

# Adam and Eve and the P-TA

By PETE KYLE McCARTER

THERE WERE ONCE a man and his wife whose marriage appeared in the beginning to be a happy one, though they were of conspicuously contrasting taste and temperament. They lived in a very beautiful and productive region, but the fact that they had little or no communication with other people left them pretty much to their own devices. Such a situation—two people living in almost complete isolation—usually leads to a Crisis. The Crisis that developed in the lives of these two may be better understood, perhaps, if we try to understand their intellectual and temperamental differences—and these differences, as a matter of fact, are more important to my purpose here than is the Crisis itself.

The husband had a realistic, factual turn of mind. He was something of a scientist, but his interest was focused almost exclusively upon the external aspects of botany and zoology, with a strong tendency toward specialization in taxonomy. There is no indication that he ever paid much attention to the stars or that he ever sought to analyze or probe into more of the natural world about him than he could perceive with his naked senses. In short, he had no curiosity whatever. He was a student of Things As They Are. Whatever came to him as authoritarian truth, he quite readily accepted without question. And so he went about his daily routines, classifying and labeling the flora and fauna of the region, perfectly willing to fit, to the best of his ability, into the place in life to which he assumed he had been destined.

His wife, on the other hand, was a person of curiosity and imagination. In the early days of their marriage she had been fairly content to let her husband rule the household. He was older than she; he was possessed of a great deal of information; and he could provide her with a well-ordered existence with a settled and sure future. But soon things began to seem dull to her, and in turn she began to be disturbing to him. Whenever he told her What Was What—and he was by now an expert in What Was What—she would trouble and confuse him by asking Why. He was

not much interested in Why—experts in Things As They Are often become uncomfortable when they are asked Why. “Because that’s the way it is,” he would say, and for him that would settle it.

But not for her. She thought such a reply as that had an unsatisfactory redundancy. And so a rift appeared in their marriage. She found her nature incompatible with his in two important ways. When her husband said stuffy things about what a woman’s place was meant to be, she wanted to know Why, and he would say, “Because that’s the way it is,” and she would consider such reasoning to be unconvincing and then she would be irritated with him and finally she would become rebellious. And for another thing she allowed her curiosity and her imagination to lead her into explorations of questions and things that went beyond his taxonomic and utilitarian interests in plants and animals. She began to wish for some one else to talk to.

It was this growing independence and this imaginative curiosity that led to the Crisis—which actually took the rather trivial form of her allowing a third Person, who was also known to be something of a rebel and whom she got to meeting secretly, to talk her into making an experimental sampling of a fruit which her empirical husband had not yet got around to classifying but which he had tentatively hypothesized to be of doubtful nutritive value and possibly to be actually injurious.

The husband’s name was Adam. His wife, of course, was Eve.

MY REASON for reviewing the story of their early marriage is not that there was anything remarkable about it. Their kind of incompatibility is fairly common, and the novelists, especially the French ones, have worked the theme over and over.

I have rehearsed the story because these two people are our original and common ancestors. We are descended from them both, and in us are their elements commingled. Sometimes Adam’s genes predominate, and sometimes Eve’s, but, unless something unmentionable happened to the

family tree along the way, we are all some sort of combination of Adam and Eve.

But let us follow their story a little farther:

After the Crisis had deprived them of all their possessions, including their real estate holdings and their personal property with the apparent exception of a few fig leaves, they did what any family life counselor might have advised—tried to patch things up by moving to another part of the country and rearing some children. As might be expected, considering the essential differences between these two strong-willed parents, some of the children didn’t turn out any too well, and from this I deduce that neither of the parents learned much of a lesson from their experience in Eden.

But it is interesting, I think, to meditate on what a time a teacher would have had if Adam and Eve had sent their children to a public school and if both of them had taken an active interest in the P.T.A.

Adam would have said that he considered one of the primary purposes of education to be the preparation of the child to make a decent living when he grew up—or, being the kind of person he was, he would have quickly picked up the language we educators use and, instead of saying, “Teach them to make a decent living,” he would have said, “Equip them to be economically competent.” Why should Abel waste all those years unless they were going to pay off later in sheep and goats?

And then Adam would have said, “Economic competence is an important goal, but it is not enough. The real purpose of an education is to prepare children to take their place in the society in which they will be living.” There is no record that Adam ever said such a thing, but, if I understand him, this is what Mr. John Dewey has been saying for a long time and quite effectively, and it is my impression that Mr. Dewey inherited most of his genes from Adam.

In short, what I think of as Adam’s point of view is that we must be pragmatic and realistic in our educational purposes. We must see Things As They Are. We must

concentrate on the useful, the utilitarian, the practical. We must accept the authoritarian guidance of the measurable parts of a child's psychology, and with this guidance we must equip him to take his place in the society in which he is going to live by providing him with information, skills, and techniques.

Now I have no intention of choosing either Adam or Eve to the exclusion of the other. It is possible to view Adam as the unique first edition, mint copy, and Eve as the ill-advised revision. Or it is possible to view Adam as the laboratory experiment and Eve as the improved model, put on the market after the bugs were got out. I am not making a choice between their two views. After all, both these people were the same kin to me, and so I have no intention of attacking Adam's way of looking at things. From a man's point of view, he was operating a pretty good system in Eden, though it did turn out to have one or two serious flaws. But, with all due respect to one of my original ancestors, I want to remind you that the other one probably had some pretty fair ideas too.

**I**N THE EARLY GRADES my children have been using textbooks that deal with two characters by the names of Dick and Jane. Dick and Jane are ostensibly members of an average middle-class American family, the well-behaved children of presumably well-behaved parents. They are unusually companionable for a brother and sister of their ages. They are reasonably alert and active within the terms of the more common and simple verbs in the language. They play with several very clean and colorful toys, which have monosyllabic and disyllabic names, and which Dick and Jane seem to maintain and operate with very great care and with respect for property rights. Their circle of acquaintances includes several rather commonplace domestic animals and a number of remarkably cordial and kindly tradesmen and public servants. Between Dick and Jane themselves the only discoverable difference is in their clothing, which appears to have been chosen for the purpose of indicating gender.

In short, Dick and Jane are just the kind of children that Adam probably wanted. They are about as dull and unexciting as they can be, and they do the dullest and most unexciting things. It is easy to imagine exactly what they will be like when they grow up—and that is a devastating thing to say about a child because it denies him his individuality. I look at these books about Dick and Jane and I think of the little book that was applied to me in the second grade. It was called *Fifty Famous Stories*,

and it was written by a descendant of Eve. From it I learned about Horatius at the Bridge, and Joan of Arc, and Robin Hood, and the Trojan Horse, and Betsy Ross, and Richard the Lion-Heart. And the thing that I remember about it most clearly and most gratefully, coming to it as I did from a very dull volume concerning the routines and mutual affections of three characters known as Mama, Baby, and Rover, was that it kept me wanting to turn the page, wanting to read on and see what happened next. And I think I see one reason why, in our household anyway, Dick and Jane never stood a chance in competition with the comic books.

My point is very simple. A child's imagination is a precious thing and it ought not to be allowed to die of malnutrition. I have enough of Adam in me to see that my children learn something at home about the milkman and the postman. As a matter of fact, they had done that before they started to school and—though I do not wish to boast—they could discern the difference between a ball and a wagon at a fairly early age. But I also have enough of Eve in me to want my children to know that reading is more than a utilitarian skill—that this, indeed, is the lowest of its uses. I believe in fairies and in Santa Claus; I have traveled much in Wonderland and in Never-Never Land. And I want my children, like their grandmother Eve, to be interested in what's on the other side of the garden fence. If it had not been for Eve, we would presumably still be living in Eden, and at the moment I can imagine nothing more boring.

And a second point where I think we might listen to Eve in setting our educational objective is this—that Adam's idea of educating a person to take his place in the society in which he is going to live sets our sights too low, when we can just as well shoot at something higher. Cats and camels and kangaroos educate their young in the skills and techniques which will equip

them to take their place in the society in which they may expect to live. I choose to think the human mind can hold something more. I should like for my children and all my neighbors' children to be educated not just to fill a slot in our cultural and social complex. I should like for them to be educated not just to take their place in society but to make their place in society, and a very good place too. I might even go further and hope they might be prepared to help make the society itself in which they expect to find a place.

In short, I should like them to be educated for leadership. But, as you say, they can't all be leaders; you can't have a leader without followers, and the leaders are far fewer than the followers. If you say that, you are talking just like Adam. Your logic is absolutely true; but your facts are absolutely false—at least in America.

Because, really, that is what the American kind of democracy means—the right of every person to develop his potentialities and capabilities to the utmost, the right to be self-reliant, the right to be a leader. If there is room for 160,000,000 people in this country today, there is room for 160,000,000 leaders. And the glory and the burden of our profession is that we are the ones upon whom this nation must rely to make this American dream come true—to see to it that democracy means a leveling upward and not a leveling downward.

And so Eve and I, as interested parents, would like to suggest to our children's teachers that, in addition to all the other fine things they are doing for our children, they do these two things—feed their imagination and give them the equipment and the aspiration for leadership. We don't think Adam could object very much, for we aren't advocating the scrapping of his theories and opinions; and we think that even Dick and Jane would just love it, if something of this sort can be done for them before it is too late.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*This entertaining article on the contrasting objectives of education is reprinted by permission of the editor of Educational Forum where it first appeared in the May, 1955, issue. After graduating from the University of Mississippi in 1931, Dr. McCarter took his graduate work at Wisconsin, writing his dissertation on "The Political, Social, and Literary Theories of Washington Irving." He returned to Mississippi as a member of the Department of English. He was Dean of the Faculty at Mississippi when he resigned to become Vice President and professor of English at Oklahoma in 1953. The article is copyrighted by Kappa Delta Pi.*