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I Like Being a Teacher

BY ELEANOR METHENY

Here is one schoolmarm who thoroughly relishes her job and knows all the reasons why



■ I CAN'T TELL YOU why an engineer enjoys fooling around with electric currents. I can't tell you why a caterer likes making 500 pastry cups and filling them with creamed chicken. But I can tell you something about being a teacher, because I am one.

I like teaching, primarily, because I like people. I like them young and growing and optimistic; and I like them mature, realistic and still eager. Teaching is synonymous with people. They are our stock in trade.

I like teaching because I prefer ideas to things. I like to sell and convince people—but I'd rather sell ideas and attitudes than refrigerators. I wouldn't be happy in a job in which the outcomes were measured only in terms of money. I've

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taught long enough to see some of the ideas I've tried to sell come alive in action, and influence not only the people I've taught, but the people they have taught in turn. An idea is a living, growing thing; it has influence; it has substance. It does things to people.

I like teaching because my overhead is paid. For 23 years I've taken it for granted that the institution for which I worked, either public or private, would provide me with a place in which to ply my trade, and give me tools to do it with. I pay no rent for my office, my classroom or my gymnasium. There it is, furnished with desks, chairs, bookcases, balls, rackets and nets and heated and lighted for my comfort. On the first of September I just walk in and start teaching.

I don't even have to worry about finding customers for my ideas. They, like the rest of the furnishings, are there waiting for me.

I like teaching because I'm an extrovert, an egotist, a ham actor, if you like. It's my job not only to have ideas and opinions, but I'm expected to express them. My audience is a caged audience. Bob Hope? Lowell Thomas? Name me one actor or lecturer who does not yearn for such an opportunity! It's mine five days a week.

In the classroom, I'm my own boss. I'm the person who shapes the course of events. Because I'm a good teacher, I let the customers participate in the planning, and I listen as much as I talk, but no one is looking over my shoulder telling me what to do next. The outcomes of every hour are determined by my thinking, my planning and my working with people; and no two hours are ever alike.

But let's talk about that important item—salary. Teachers are underpaid. Most of them are worth more money than they are getting. I'll fight for better salaries for teachers as long as I live, but I'll fight on the grounds that we are worth more because we are well-qualified, well-trained professional people doing a professional job, rather than beg-

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ging a dole to keep us alive because we are necessary drudges doing a distasteful job. Yes, I could use a little more money. Who can't? But I get along, just as all teachers do. We don't buy many yachts, but we do buy homes. We drive reasonably good cars. We dress well. We send our children to school well-fed.

So I like teaching because I like the salary I get. It wouldn't make much of an impression on the national debt, but I like it for its regularity, for its tendency to increase through the years, and for the security it gives me. Comes a depression—and I taught through the big one—we who teach may find our salaries lower. We may even have to wait for them until the taxes come in. But we'll still be working. The bricklayer, the stenographer, the architect may go unemployed, but there is never any shortage of customers for us. In war or peace, depression or prosperity, there will always be children; and in America, at least, I believe there will always be schools. My job provides me with sick leave, provision for lifetime disability if that should occur, with retirement at the end. Not affluence, to be sure, but a kind of security difficult to attain without sacrificing personal freedom.

I like teaching because I like the hours I keep. I like the weekends and the little one, two, or 10-day vacations that break up my working year. My neighbors work 50 weeks in the year with Christmas, New Year's, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day off. For me, Thanksgiving means three days, Christmas about three weeks, Easter means spring vacation. I honor the names of Washington, Lincoln and Columbus, plus a few days between terms for good measure. Normally I work about 180 days a year; my neighbors work 250 or 300! My blocks of free time dwarf their two-week vacations to insignificance. And if I decide to teach summer session—that money is pure gravy!

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I like teaching because it is a cooperative rather than a competitive profession. We meet, we share, we live and work in what is essentially a cooperative atmosphere, an atmosphere we often fail to appreciate because we have never known any other.

I like teaching because, as a woman, it gives me status of a kind difficult for a woman to attain in other professions. As a teacher I have all the masculine prerogatives, but I do not have to sacrifice the feminine privileges to get them. Teaching is traditionally a woman's field in this country, and it is one of the few professions in which women are still the majority group. Men have a well-established place in the teaching profession, but we women have never had to compete with them, fight them or ape them in order to hold our place, as have women in many other professional fields. We are respected, we are essential, our place is secure, and no one wants to keep us out.

While we are talking about women, let's take a look at that old maid concept. Where did the idea of the old maid school teacher come from? It arose by definition from Boards of Education many years ago. Practically all school boards at one time prohibited teachers from marrying or married women from teaching. Therefore, the terms "teacher" and "old maid" became merged by official decree.

This definition is rapidly vanishing, and has completely disappeared in all but the most narrow-minded communities. It was on its way out in the '30s, and World War II

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dealt it the final death blow. In most large cities the married women teachers out-number the unmarried ones. Those who take advantage of maternity leave and then come back to teaching find that it is a profession which synchronizes beautifully with the business of raising a family. When the children are of school age, their school hours and the mother's working hours coincide perfectly. Even their vacations jibe, which some mothers consider a mixed blessing.

Many girls have hesitated to become teachers because, being normal young women, they wanted to marry and have a home of their own. I think it is time we set them straight on that point. If graduates of my university are typical, and I think they are, I am sure that teachers not only can but *do* marry, for 85 per cent of the addresses on our alumnae list begin with Mrs.

But suppose a teacher doesn't marry. Some of us do not, for reasons which may or may not be linked with our being teachers.

As teachers we still have status and position in our community which few single women can attain and which many women marry to achieve. I am not a single woman living alone, excluded or ignored. I am a *teacher*, respected, respectable and accepted as a worthwhile person in my community. I am "the teacher who owns the blue house"—very different from my neighbor down the street who is called "the woman who works who bought the green house." My opinions are sought; my co-operation is enlisted. The men like me and accept me as an equal in any project involving joint planning; the women accept me because I work with children and can understand their problems. The children come to sell me Girl Scout cookies and chances on a bicycle and they demand "treat or tricks" on Hallowe'en.

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I live alone in my house, and no one questions my intentions or my right to do so. I come and go at all hours of the day and night, escorted or unescorted, in perfect propriety. I entertain what guests I choose, assorted or unassorted as to sex, and no eyebrows are raised. My ethics and morals are above question, because I happen to be a teacher. (Sometimes I find this a trifle depressing!)

Teachers as individuals, both men and women, take their status in the community for granted, not always fully realizing how substantial it is. As a teacher I am, by definition, educated, trustworthy, responsible, respectable and interested in the public good. I do not have to prove myself. My credit is good anywhere, and I can borrow money from any bank in town because teachers are honest and pay their debts. If I wish to rent a house or an apartment, I am classed as a highly desirable tenant, because teachers are decent, dependable people. I am welcome in any circle of the "best" people because, as a teacher, I am informed, well-read and socially acceptable.

I like teaching because it has brought me friends by the hundreds, friends of all ages, friends in all parts of the country. This, like many of my other blessings, I had always taken for granted until last spring when I spent some time in the hospital. Almost before I was tucked under the bed-covers the flowers started to come, until my end of the room looked like a gangster's funeral. The cards poured in by the handful in each mail delivery, until I became somewhat embarrassed by the envious glances of the other two women in the room. One day, after an especially crowded visiting hour, the nice older woman in the next bed said to me, "You really do have a rich, full life, don't you?" I answered without thinking, "Yes, I do—but then, you see I've been a teacher for 23 years." Thinking about it later, I realized I'd said something quite profound.

I've never considered it unusual

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to have so many friends that I can't always keep track of all of them. I've just taken it for granted, and so do all the other teachers I know. If you don't believe me, visit the home of a teacher at Christmas time and count the number of people who thought enough of her to send her at least a Christmas card. Then go next door to your nearest neighbor and do a little comparing. Not that Christmas cards are the supreme token of friendship, but perhaps they serve as a simple indicator.

Like any job or profession, teaching is not just a way to earn a living; it is a way of life. If I were the kind of person who would enjoy the life of a deep-sea diver or an investment banker, then being a teacher would either bore me intolerably or drive me to desperation. But I'm not. So for me, teaching is a good life, and I like it. ■ ■



Now a Los Angeles resident, Eleanor Metheny reports she's taught "from coast to coast and cradle to the grave"—from preschool children through graduate college students in their 60's! Her fields have been math, English, physical education and hygiene.

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