

The Writer As Teacher

A Case History

Adele Wiseman

It happened this way. On the occasion when the course of my life was to be arranged, one of the Fates on duty took a shine to me. The other Fate who'd drawn the same duty day, however, for some reason took an immediate dislike to me, couldn't stand this job. Who knows, maybe it wasn't even me; maybe they just couldn't work together, so instead of a simple, everyday life to be arranged, I became a kind of battleground for them. In me they worked out their frustrations and irritations with each other. One wanted to arrange my life one way, so of course the other proposed another way. One wanted me to be a Taurus, so the other decided I must be a Gemini. One rather fancied that I should be large eyed and of a solid, serviceable build; the other rushed to fill my mother with misgivings, and implanted in her the uneasy notion that she was about to give birth to a monkey. One knew that more than anything else I would want to be a writer, and proposed to fix things up for me accordingly; so the other, who knew that less than anything else I would want to be a teacher, insisted, lest I grow swelled headed and imagine myself unduly beloved of the Gods, that I must become a teacher. How can I describe it? For a pair of incompatible working Fates it was just one of those days. But you can waste only so much time on a mere mortal. Eventually, some compromise had to be reached. So I was born on the cusp of the month, Taurus and Gemini all three, was issued large eyes, a serviceable build, and a simian disposition, and after having done everything short of

sex. In a world clamoring for exploitation of its resources, to deny talent its full expression is too high-priced a luxury.

Second, the example of the boys' cooking class shows that schools can lead in breaking down old prejudices. Co-operation between teachers and school counselors can create a climate in which pursuit of one's fancy is not just possible, but encouraged. (Perhaps the place to begin a breakdown of such prejudice is in teachers' colleges and universities. A very liberal academic administrator tried to name female deans, other than Deans of Women. Failing to come up with a single name, he said, with half a twinkle in his eye "Well, you can't have a woman dean!"). And a talent-hungry world will seize the opportunity to give the applicant a chance, regardless of sex, if it is aware that a continuing stream of applicants is assured.

Always there will be limitations — for want of size, few women will play professional football — but then few men the size of women play football either. No man will bear a child but many will look after children and care for the home in which they grow.

Backlash or Freedom?

Of course, there's always the possibility of backlash — the prospect of no sex role may become sufficiently revolting to both sexes as to promote a deliberate return to the old system. There is the curious fact that in the United States, the percentage of women who marry has risen steadily and steeply since 1940 and the largest increases are among the better-educated. It may be that while the searchlight is on sex role change, there is an undercurrent of reaction such as to slow and eventually stabilize sex roles, allowing men and women to retain differentiating characteristics apart from the most obvious. Perhaps sex roles will not be obliterated, merely modified. While this possibility cannot be denied, the apparent strong satisfaction achieved by so many women outside the home to-day makes it highly unlikely that they will abandon what appears to them to be substantial gains in freedom and a sense of self-worth. In fact, the increase in percentage of married women, mentioned above, can be seen as an indication that social attitudes to working married women have changed and that a combination of two roles, home and work, now is possible.

At the present pace, it should not take more than a generation to remove educational and social barriers so that the individual has a freedom of choice unknown in recent history. Not only the individual, but society, should profit.

starving to avoid it, I finally had to submit to destiny and became a teacher as well as a writer.

I submitted, yes, but not gracefully, and not completely, either. After having fought through my entire childhood, and continued to fight through a stormy adolescence which has lasted a round half lifetime, I find it hard to stop. I still squirm rebelliously.

The Fates are thorough. They used what I believe would be called, in some circles, the "project method" to each me, grade by grade, the coercive and punitive nature of school. Do you remember *The Count of Monte Cristo*? That could be the story of my school-days. The hero is kidnapped by the agents of a villainous enemy, and incarcerated in a dungeon on an inaccessible island. After years of hopelessness he decides to try to tunnel his way to freedom. He tunnels and tunnels, and ends up in the cell of another prisoner. More tunnelling. More years go by. Finally, the neighbouring prisoner dies, and our hero realizes that the only way to gain freedom will be to change places with the dead man. So he climbs into the sack from which he has removed his dead friend, and plays dead. He is carried out, and flung from the cliff into the ocean below. Once in the water, he cuts himself free and swims into life again. That's how I finally won my High School Diploma. I played just dead enough just long enough to convince the educators who were processing me that I was safely in the sack.

Not until I got to the University did I find myself swimming in a congenial medium. It was the memory of the positive possibilities of a University experience that gave me the idea, when I sued for employment as a teacher, that it might be possible to sabotage the system. It was a madly romantic plan, you'll agree, to work from within, to rescue and remake the tools of the system, to rehabilitate the victims of education. How innocent I was. Like so many rebellious souls, I had spent so much of my life struggling for the survival of my own spirit, that I hadn't noticed what was happening to those about me. I thought, when I first began to teach, that I could make the best of the job by converting my pen, during teaching time, to a penknife, and cutting open the sacks into which my students had been pre-sewn, to release them at last. Imagine my horror that first little while when I discovered that many people who get

sewn into sacks really are dead. The sack is now their proper shape. They have been successfully educated.

But I do not despair. Once, when I worked in an entomology lab, we were engaged in an experiment. We were trying to determine the efficiency of various pesticides. So we subjected our insect subjects to varying doses of insecticides, for different lengths of time, and afterwards examined the damage done. We had four categories of results: the dead, the moribund, the affected and the living. It took a certain amount of skill to determine the difference, in some instances, when your subject was a grain louse under a microscope. And we discovered that some of the little critters were cannier than expected. They played dead. You had to get down close to them and warm them with your breath before you could certify them really dead. Sometimes, under this coaxing treatment, a tiny member would move lethargically, and you would find you had a moribund insect rather than a dead one on your plate. And sometimes marvelous recoveries took place under your warm breath, and a dead insect worked his way rapidly back through moribund, to the stagger of affected, and finally to firmly living again. Already, I'm told, there are pesticide proof strains of plant pest evolved. To put it another way, some species of life have managed to adapt to and survive in spite of a malignant environment. If they can do it, why can't students? The thing to do is to blow on them gently, warmly, when you have finally released them. Of course they may turn around and bite you, when they come to. I hear it's been happening quite frequently of late. But who can blame them, after what they've been through?

And that's the story of how I became reconciled to my good Fate and my bad Fate; but not gracefully, never gracefully. That's the story of how I managed to surmount my education by surviving to become a writer, and how I managed to surmount my hunger pangs by becoming a teacher. Sometimes, as I eat my second helping of humble pie (for one does have to keep the serviceable figure in shape), I wonder whether I will eventually give in completely, call myself a teacher, become interested in Education, maybe even take up a hobby, like fancy sack stitchwork. No. If for no other reason, I couldn't; my students would suffer.
