening to the words of a hit song ("Take Paradise, Put Up a Parking Lot" or "Signs," for instance), discussing reactions to "Jesus Christ, Superstar," discussing the wonder of a book written by a Mongoloid,³ remembering the costuming, scenery, and the acting in "The Six Wives of Henry VIII"—all of these are part and parcel of their *now* world and become part of the "Now" folders.

Students' reactions and perceptions, the poems they include, the comics they clip—

³ Nigel Hunt. *The World of Nigel Hunt: The Diary of a Mongoloid Youth*. New York: Garrett Publications-The Helix Press, 1967.

"To know students well, to open up the way for some, to prod others, or simply stand aside and watch in wonder as some accomplish near miracles—this is teaching."

these begin to shape up and reveal a unique personality. And in terms of my knowledge, I can judge the appropriateness of the individual and group projects they decide to work on—the only stipulation being that somehow these must relate to communication.

If I had assigned a group of students the task of making a movie with a sound track or enhancing the taped talk of a well known speaker with a series of appropriate collages plus putting it all into a musical background, or making one of the stories from *Winnie the Pooh* into an operetta or interpreting a book in ballet, they would have gasped and decided they could not possibly accept the task. Yet all of these have been done, and done expertly and beautifully.

The movie, the multi-media presentation, the operetta, the ballet—these weren't important in themselves. The real payoff came as individuals grew, and changed, and became truly VIP's in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of others.

It does not matter whether the students concerned are 6, 16, 26—or what age—to know them well, to open up the way for some, to prod others, or simply stand aside and watch in wonder as some accomplish near miracles—this is teaching and bringing self-fulfillment to boys and girls, to young men and women. It takes hours and hours of patient study. It is the hardest of work. At times it leaves one's spirit bruised and hurt and bereft. Yet no matter how tired and depleted one becomes there is always renewal.

And then, there is the note from Connie:

Dear Miss Harbage:

We had good times together. I'd like to give you a present for remembrance. Connie.

A small piece of adhesive tape held the gift in place—a penny all carefully wrapped in chocolaty-smelling foil. " 'Tis gold enough to last the years." □

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