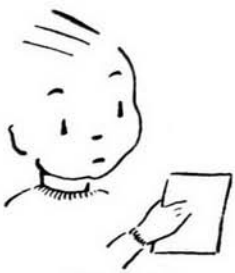
The Importance of People

Ruth Cunningham

WHAT TOMMY LEARNS

TOMMY IS A SMART BOY. He learns a great deal at school. He doesn't do well on examinations on things in books, it's true, but he learns a lot, nevertheless.

One of the lessons Tommy has learned is about superiority and inferiority. Some people are "better" and others are "worse." This better-ness and worse-ness has little or no relation to the effort people make to do something about it. It just *is*. At least this is the lesson as Tommy has learned it.



Report card

Tommy's first lesson came with his first report card. The marks on his card were not very good. He wasn't inclined to pay much attention to this at first, —until he found it had to do with other things, such as receiving praise or blame, or being allowed certain privileges. Boys and girls with good marks were appointed by the teacher to be chairmen of groups, allowed to change the water in the goldfish bowl, or named to go and get the milk, bringing it proudly down the hall in the wire basket. Boys and girls with poor marks were told to write the spelling words again, or to re-work the arithmetic problems they had missed. Tommy decided he would do something about his situation. He worked hard for weeks and weeks, until time for the second report card. This second report delivered a severe blow. It was no better than the first! All that hard work was for nothing. Some of the kids who didn't seem to work at all had good reports. Evidently they were "betters" by nature. Tommy resigned himself to being a "worse." And there was nothing he could do about it—nothing at all. The school was teaching well the lesson of superiority and inferiority.

It wasn't until he was in the third grade that Tommy became aware of "grouping" in the school. Sam, the kid next door with whom Tommy played, was in the third grade, too. They had started to school together, and when assigned to different rooms, were both disappointed but decided it was just one of those sad things chance can do. As time went on, they compared notes and found they were not doing the same things at school. By the time they were in the third grade, the lessons were quite different. Tommy's first reaction was that he was in luck, for Sam's work seemed a lot harder than his. But Sam didn't let it go at that. He explained it to Tommy as his mother had explained it over the back fence to a neighbor. He, Sam, was smart and was in the fast group, but Tommy was a dummy and had to be in the slow group. Tommy protested. There were blows and two bloody noses. But Tommy had to admit to himself that there might be some truth in what Sam said about the difference in groups. He was evidently even more of a "worse" than he had realized. And there was nothing he could do about it,—nothing at all. The school had taught well the lesson of superiority and inferiority.



Carrying the milk

Tommy first became aware of race differences when he was in the fourth grade. The kids were organizing a baseball team. Sam, the boy next door, was leader of the

gang. His closest rival for pitcher on the team was Joe Billings. The gang wasn't sure which boy should be given the important post, but Sam settled the matter with ease. He announced, "We don't let niggers be pitchers." That was that. No one questioned the pronouncement. It came as a new idea to Tommy that being Negro made a difference. However, he had no difficulty in understanding it. It was another case of "better" or "worse" people. Evidently being a Negro put Joe in the "worse" group and made it impossible for him to be a pitcher, just as he, Tommy, through no action of his own, was denied opportunity to take care of the goldfish and carry the milk. He felt sorry about Joe, but he felt there was nothing he could do about it—nothing at all. Could it be that the school had taught well the lessons of superiority and inferiority?

In the sixth grade Tommy was taught another lesson, this time with great drama and force. The end of the sixth grade is a time of high excitement, for it is then that one leaves the "little kids' school" and goes on to High School,—*Junior* High to be sure, but High, nevertheless. Tommy and his classmates were breathless with anticipation. Then the blow fell. The school said to Tommy, "Thou shalt not pass!" Again, for no reason he could understand, he was branded a "worse." His dad gave him a licking. His mother cried and said she didn't know how she could face the neighbors. But hardest of all was trying to keep up a front of not caring when the other kids were around. It was tough all the next year, thinking about the others having a good time at High. And there was nothing he could do about it—nothing at all. The school was teaching well the lesson of superiority and inferiority.

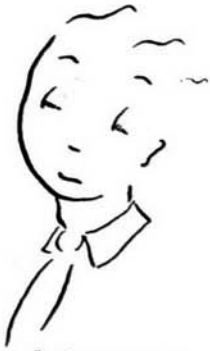
It was in the tenth grade that Tommy learned about religious discrimination. He was being rushed for a fraternity, but Sam wasn't asked to the parties. Tommy cautiously broached the subject of Sam's qualifications to one of the fraternity brothers, a senior, an elder statesman. "Nix", said the statesman, "We don't pledge Catholics." Here was the old familiar pattern but with a new twist. It would seem that sometimes the "betters" could be classed as "worse" and vice versa. Suddenly *he*, Tommy, was a "better" because his father and mother went to one church, and Sam, was a "worse" because his parents went to another.



Black eye

It was difficult to see through this business. Tommy thought and thought about it. The only sense he could find was the one common element. One is "better" or one is "worse" thru no effort or fault of one's own, and there is nothing anybody can do about it—nothing at all. As Tommy couldn't carry the milk and couldn't "pass", as Joe couldn't be a pitcher on the ball team, so Sam couldn't be a frat man. Evidently the trick is to find the situation where you are a "better" and play it for all it is worth. It might be hard on the other guys, but after all, you're a "worse" yourself at times. In situations where Sam is a "better" he snubs Tommy, and when Tommy is a "better" he snubs Sam. That's the pattern. Could it be that the school had taught too well its lesson of superiority and inferiority?

The pattern helped Tommy understand his history lesson and current events. It seemed that Americans are "betters." They are the great ones, the right ones. You doubt it? Look in the history book. Read the daily papers. Our Allies are "betters" of a somewhat lower rank. Our enemies, past, present and future, are "worse", and there is nothing anyone can do about it—nothing at all. Tommy's teachers would be shocked beyond words if anyone had accused them of teaching the theory of a master race.



Senior statesman

Someday Tommy may go to the polls to vote on legislation such as the fair employment practices bill, or on a matter of great importance for international cooperation. Will then the lesson remain,—the lesson in superiority and inferiority the school has taught too well?

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