

# Reflections of a Head Master

John A. Pidgeon

HAVING JUST RETIRED after forty-five years as a head master, I should, I suppose, be able to reflect back on what has happened and on what I have seen and experienced. I do, however, fear that the salient fact is that after forty-five years I simply have not been able to get promoted. Be that as it may, I suppose that forty-five years in one job justifies this reflecting process.

When I first came to office, Dwight D. Eisenhower was president and the changes that have taken place in private education parallel, I suppose, those that have taken place in the nation as a whole. To me, the most alarming change has been the disturbingly low average tenure of head masters in the United States. The reason for this is simple. It lies in the fact that we, and boards of trustees in particular, have been turning the leadership roles of our schools over to the wrong people. I have seen too many people assuming the leadership of schools who really should have gone into business or some other profession. These people simply want to *run* something. They want to be in *charge*. This one fact has caused me to divide head masters into two categories. These two categories can be distinguished by the way that the people themselves pronounce their title. Some put

the emphasis on the first part of the words, *head* master, and some put the emphasis on the second part of the word, head *master*. I have always made every effort to fall into the latter category, and as a result, have always felt that I was first and foremost a schoolmaster who happened to head a school.

A schoolmaster to me means one who is a teacher, a coach, a guide, a mentor, and one who is totally immersed in the welfare of students. A head master should be the head teacher, the head coach, the head mentor. Now, even my ego will not allow me to represent myself as having been the best teacher at this school. I have, however, always done my best to try to be. It also will not allow me to say that I have been the best athletic coach here, but I have always tried my best to be. It will not even allow me to say that I have been the best mentor and example for students, but I have always tried to be. This to me is the essence of the title.

Far too many schools are hiring, as head masters, "experts" in fund raising or extracurricular programs or curriculum development, and these are the people to whom I am referring. They are not head masters but are technicians, and for this reason either leave this profession after a few years or go on to another head master's job at another school and from there to another job at another school

---

JOHN A. PIDGEON is Head Master Emeritus of the Kiski School in Saltsburg, Pennsylvania.

and thereby fail to establish any permanence. I don't think that any head master can have an effect on a school until he has been there for at least ten years. This constant turnover of school heads leaving for other jobs has led to a situation where schools no longer have an identity.

I could not believe my ears when I heard "an educational expert" say recently that a head master should serve only five to seven years, do what he can do for the school, and then leave. This is without question the most idiotic statement I have heard, especially from educational experts who are probably the most idiotic group I know anyway.

Like people, schools must have an identity. If they do not, they drift along trying to be all things to all people. A school is not unlike a person in that it must have a set of values from which it does not waver. I have known many people who do not have this set of values and they bounce about the world standing for one thing one day and another thing another day and become feckless and pitiful people who do not command the respect of their peers and are unable to make any lasting impression on life. I hope that we can remember that the same principle applies to schools.

A school may be very conservative, but it should remain conservative and it should stand for the same set of values in all situations. Or, a school may be very liberal, but it should remain liberal and maintain its values. What I am saying is that, as is true of people, schools should not stick their figurative fingers in the air and decide which way the wind is blowing that particular day and become the particular kind of school that seems to be in vogue at that particular time. Schools today that seem to be doing this are, in my opinion, doing as much harm as good in that they are trying to cater to all points of view and are happy to adopt each new educational fad that comes along.

This profession is particularly prone

to "faddism." When I first assumed this office in 1957, for instance, the U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik. This had an alarming affect on American education; fingers were pointed and articles were written and hues and cries were raised bemoaning the fact that American education had fallen behind "the Russians." Countless books were published explaining why "Ivan had surpassed Johnny." Committees were formed, pontifications were uttered, and finally James Bryant Conant through the Conant Committee arrived at the solution. "Aha," they said, it is the small schools that are the root of the problem. We must destroy them and we must form jointures and bring the best teachers and the best equipment under one roof. This, to me, was the beginning of the downfall of American education because it ignored the fact that one cannot put several thousand teenagers under one roof without destroying the individuality and sense of self-worth that has always characterized Americans. This move, although confined to the public schools, also had a deleterious effect on private schools.

As another example, let me point out that after the "Sputnik catastrophe" the teaching of reading by phonics was most often mentioned as one of the reasons for the decline in American education. A few years ago I was stunned to hear on the radio that the teaching of reading by phonics was the "new wave." F. Scott Fitzgerald's last line of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) came to my mind, "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

But the worst effect of Sputnik was, in my opinion, the fact that it attracted to this profession the kind of people I have been describing, "head masters." As an example of what I mean, for the forty-five years that I was in this position, I never felt that I should shut myself off from the student body or from the faculty. I designed my office so that the secretary was

off to one side and that no teacher or student ever had to go through a secretary to see me. My doors were kept open at all times and boys and faculty were free to walk in and out.

I always went out of my way to avoid meetings from which anyone could feel excluded. If I should be meeting with a group of faculty, I always tried to make it a point to avoid the impression that “administrative decisions” were being made in private. And so, whenever a faculty member might walk by the open doors and wave, I would try to invite him in and ask him to join the group and give his opinion of the particular subject that was under consideration. I often did this also with students who might wave as they passed by. In this way, I think, we were able to avoid the “we versus them” feelings that faculty and teachers develop about “administrators.” “Administrators” are, in my opinion, the bane of schools and the head master should make every effort to let teachers and students know that these people are merely glorified clerks and should not be granted the right to control the destiny of anybody. This attitude, as you might imagine, did not make me very popular with “administrators,” but, as I always said, my duty was to care for students and teachers and not to gain popularity with tycoon admirers. “Administrators,” I believe, have never seen a meeting that they did not like.

One cannot function as a head *master* if one shuts himself off from faculty and students. To be sure, such matters as development, admissions, and public relations are important, but these are, after all, things that can and, in my mind, should be delegated so that the head master can devote himself to the real business of his job, the welfare of students and of faculty. I did, after all, learn at the feet of Frank L. Boyden, perhaps the greatest head master who ever lived, and from him I learned the importance of this accessibility that I have mentioned.

Mr. Boyden’s desk was located in the hallway of the classroom building and at the end of each class period, teachers and pupils would stroll by him and wave or exchange a few remarks. Indeed, one of the happiest memories I have of my years at Deerfield Academy is passing through the head master’s office on the way to another class or after finishing a class, sprawling in one of the chairs that surrounded his desk, and engaging him in sundry discussions.

One of the greatest lessons I learned from Mr. Boyden was that a head master may delegate school management—he may delegate academic matters—he may delegate developmental matters, but the only job he cannot delegate is leadership as demonstrated by a concern for the welfare of his students and the individual members of the faculty.

But, there are other deleterious effects that the creation of larger schools has had on education itself. Bigness in itself is the great enemy of education. In the past few years we have speculated about the causes of the various shootings in public schools, and we must never forget the fact that most of the children who attend private schools began their educational careers in public schools where they were influenced by this bigness. Bigness leads to impersonality and callousness, and although there have not, to my knowledge, been any shootings or other acts of terrible violence in private schools, the fact is that some students in private schools display the same kind of callous attitudes that characterize their public school counterparts.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “Society has not progressed; what it gains on one hand it loses on the other.” Each time we think we are taking a step forward in improving our society, we may very well be taking a step backward. This principle applies to schools. The members of the Conant Committee undoubtedly felt that they were taking a step forward in improv-

ing schools by eliminating the smaller ones when actually they were taking a step backward by eliminating these small schools and, in doing so, eliminating the individual identity of students. For years the small school helped youngsters grow and develop a feeling of identity, but with the vanishing of these schools we have lost a sense of community that the small school and the small town represented. We have become a country of shopping malls. The huge mall has replaced the local drugstore or park or the local Y.M.C.A. or church as a gathering place for adolescents and the result has been the creation of a generation of cold, clinically detached adolescents with whom one must deal in public or private schools.

I have often been asked what changes are occurring in the curricula of private schools and what changes I have observed. I think the greatest change is the fact that we seem more and more to be moving away from cultural immersion and more and more toward vocational training. There is no doubt that the onset of the computer age has made a tremendous change in private school education. I fully appreciate the values of computers, but I feel that they must be used as a means to an end, the end being more accessibility to the cultural aspects of life. I fear, however, that private schools are spending great sums of money by providing computers and instruction in their use to their students at the expense of teaching the joys of literature, poetry, and history. To be sure, computers have served us admirably in the areas of mathematics and science, and I applaud this improvement, but I do not wish to see schools turn out generations of highly trained technicians. Ethics and goodness are best taught through the perusal of great literature and the study of history, and I fear that, if we continue on our present path, we are going to fail. As William Ellery Channing wrote. "Though talent can be worshiped, if it is not accompa-

nied by rectitude, it can prove more a demon than a benefit."

Another great change that I have seen in students during the past forty-five years is an alarming decline in the civility with which students treat one another. This lack of civility is not confined to other students, but rather seems to be manifest in most aspects of life. The slovenly dressed teenager, baseball cap perched backwards on the back of his head, has become almost a cliché. I know that many colleges and universities have tried to address this problem but, really, if it has not been addressed by the time a youngster reaches the college or university level, then I doubt very much that any efforts by these institutions of higher learning will be successful in developing civility in their students.

As is true of charity, civility begins at home and also in the early years of school. Several years ago I attended a meeting of head masters and this subject came up for discussion. I voiced my disapproval of the way private schools are handling the matter and strongly suggested that we direct more attention to teaching our students manners and a civil attitude towards one another. I was immediately rebuffed by several of my colleagues who told me that this was a matter for boy scout troops to concern themselves with, but not the responsibility of schools. I strongly disagreed at the time and still do, but apparently my words have gone unheeded.

We might ask ourselves what has caused this alarming growth of uncivil behavior. All one has to do to find out, however, is tune in to any of the dozens of television shows and see the behavior that passes for entertainment. Most of these shows are clearly directed at teenagers, the very people who shock us when they do not commit to civility.

I have become greatly concerned that our private schools have created environments in which less than acceptable

behavior and bad manners are condoned and, in some cases, even overlooked. Too many of our teachers are putting a personal desire to be popular with students ahead of their adult responsibilities to teach these students right from wrong. As a teacher for fifty-three years, and head master for forty-five of these years, I firmly believe that it is not enough simply to teach our children academic subjects. We must also teach them to be considerate and respectful towards others. Cultivating personal qualities like integrity and respect for others is just as important as learning how to master a computer or find one's way down the information superhighway.

Good manners matter. And it is especially the responsibility of private schools, because they are ideally suited for this task, to teach good manners, which are, after all, simply the outward expression of man's respect for his fellow man. Clausewitz, the great military theorist, once wrote that war is merely an extension of politics. I would say that he might just as accurately have written that war is merely an extension of bad manners. Good manners and civility are a code of conduct, a standard of behavior allowing us to interact peacefully and productively. Edmund Burke once wrote, "Manners are more important than laws because upon them to a large extent do the laws depend." Good manners are not inherited and cannot be taught in a classroom any more than ethics or honesty. They can, however, become the basis of a culture that a private school can create.

One can boast of having courses in ethics taught in a classroom, but unless the school community, and by "community" I mean teachers and students, operates on an ethical basis, then these courses are mere window dressing.

Good manners and civility come from a respect for others. For instance, every few years I attend a dinner along with men with whom I served in World War II. We

dress formally in tuxedos and I suppose that the food would be just as enjoyable and the company just as enjoyable were we to wear cutoff jeans and tee shirts, and even baseball caps backwards. We do not, however, because we feel that by dressing formally we honor what we were to each other and what we did together. I think that this illustrates the point that I have been trying to make. Good manners are like sacramentals—outer signs of inner grace.

It is in this area particularly that I believe that I have seen a great change in private schools. The sophisticates who more and more are joining our private school faculties scoff at "character building" and good manners, but I believe it is fundamental to the educational process. Students' success will be measured by far more than their S.A.T. scores. The world will judge them not by their grade-point average, but by the quality of their character. Naturally, academics are important and, as I have said, most independent schools have outstanding curricula. Most private schools are leading the way in providing computer training and technological training, but they are sadly lagging behind and ignoring their responsibilities to emphasize character strength.

In my career I have coached almost one-hundred varsity seasons and I can assure you that the private school athletes whom I coach today are very much more in need of learning civil behavior toward their opponents than were the athletes I coached only twenty years ago. I find this particularly sad because athletics are a wonderful venue for one to use in teaching civility and ethics. We cannot simply say that we have a course in ethics, or several courses in ethics, and then fail to create communities in a private school in which civility and ethical behavior are the common standard.

I have, of course, been greatly disturbed by the fact that the abominable behavior of professional athletes and

college athletes is now seeping into the private schools. I was shocked recently to hear a young person reply to me, when I was criticizing the lack of sportsmanship and ethical behavior and civility at the college and professional level, "But, sir, you just don't understand. This kind of behavior is necessary to compete today." Well, I do understand, and I know that my obligation as a teacher and as an athletic coach and as a head master is to see to it that civil behavior and strength of character become the goals that we set for the youngsters entrusted to our care.

We must teach both good character and self-discipline. We must teach our students to choose a course of action and stick with it. We must teach them that cheating and stealing cannot be condoned. We must teach them that moral relativism is an unacceptable doctrine. We must teach them that virtue really is its own reward.

If, as educators, we do not teach these elements of good character in our private schools, as I think we are not doing, and if we do not make civility and good manners the rule and the accepted way of life in our schools, then there is no point in considering ethical and moral behavior as something that can be taught in the classroom as are mathematics or literature.

It seems to me that this trend away from "character building" is one of the greatest changes that I have seen in my forty-five years as head master. Private schools seem to have forgotten the simple fact that virtue is not a single act, but rather a habit that can lead to a strong character.

But there are other changes that I have noted. These are, in my opinion, not quite as important as those I have mentioned earlier, but nevertheless, they are important. I have been asked, for instance, how students are responding in the face of fading traditions. I think that people fail to realize that students love tradition.

They love to feel that they are part of a long line of students who have sat in the same chairs and done the same things they do. As a matter of fact, in my opening remarks at the beginning of each school year, I always made it a point to remind them that they were a part of a long line and a long, proud tradition. This is particularly important in a private school whose future is not guaranteed by the state or supported by the government and, although it is important to point this out to students, in doing so, one is also satisfying their yearning to be "a part of something."

We live in a cynical age when people, some teachers in particular, wish to denigrate the past. I believe that they overlook this aforementioned fact about youngsters. I was wondering if this was a phenomenon that was peculiar to my school, and this question was answered for me when I was in a conversation with my successor at Deerfield Academy. This gentleman had worked for Frank Boyden for twenty-five years and told me how often students now congregate at his table after a meal and beg him to tell stories about Boyden and his relationships with students and teachers. And so, I would say to those people who feel that the past is unimportant and try to pass this on to students, they are making a great mistake. The fact remains that, in the minds of students, the past and its traditions are not fading in importance.

I have also been asked about the future of private school education. Independent schools do face very hard times and I am not at all sure that they will survive. There is, of course, always the danger that these schools will "price themselves out of existence." If this happens, and if private schools do disappear from the scene, I feel that this society is going to be deprived of one of its greatest tools in combining the aims and virtues of education and the benefit of the moral constant.

It would be particularly tragic if the

small independent boarding school disappears. I realize that I could be accused of being self-serving in making this statement because I am a product of an independent boarding school and have spent most of my life working at one. I have done so because I believe honestly that the independent boarding school is the ideal venue for students to learn the link between formal education and moral and ethical behavior.

Many people reject the idea of a boarding school because they feel that to send their children to one is to abdicate their responsibilities to bring up these children. Furthermore, they believe that the faculty and administrators of boarding schools are smug in suggesting that they can do that job better than the parents can. We in boarding schools are not saying that. In fact, parents have, by far, the strongest influence on children and we know it. A strong family background is, after all, essential to the developing of goodness and wholesomeness in young people. The closer children come to adolescence, however, the less influence adults, even the most concerned parents, have on them.

It is a sad but universally accepted fact that by the time youngsters actually enter their "teen years," they fall prey to a powerful social force. That social force is peer pressure. Even the best and most determined parents find themselves unable to offset the often-harmful effect of an adolescent peer group. We have all seen parents driven to near distraction by the realization that, despite all of their efforts, their youngsters have fallen into a "bad crowd," or have been led into less than satisfactory behavior by one or two "friends." The fact is that parents cannot entirely control their child's social environment. They cannot banish this "bad crowd," and they certainly cannot drive a few unsatisfactory youngsters from their neighborhood. They cannot force local schools to "get rid" of the trouble-

makers. What they find themselves doing is standing by as their children choose a course of action that can permanently and negatively influence their future lives. Only, and I emphasize the word "only," the boarding school possesses the power to control the peer group. It has the power to remove negative influences. It can nurture the youngster who wishes to pursue a positive course in life. I know this because I have headed one of these schools for forty-five years and I know that our primary concern has always been to see that each youngster is subject to the best possible influence on the part of the peer group. When negative influences in that peer group surface, they can be eliminated by the boarding school, not to punish the weaker character, but to insure the other students and their parents of the most wholesome environment possible. Since our students are with us twenty-four hours a day, except for vacations and limited weekends, we know we can monitor the influences on them. No other kind of school can do this.

Private schools can and do provide an excellent academic education. They can, after all, employ superb teachers and allow these teachers real academic freedom. Public schools, unfortunately, cannot, without enormous legal difficulties, rid themselves of negative influences. Even independent day schools have little control over what their students are subjected to during non-school hours.

Naturally, all parents want the best possible situation for their children. They want a sound academic education and a community of wholesome values. They want their children to be physically and socially safe from the ever-increasing dangers of society, especially when urban life threatens them today. The greatest threat to the welfare and future success of these students is the power of the peer group. The boarding school is the only kind of school that can control this group that has such an influence on

youngsters. In my opinion, the boarding school, particularly the small boarding school, may well be the last bastion of defense from the "bad crowd" of the peer group. We must remember that smallness is extremely expensive and we are running a great risk in attempting to preserve independent schools in light of the severe financial burdens we are facing.

I have often been asked, too, about Frank L. Boyden since I worked so closely with him. There are thousands of stories about Boyden and I would like to relate only two because they seem to describe him better than any words I could possibly muster. Boyden had two prime concerns—the welfare of his students and the welfare of his faculty. He had one other passion, which probably explains his enormous success. This passion was Deerfield Academy itself and his absolute determination to convince people that it was the greatest school in the world.

The first story is one that concerns me personally. When he first hired me, he did so because he needed a swimming coach. But Boyden was not one to entrust a varsity team to a rookie teacher and so he made me the assistant coach and appointed another veteran faculty member to be the head coach, although this man knew nothing whatsoever about the sport. After almost two years, he apparently decided that I was trustworthy enough to take the team on a trip myself without my "chaperone." We were swimming at Hotchkiss Academy in Connecticut that day, and I loaded my team on the bus, and we started down the road that bisected the campus to head for the main highway. This road led directly past his house and, as we approached it, we could see the head master standing in the road motioning for the bus to stop. We did and opened the door of the bus and he beckoned me to come off. I did so with a rather quizzical look on my face and he asked me who the boys were who were sitting in the

two front seats. I told him who they were and Boyden asked me to move two other boys into those front seats. I did so, but a day or so later when I was passing through his office, I stopped and asked him why he had done it. He looked at me and said that the two boys he had asked me to be seated in the front were very handsome and very well dressed and they would undoubtedly get off of the bus first at Hotchkiss and thereby make an excellent impression on the people who were there to welcome us.

The other story has to do with basketball uniforms. Deerfield's colors are green and white and naturally the basketball team wore green and white uniforms. I noticed, however, that the team always practiced in uniforms that were a very unusual shade of maroon and blue. One day I was in the equipment room and I heard the equipment manager ordering more practice uniforms of the same color. I asked him why and he said that was because Boyden wanted them, and so the next day I stopped and asked him. He forthrightly gave me the answer, saying that basketball was practiced under the lights that were necessary in a New England afternoon, and the boys were white and untanned and that visitors to the school often stopped and watched the boys work out. He explained that he had experimented with various colors and found that this odd shade of red and blue made the boys look healthier and therefore presented a favorable impression of the student body.

These two stories, although they seem to be rather humorous, also point out an aspect of Frank Boyden from which any head master can benefit. Besides being concerned with the welfare of students and faculty, a head master must "sell" his school. He need not, and probably should not, hire a public relations firm to do so, but rather should pay attention to the minute details that penetrate the subconscious of parents and visitors whose

opinion of the school is so important to its growth.

I do think that forty-five years in one job does justify my giving some advice, and these are some of the things that I would advise people aspiring to be a head master or beginning a career as a head master:

- Do not think of becoming a head master unless you want to be the head teacher and head mentor. If you simply want to “run something,” look to another profession.
- Do not confuse bigness with excellence.
- Do not confuse academic excellence or athletic ability in a student with virtue. There is generally no connection.
- Always bear in mind that your first responsibility is to your students and to the members of the faculty.
- Beware of the expansion of the number of administrators. Administrators tend to multiply and become inflated with their sense of self-importance.
- Beware of consultants. Most of them are head masters who failed as head masters and now want to teach you how to flunk out.
- Remember that the only reason for a meeting is to decide what will be discussed at the next meeting. Meetings are great places to hide from your real responsibilities to your students and your teachers.
- Remember that the only reason to give up on a student is if he or she is having a harmful effect on good students—an effect you cannot offset.

- Remember always that your obligation is to encourage students to behave civilly and courteously.

- Remember that your obligation is *not* to punish students. Sometimes you may have to do so but, generally speaking, telling a student that his or her behavior has disappointed you is punishment enough.

- Remember that many people have the ability to keep growing during their lives, and one can make a serious mistake by judging what a person can be as an adult on the basis of what he or she is as a teenager.

- Remember that you and your school are not in competition with public schools, but rather are colleagues in attempting to find more efficient ways to develop youngsters.

- Remember always that teaching is an art, not a science.

We are now entering the third millennium and we are about to collide with a post-modern, post-Christian world. Although the world is changing and our student bodies are becoming less and less Christian, I do not think that this should steer us away from our traditional methods. Frankly, I do not know how many Muslims, Jews, Christians, Blacks, Whites, Latinos are in the student body. I do not want to know and I do not think that I should know because my mission has never had anything to do with race or creed, but rather simply with helping a student to become whatever his or her God has intended him or her to be.