The Importance of People

A Wonderful Way To Live

Mary Harbage

WAS it a *golden age?* I wonder. Perhaps it is enough that the words come to mind when remembering growing up in a midwest farming community.

Growing Up—Then

There was no want, no deprivation. The word tension was known, but seldom used. There were times filled with people, for ours was a family that celebrated Sundays and holidays en masse. Other times were so alone that I easily pretended I was the only person in the world —others came to life only as I willed them into being. There were playmates —the nearest and best another Mary within walking distance. Visits back and forth fell into a comfortable pattern of two afternoons a week, a plan open to frequent modification by need or inclination. And, most important, there seemed always to be an adult within calling and consulting distance.

There were many "things" in this world of growing up—trees and hills, two brooks and a creek, the woods, an abandoned carriage, the great high swing, a tilty rowboat, and the wonderful playhouse with the stove on which you could really cook. The animals, which in spite of all efforts to have them come at my call, remained in two groups—tamed and semitamed. There were chickens, squirrels, a wobbly calf, a stubborn pony, the inevitable orphan lambs, a clutter of cats, and always a companion dog.

From spring through fall it was an outdoor world. The toys, books, and several generations' worth of *St. Nicholas* moved in and out of the house with the changing weather.

The people, the things, the animals—these were riches. This wealth was fully exploited and it might have been wasted, but for one essential. There were hours and hours of uncommitted, uncluttered, unstructured, lovely, free-flowing time. There was time to dream, to mull things over, to get excited about a project, to probe, to accomplish, to experiment, to explore, to learn, to discover, to contribute. There was even time to blissfully do nothing as I watched the changing patterns of willow branches against the sky or half sang to the accompaniment of the wind rustling through the pine trees.

Time To Help

There were calls upon the long play hours. Time was not your own if someone in the community was in trouble or if help was needed. As we rode leisurely through the countryside in Emmaline, a Model T Ford, any stock wandering upon the road became our responsibility. Emmaline was strategically placed, the whole family got out, took their appointed places, and the cattle, sheep or

hogs were herded back into a pasture. Even then our task was not complete. We stopped at the next farmhouse and left the information that an open gate had been closed, or a piece of fence should be mended.

A fire was everybody's job. One telephone call and "central" would ring each farm home in quick succession. When everyone was on the line the information was relayed, quickly and efficiently. Buckets, boots, rubbers, and sweaters were grabbed on the run and everyone piled into the car. The men took over, jobs were assigned. The youngest children huddled in a frightened group away from the confusion. It was a proud day when you were beckoned from the watchers and joined the fire fighters.

There were mornings when, on coming downstairs, I could feel the emptiness of the house and walked straight to the kitchen table to look for the note propped up against the sugar bowl. Perhaps the message told of a neighbor who was sick or dying. More frequently it announced the imminent arrival of a new baby. This kind of neighboring was a two-way street. When mother was ill the neighbors came to us. I will never forget the blessedness of a kettle of chicken and dumplings plus a hot apple pie left on the kitchen table while I was upstairs asking mother for the fifth time how to start a fire in a coal range. Yes—there was time for neighboring and it took precedence over play—and so did work.

Committed Time

There was no escape from responsibilities and little inclination to do so. The tasks of helping with the dishes, bringing in wood, and Saturday cleaning grew irksome at times. But conversing with mother in rhyming couplets made dish drying time fly. And pretending to be a

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home demonstration agent teaching housewives how to clean relieved the monotony of scrubbing porches and dusting furniture.

No one in a farm family needed to be reminded that the hay must get into the mow within the span of a few summer days. Even the youngest kept a wary eye out for storm clouds in the sky. So I endured the hot sticky hours perched atop a big work horse doing my part in haying—guiding the power which pulled a huge fork full of hay from the wagon to the door at the very top of the barn. If the "power" was not guided smoothly or was not stopped at exactly the right moment—when father called "Whoa"—the fork full of hay plunked back to the wagon and 'twas all to be done again.

Threshing time was more exciting and my job as water boy was not only necessary, it was crucially important. Even Beauty, the stubborn pony, seemed to sense this, for only at this one time of the year did she stand still while being hitched to the pony cart. After the kegs and jugs had been packed aboard she started willingly on our circle tour—the men at each wagon in the fields, those met on the way, the crew at the threshing machine, and then to the pump to restock, get a piece to eat, and start again.

My coming meant a brief respite for the men from back breaking toil under the hot summer sun. All work stopped as I pulled Beauty up beside a wagon. Off came straw hats. Sweaty faces were wiped with bright bandannas. In one sure movement a jug was tossed to the man on the very top of the wagon. His partner on the ground took another, and hooking one thumb and finger in the handle, tossed the jug to his shoulder, tilted it to an exact angle and the water gurgled down his throat.

I was the messenger boy as well as the water one. Word would come from the grain elevator in town, "Speed it up, they're waiting" or "Slow down—the loads are backed up." Or there was the message from the head of the kitchen to the man in charge, from mother to father, "Food's ready, come on in." As water boy I took my place and was served at the first table. As the threshing crew moved from farm to farm throughout the neighborhood, I became a connoisseur of good cooking. Chicken and noodles, roast beef and roast pork, apple and cherry pie were dishes on which I expended satisfying hours of research.

Midafternoon there was a special trip. By then the enormous piles of dishes had been washed and stacked on the dining room table for tomorrow's use and mother had a bit of a breather in which to make the favorite drinks. Half of the jugs were filled with sour-sweet lemonade. Into most of the rest went cool milk flavored with nutmeg, vanilla and sugar. The last few were refilled with clear cold water. This was the longest trip of all. The men drank deeply, talked and joked a bit. Somehow the pace had eased. Yet, no matter how long the day, everyone kept going until the last wagon was on its way to the barn lot—at a fast clip if a storm was brewing.

Work? Play?

On the hot sticky trips back and forth across the creek I kept eyeing the water, with the big stepping stones making a kind of bridge between one side of the farm and the other. Wading across while leading the pony was cooling—but it didn't compare with taking a real dip. The creek was too shallow for swimming, just deep enough to paddle around in and get wet.

While mother and I were getting me cleaned up at the end of each day, a project requiring joint efforts, I began to question her. Did she remember the big dam near Columbus? It held the deep water back. Why didn't it wash away? How was it made? As usual mother sought information in books. The current encyclopedia had a good section on dams and she found an article about beavers and their work. We engineered a Sunday picnic to the nearest dam and got father started talking about dam building in general.

My sister, freed from helping in the kitchen now that threshing was over, and I began to experiment with dam building with an eye to swimming in that shallow creek. We made a pool two feet wide by putting a dam across the brook south of the house. With this experience in hand (or under water as it were) we moved north to a fairly swift running stream. On mother's advice we surveyed it from the culvert under the road to the creek, searching for the best spot in which to hold the water back.

Halfway down the hill the stream changed course because of the roots of an old, old tree. These were incorporated into the structure. The dam was none too well made, for with the first rain it washed away. The next try was better and we advanced to a series of dams and tinkly waterfalls. For several days we were sidetracked from our main objective, a dam across the creek, by making boats to shoot the rapids.

Each time we looked at the creek it seemed a little less wide, a little more manageable. And, after all, the stepping stones which had stayed firmly in place through spring floods and winter freezes could serve as the foundation. By conjuring up a picture of a deep swimming pool and perhaps even a diving board, we were able to enlist the help of young neighbors. There were those who pulled brush and branches to the banks. Others gathered stones while the big boys took over the task of moving the larger rocks into place.

When things went wrong a messenger was sent to the house to consult with mother, who by that time had collected a young library on dams and dam building. Advice and food were always forthcoming.

It was Bill who finally realized that on one side of the dam he was no longer working in water up to his ankles, nor up to his knees—and in that second he gave up work for swimming. The dam was built.

The sequel to this came suddenly as father, on driving stock to the creek bottom, was faced by a veritable water-meadow. He stamped back to the house, loudly announcing from some distance what we were to do with that damn dam and that it was to be done before sundown. We did. But the story had a happy ending. He remembered a deeper hole in the creek, hitched up a team of horses to a slip-scraper and he and the men deepened and widened the spot until we had a place to swim. You see there was plenty of time—time for adults, time for children.

Summer followed summer—and looking back I'm sure that more was learned in these long sunny hours out on the hills, in the creek, and roaming the farm than was gained once the school door closed us in.

The Best School Years

Of course many of the in-school hours were probably good for me, but out of the first thirteen there are just four which stand out as deeply rewarding.

And the earliest of these was the year before I formally entered first grade. There was no kindergarten. Mother had fixed up a work-play desk for me, but it represented lonesome learning. So when I was five, I had another desk in the one-room school at the end of the road. I came and went freely, usually arriving a bit before recess. I stayed to listen to a few classes, cleaned out my desk, looked over my school treasures, played games, and then wandered away.

First grade itself was terrific. A young man introduced three of us to reading. Having followed various members of my family around for months, book in hand, begging them to read to me, I realized that soon I might be on my own with a book. I couldn't go fast enough to suit myself. Cecil Corbett, the teacher, took me "full speed ahead." And when he was busy, the older girls took turns helping me. Sad to relate, that was the last year of the one-room school and never again did I have so many willing teachers.

It wasn't until fifth grade that I was in Nellie Demmett's room. She was one of those rare people every child in the school longed to have for a teacher. What a year it was! We made. We researched. We did. We studied. We worked. And how we learned. The peaks of the Andes Mountains, the valley of the Amazon, the harbor of Rio all became exciting, living places for me. Nellie Demmett was a true explorer and took her classes into other times and places.

It was a long wait for the next unusual teacher, well into high school. But I managed to study literature with Austin Burnham for two full years. I had read widely, but with little "relatedness." Never before had I connected an author, his times, his life, his style, and his works. I re-read. I memorized. I dug deeply. Now there were many "pegs" on which I could organize and relate my learnings.

When I reached The Ohio State University, I found that someone had taken many topics and subjects and organized a vast library about them. The wonder which opened up through a card catalogue still seems beyond description. No office that I may ever have can be as exciting a workplace as the small table plus two shelves deep in the stacks that became mine. For two years I wandered or rushed, all depending on assignments, happily from one level to another, up and down the narrow aisles of books revelling in the discovery of each new lead to an elusive bit of information—all the while drinking deeply of the scholarly musty sniff of worn bindings, time-edged paper, and well-set printer's ink.

At O.S.U. and other universities I added greatly to my knowledge of kinds and types of teachers. I met the great and the near-great; the opera stars vying for recognition; the actors and actresses adding drama and fun to each lecture; the dedicated and the dutiful. I knew real scholars and a creative genius. I began to recognize the seeker; the clear-cut thinker who surely made her way through the confused maze of my ideas and helped me find direction. There were those who taught clarity of communication, a sense of timing, the basic need for applying common sense in all situations as well as using it to interpret history, English, and education. Many were warmly human and kind. For the first time my best was expected, no, demanded of me.

Again and again the obvious lessons were these: Teaching, for some people, is a wonderful way to live, to give, to be.

The quality of education correlates with the quality of the teacher. And much much later I began to realize—the teacher is a uniquely developing self as he or she teaches and lives. The methods used, the ways of living with students, emerge from a developing personality. Within one's self the teacher must find the strengths to be built upon and widened; the weaknesses to be set aside or circumvented. Better than courses in methodology or subject matter are the opportunities for developing the many facets of the individual personality. Those professors who can teach the methodology and subject matter while opening the way for and encouraging uniqueness are today's great in the field of teacher education.

Not All Are Good

The inept? The unkind? The dull and dreary? The sadistic? There were some on every level. A few come shudderingly to mind as I think back to early school days. In one such room the teacher and I waged a weekly battle over spelling which usually culminated, for me, in a Friday paddling and tears. On the same weekly basis I was described as a slow learner, an unworthy member of the third grade, and a stubborn dullard. With help, I finally rejected those labels. Yet spelling still remains a "dragon."

One Thursday night mother made room for me beside her in the big rocker and we talked it over. We agreed that it didn't help to pretend to be sick, I still had to go to school. And she pointed out to me that even though I had talked the spelling situation over with the Lord, it wasn't His responsibility, but ours. She reminded me that I read well, that the family couldn't get along without my help, and that vacation time was almost here, and meanwhile we could work on spelling in our own way.

Spelling games took the place of dish-drying rhymes that spring and continued during vacation. Otherwise there was little change in the summer. There were still long free hours: plenty of time to cut bits and pieces from many sources and reassemble them into intricate stage sets and scrapbooks, time to read and re-read book after book, time to write a whole series of comedies and tragedies with only a casual thought about the spelling therein, time to know more fully the adults and children who made up my world. Was that the summer we built the waterwheels? Or was it the one when we fixed up the playhouse around the stove on which you could really cook? It doesn't matter. It was summer and I was free to explore my world, free to learn.

—Mary Harbage, *Professor of Education and Chairman, Elementary Education, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.*

Poise—*Foster*

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which we presented some 18 different demonstrations for parents.

When every teacher has been a master teacher for student teachers, has put on a number of demonstrations for other teachers, has worked with new teachers before school started—then a staff seems to emerge that is motivated by excitement and commitment.

The program I am suggesting in curriculum change has a basic investment in people. First, "I really believe that people want to perform well if they are free enough to perform well, and this performance is not based on any kind of gimmick."

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