



# The Loyal Opposition

“Once upon a time,  
I was a segregator. . . .”

By **Burton Blatt, Ed.D.**

I have spent a lot of time on the front porch of Special Education, watching herds of wise men and enthusiasts, reformers and counter-reformers thundering by. My first great teacher used to say that the one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn anything from history. Other people say that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Well, as I've watched from my porch and even thundered along with the herds through a few of the "periods" in this field, I've come around to the conclusion that we do learn *something* from history — we don't seem to learn how to avoid repeating it, but at least we learn that it repeats. And, as for things remaining the same, they do — but they remain the same *differently* from the way they used to remain the same.

So, when it comes to guessing or predicting what will happen in the next ten years of this business, I can predict that we will repeat ourselves to some extent, make mistakes that have been made before, and again discover solutions that we once discarded. But, I can also guess that our recapitulations will serve and perplex us differently from the way they did the last time around.

Whether our thoughts or methods are new is perhaps less important than whether *we* have changed. I think we *have* changed, and quite a lot. This is what I discovered by recalling my first thirty years in this business.

## I Was a Segregator . . .

I've participated in the world of Special Education as a big-shot commissioner, as a little-shot teacher, as a university professor, as a dean, as an advocate for people, and as an advocate for *Advocacy*. Once upon a time, I was a segregator who taught a special class with enthusiasm. In the mid-1950's, I worked on a study with high hopes of showing once and for all that separate special classes are superior to regular classes for retarded children. I was even more disappointed

with the results of that study than were my critics. All of the "good guys," myself included, were sure there *must* be a flaw in my research design, so certain were we that any study which showed no advantage in special classes by definition was a bad study.

Once upon a time, we, the segregators, were the "good guys;" the integrators were the "bad guys," and that was the nicest thing that could be said about them. Yet, the movement changed direction, as movements always do. What was once a decent reaction to the neglect of handicapped children in regular grades became an indecent over-emphasis on separation of one part of humanity from the rest of us. As the effort to give special attention to special needs led to the creation of a monolithic system of segregation, eventually I became an integrator, an opponent of the movement of which I had once been so hopeful and supportive.

It was a time when the once-good guys either changed their tune or became the now-bad guys. And, though in a way we were merely returning to a previous special-classless cycle of history, we were doing it differently. All of us, even the "bad guys," had changed because we could no longer speak of our field without the vocabulary of human rights and societal values. What is quite new historically is that, for the past decade or two, our field has been struggling to come to grips with the realization that where we once spoke of "them," our patients or our cases, we must now speak of our neighbors and of ourselves.

## Same Arguments . . . New Voices

Other things have changed. Once upon a time, the field of Special Education had arguments with labor unions because the handicapped were felt to be a threat to the jobs of the *typical* labor force. Today, we have arguments with different unions and for different reasons. The unions of teachers of *typical* children sometimes speak as if they want only *typical* children in their classes and, therefore, have been known to oppose integration or mainstreaming or normalization.

Also, the teachers and caretakers of the handicapped are (understandably) worried about jobs. Some of their jobs may vanish as mainstreamed schools and community-based service systems bring a downturn in the business of the traditional handicap "industry." Altruism in this field once held the promise of a secure career. Today, altruism seems to require that many of those careers be abolished, and we probably shouldn't be surprised that there are many among us who are reluctant to make the gesture. The responses of people to matters involving their self-interest have not changed; only the individuals whose self-interest is involved have changed.

### Hope for the Future

What's *best* in our field is not invariably what's most *recent*; conversely, what's most recent is not necessarily best. While there are many excellent programs today unlike anything we did in the past, we also have the much earlier and unsurpassed examples of Itard who civilized Victor, and Anne Sullivan who believed a wild beast into a glorious human being. By the same token, as our past holds examples of stupidity, incompetence and callousness, no doubt some of our present practices and beliefs have those same characteristics. However, decency and thoughtfulness seem more often today than before to be winning over cruelty and indecency, and I have hope for the future. Given the inexorable nature of human beings and their society, I have to call it *progress* if we are still muddled and clumsy, yet more respectful of each other.

I feel certain that, as people got on and off the segregation train of the 50's and 60's, there are going to be those same people, and of course others, too, who will get on and off the integration bandwagon of the 70's. One has to be careful about bandwagons, even though most of us don't want to remember that bands can play at funerals as well as on happy occasions. It will not surprise me if not only the teachers' unions become enemies of mainstreaming, but that the very individuals and organizations who powered the passage of our now famous Public Law 94-142 join in the final resistance. Indeed, what will be the posture of the

Council for Exceptional Children if and when mainstreaming takes such a giant leap that special education itself becomes a small, and to that degree, minor, field of education?

### Survival through Change

Because we have gone so far in professionalizing and medicalizing and competency-basing our attitudes toward the people we wish to help, the importance of producing the miracle is paramount in our relationships with them. We *need* our clients to change because our professional, psychological and economic survival depends on it. The lesson that Anne Sullivan might have taught us long ago, which is gradually becoming more inescapable, is that this is not an auspicious starting point for fruitful relationships. There is a basic and beautiful contrariness about human beings that makes them likely to give more as less is demanded, to resist manipulation but to respond to mutuality. They also have an uncanny sensitivity to the difference between genuine friendship and professional intervention.

In preparing future teachers, we will probably concentrate no less on their mastery of theories and methods. However, we will have to become far more deeply concerned with their attitudes and values and motives, with the way they view the world. Important changes will have to be made in the institutions which prepare teachers. Just as a severely handicapped person is apt to balk at the approach of an impersonal "intervention," our student teachers certainly don't develop their best qualities when subjected to the impersonal machinery of the certification process. Perhaps in the coming decade we can enable them to feel less as hostages, paying ransoms to universities — ransoms of money, time, and the ordeal of meaningless courses — until they are issued lifetime passes to work in America's schoolhouses.

Through the movement of advocacy, consumerism, accountability, and the liberation of our various excluded groups, society is likely to make us change, whether we are ready or not. I like to think we are capable of doing the right thing before it becomes inescapable. ■

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*I was born in New York City on May 23, 1927, attended public schools there, went to college there, taught there, married there, and hope to return there when it's time to go home. Myself and Ethel, my wife of 28 years, have three sons: Edward, a graduate student in developmental psychology at Syracuse University; Steven, a medical student at SUNY Upstate Medical Center; and Michael, an undergraduate at Hobart College. Currently, I serve as the Dean of the School of Education at Syracuse University. Ethel is a teacher of multiply handicapped children for the Syracuse City Schools.*

*I've written some books and papers concerning handicaps and how we view and treat "different" people. I've taught a lot of college students who were interested in mental retardation. This will be my 31st year in the field, and I believe progress has been made. But I also believe, that we probably could be doing more and better. To whatever degree I am known, it's more than likely due to a book written in 1965, entitled Christmas in Purgatory. A new book, The Family Papers: A Return to Purgatory, co-authored with Andrejs Ozolins and Joseph McNally, will be published by Longman this fall.*

—Burton Blatt