

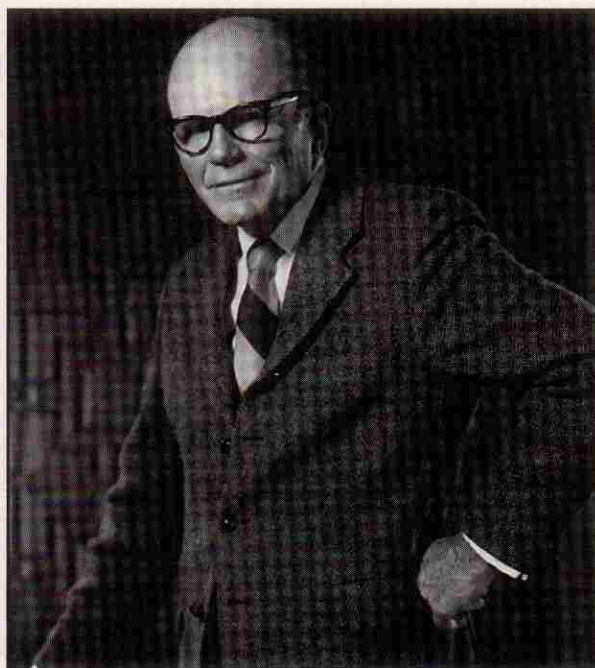
Ralph W. Tyler Remembered

Lou Rubin

If any educational figure of our time deserves the accolade of greatness, Ralph W. Tyler tops the list. His contributions to policy, evaluation, testing, and curriculum development were legendary long before his death. The extraordinary range of his work, coupled with the penetrating depth of his perception, are inspiring testimony to his genius.

Less familiar than his constructs on policy, curriculum, and evaluation, perhaps, were his enormous contributions to the achievements of others. His influence on colleagues over the course of seven decades of service to learning and instruction has been staggering—as a founding father of the National Academy of Education; as the first director of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences; as one of the principal architects of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; as Dean of the Division of Social Science—during its preeminent period—of the University of Chicago; and as a consultant to five presidents of the United States.

Ralph Tyler had a remarkable aptitude for discovering and nurturing the talents of others. During his Chicago period, for example, he helped launch and propel the careers of, among others, Benjamin Bloom, Robert Havighurst, Jacob Getzels, Hilda Taba, Allison Davis, Frank and David Riesman, Joseph Schwab, Herbert Thelen, Edgar Friedenburg, and Louis Rath. Tyler's uncanny instinct for high human capacity, together with his altruistic spirit and profound belief in



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the value of unfettering the best in others, was a formidable force.

Blessed with exceptional intelligence and extraordinary memory, he viewed work as both avocation and vocation. Always, he was guided by a basic conviction that the best use of a life lay in bettering the human condition.

A peripatetic traveler, Tyler often crossed the country two or three times

a week to serve on a variety of advisory committees, boards, and commissions. Because he was a quick study, with an unerring ability to reach the crux of a problem in record time, his services were widely sought. People joked that he had an endowed chair on TWA; he was famous for his habit of memorizing the number, gate, and time of his next flight, as well as those of the departures immediately before and after it in the event that his meeting would end either early or late.

Bruno Bettelheim once told me that whenever he felt in need of Tyler's advice while he was at the University of Chicago, he would simply call Tyler's secretary and find out

which train he was taking that evening. Then, by buying a ticket on the same train, Bettelheim was able to pursue his concerns.

I came to know Ralph Tyler in Santa Barbara during the early '60s at the Center for Coordinated Education. Ernest Boyer was the first director and I served as the second. We both learned, early on, the importance of clearing our recommendations with Ralph, at lunch, before the board meeting began.

Over the course of time, Tyler honed and sharpened his idiosyncratic ways of doing things. Preoccupied with cultivating efficacy, he analyzed quickly and reasoned intuitively. Then, in small words of compelling logic, he would often resolve a prolonged debate by quietly saying, "Three things are at stake, but isn't what's best for kids the most important?" In this fashion, he taught many of us

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powerful lessons—about the pruning of academic egos, the sloughing away of old misconceptions, and the importance of guarding against moral frenzy.

At a time when greed and narcissism are endemic, when many policy-makers prefer myths to facts, and when administration is often seen through the prism of convenience, Tyler's views about leadership are instructive. For him, true school reform lay in the capacity of schools to increase the relevance of learning, ease the plight of disenfranchised children, and facilitate for children a less troublesome passage into adulthood.

An instinctive teacher, Tyler began his career in 1921 and continued teaching for the next 72 years. He habitually responded to a question with one of his own—cast in such a manner that the inquirer would often suddenly sense the answer. Free from the ideological insecurities that afflict many of us, he drew upon a commanding knowledge of the social sciences and a rare aptitude for connecting old and new paradigms, to fix upon his convictions with unclouded certainty.

Of all the valuable lessons Ralph Tyler taught me, two are unforgettable: first, always sit in the first row on a plane, to avoid being distracted by the movie; and, second, always carry a proposal in your pocket in the event you meet someone with money. ■

Editor's note: Ralph W. Tyler died February 18, 1994, at the age of 91.

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