

The Trouble With Teachers

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The trouble with teachers is that they are teachers. Being a teacher means becoming involved in playing a role which has been strictly defined by parents' memories, school attitudes, and pupil expectations. The role, whether it fits the person or not, whether it is how one likes to play the role or not, tends to be imperative as regards behavior. There are just certain things one cannot do or else one loses moral force in the classroom.

In playing the role assigned, teachers tend to become predictable and robotic. As Bergson said, "a human being becomes funny when he becomes mechanical"; this is why teachers become such objects of fun — the young predators in their audience watch with irritated fascination every physical tic and vocal characteristic and respond with covert looks, sly giggles, and out-of-earshot imitations.

The dehumanization of the teacher is further accomplished by the tradition of giving nicknames to teachers. In the struggle of the classroom the earliest to suffer is the personal name, frequently on both sides. If by knowing the name of something or someone we come in a way to inhabit the house of its being then by using a reductionist name, we literally reduce its fullness of being.

"Lofty," "Click," "Rasherback," all taught me during my school years. Lofty was a giant of a Christian Brother who taught science. He always wore his hat and had prominent teeth and a smile like Alistair Simms. He carried a large stick. You could laugh with him but never at him or else you were dealing with a large black monster wielding a cudgel. Click was quite the opposite; a geography teacher, anxious and ingratiating who dwindled before our eyes and seemed always to enter the class with finger prints of chalk on his fly! Rasherback was a chilly presence in the classroom, a math teacher whose inevitable Arctic logic froze us into correct behavior. We cordially hated all these teachers; but the important word is "cordially."

It is to protect ourselves, we dehumanize others, we avoid becoming involved with them as people for then the responsibility and price of the relationship becomes too high, too demanding. Teachers, by going on holidays, by having children, by eventually dying remind us that they are human. The trouble with teachers is that they are human.

