

**‘Life forms us and the life that forms us is not a matter of words, but of deeds.’**

## 15 Great — All Those Holidays!

Why do teachers have such long holidays? Because of the pupils, of course. But why do the pupils have such long holidays? No, not because our forefathers were particularly fond of children, nor so that we can go to the seaside in the summer. When primary education became general, European society was still largely agrarian, so children were freed from school when they were needed on the farm: in spring to clear the meadows and plough the fields, in summer for haymaking, in late summer for the grain harvest, in autumn to harvest fruit and root vegetables. Thus there were no holidays in winter, just a few days round Christmas, no question of skiing holidays. When I started teaching in a small rural community in Switzerland in 1954, I didn't have a single, long summer holiday, but two weeks each during haymaking and the harvest. These were announced at short notice, depending on the weather, by the chairman of the local school board.

So now we have our thirteen weeks' holiday whether we like it or not, even though the pupils are not needed to work on the farms any more. We are quite justifiably envied our holidays, for they are a marvellous opportunity (which would be welcomed by members of other professions as well). We can recuperate from the stressful work, prepare for the next session and pursue our own interests.

Interests? Hobbies? During holidays paid for by the state! Some people don't like the sound of that, but they're wrong, for the children get the benefit.

There is no other profession where one's private life has such a

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direct and obvious effect on one's work, which does not just consist of giving lessons using prepared material. If it did, the teaching would be dead. As a teacher one must mean something to the pupils, must be a model, a person they can talk to, a person who inspires them, and one can do that better the broader one's horizon, the deeper one goes into areas one is interested in. For that reason it is bad for the pupils if young teachers only remain in the profession for a few years. The older one is and the more intensively one has lived, the more things one has learnt, practised and studied, the greater the wealth of experience one can draw on. A teacher who enjoys teaching knows that his whole life, all his activities, everything he does, everything he reads, collects and creates is ultimately genuine preparation for his teaching. It is the foundation for specific preparation related to particular subjects or lessons.

The sum of available knowledge is unlimited. Compared with it, the little one can impart at school is not even a drop in the ocean. I do not see why this little knowledge has to be the same for all pupils. Only a small part of the knowledge contained in our syllabuses is necessary for their future lives. That can be standardised. Beyond that, however, *what* they learn is almost irrelevant. The decisive factor is *how* they learn and whether their *faculties and aptitudes* are *developed* as well as possible.

It can only be desirable, then, that every teacher should use his own interests, which he does really know about, as a topic for lessons. A beekeeper will talk about bees in great detail in biology; an amateur astronomer will be able to relate many aspects of science to his own specialism; a plant collector will spend more time on botany than a herpetologist; and anyone who paints, or writes, or composes songs will also exploit that in his teaching.

Of course, not all hobbies are equally suitable for use in school. I have nothing against, say, wine buffs, but a local historian would find his interest much more useful from a professional point of view. There is a very wide range of interests and activities one can pursue with some passion but there are some that are very central to our cultural and social existence as human beings. In my opinion these are philosophy (including theology) and psychology, history, politics and art, in the latter especially literature, fine art and music. Anyone who has no interest at all in these areas should not become a teacher.

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There are two reasons why I consider an *interest in art* indispensable for a teacher:

In the first place anyone who occupies himself with art develops and refines his own *sensibility*, that is, his perception and judgment in matters of the mind and spirit. Sensibility is a measure of the development of mind and spirit. As teachers it is our task to assist the pupils in their own development and we can only do this to the extent that we have developed ourselves. No one can give more than they have.

In the second place, anyone who occupies himself seriously with the arts will encounter a wealth and an immense variety of expressions of the *human spirit* and this is one of the most enriching experiences open to us. The pupils of a teacher who knows something about the arts, who loves and values paintings, books and music, can hardly avoid profiting from this richness of spirit.

Acquiring expertise in art requires academic study and that is not what we are talking about here. What we are talking about is living with works of art, allowing them to enrich our lives, developing our judgment so that we can distinguish what has real quality from the superficial, from sham — that is, to acquire an understanding of art, an interest in, a love of art — for example readers who are moved by books while retaining their critical faculties, people who buy paintings, go to concerts, theatres, exhibitions. It also includes those who enjoy painting and drawing or regularly practise on a musical instrument without wanting to perform in public. A committed teacher will be glad to belong to this group, it will certainly refine his sense of quality and in many subjects this will have an effect on his choice of material and level of expectation.

This unity of a teacher's private and professional life is largely the basis for the most important psychological state for any working person: enjoyment. We teachers must do everything we can to enable us to enjoy our work. That is not only good for us — otherwise we would soon be burnt-out and fall sick — it is also good for the pupils, for anyone who enjoys his work radiates enjoyment and infects others with his enjoyment. There can be nothing better for a child than to have such a teacher at school.

Creating enjoyment is connected with other gifts every person possesses: *imagination* and *creativity*. The more a teacher can develop

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these two abilities and integrate them into his professional activities, the happier he will be with his work.

Imaginative and creative teachers get frustrated with prepared materials that are all-too perfect and restricting: teaching-aid systems, worksheet packages, standardised assessment units. As they become more experienced, they assume the right to include more and more of their own material in lessons. It may be convenient to copy language exercises on some topic out of a book, but it is considerably more satisfying to create an exercise of one's own for one's own pupils. And it can be tailored to their needs, taking account of their level of understanding and using material from a topic that is being dealt with at the moment in science.

And why should we not sometimes use texts of our own in reading lessons — stories, childhood memories, descriptions of journeys? If the pupils see their teacher as someone who enjoys writing, he is already halfway there in essay writing lessons (or whatever they're called). The possibilities offered by computers and word processing make this kind of thing much, much easier.

And how about a little school play? It is a pleasure to devise scenes and dialogues, and one can even write them to suit the pupils who are to play them. Everyone has the right to be a beginner; you gather experience and improve gradually. You don't have to be a Shakespeare.

And you don't have to be a Schubert when it comes to composing a song. There's no reason why you shouldn't try to compose a song yourself — perhaps with the words as well — and get the class to sing it. But you don't have to insist on only using your own creations in class.

There is plenty of scope for our creative urge in handicraft as well, in drawing, in gym, in the decoration of the classroom and, last but not least, in the organisation of each lesson. The more we manage to make use of our own creativity in the classroom, the closer we will come to the ideal: taking pleasure in our work as teachers.

Now it is possible to read all this and find some of it good but still to keep failing. Ultimately success does not solely depend on knowing a lot and having many skills and good ideas, even ideals; just as important is finding the *strength to persevere*. Knowing and using one's sources of strength is a matter of survival.

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Anyone who deals with this topic must look at his own way of life as well and ask himself, 'How do I handle my own psyche?' This is very personal, so there won't be any more universally applicable answers. Each person must find their own way, but I will allow myself to make a few hints and suggestions.

In this, as in education in general, there are counteractive and supportive measures; on the one hand one must avoid things that *sap one's strength*, on the other one must find *possible sources of strength*.

One of the most strength-sapping features of modern life is rush. Everyone's in a hurry, speed is the first priority. Only someone who can do two or three things at once can keep up. Another is noise: music, music, music to drown out the traffic, the machines and anything quiet. Consumption can be strength-sapping too as can any kind of addiction. Perhaps people today are less characterised by what they do than by what they do not do.

On the other hand the first source of strength is quiet. Much comes from it: knowledge of one's self, the courage to make decisions, the impetus to act. Quiet can still, fortunately, be found: out in the countryside, in the woods, far from the crowds, in one's own home, in a church. Quiet can be cultivated by meditation. In religious people that leads to prayer.

The sister of quiet is leisure — leisure to devote oneself to one's own interests. Anyone who follows their own interests, gains strength, and anyone who finds the essence in pursuing their own interests will bear fruit. Art is mankind's attempt to find the essence and give expression to it.

And beyond all that: strength is nullified by argument and released by closeness to others. One cannot aim to be strong without seeking peace with one's fellow men.

Come back from your holidays rested and refreshed.