

Semafore

Fall 1998



THOSE CONFOUNDING YELLOW SLIPS

by Susan Rubenstein Schapiro '48



Miss Angell, c. 1910, the year she introduced yellow slips

I remember the Friday as if it were yesterday. Sitting in the chapel about halfway back in the third form section, I felt electricity in my veins. Miss Angell stood at the podium waving a stack of yellow slips in her hand. I knew she was going to read *mine* this time because I knew, without a doubt, that I had written a wonderful answer.

The question: Can you build character?

"Of course," I said. "There are building blocks of life's experiences, and with each block we add to the edifice of our total character." Great image, I thought. Miss Angell has to love it. WRONG.

Actually, I was right that Miss Angell would read my slip, but she

read it as an example of a poor reply. Why? According to Miss Angell, "You cannot build character; you must grow it." In spite of my humiliation, I learned that day what Miss Angell wanted me to learn: that character needs fertilizing and careful nurturing.

And so it was in the days of the yellow slips at The Buffalo Seminary. Miss Angell taught us by making us think about the issues she deemed key to a proper education. She then called us to task if we missed the thrust of her lesson. Yellow slips were her way of fertilizing our minds and, I might add, pruning a bit, where necessary.

Deeply concerned about value issues, Miss Angell gathered her parables, quotations and key questions, each designed to bring home an important insight about life. By focusing on one thought at a time—three minutes to think and one minute to write—each student could learn not only an appreciation for serious life concerns but the benefits of clearly directed thought as well. Intensity served as an integral part of the experience, clarifying the issue and guiding the response. Yellow slips were not fun, but those who experienced them were forever wiser for their struggle to understand the core messages. That we were confronted with yellow slips every few weeks marks the importance of those slips to the curriculum that Miss Angell had in mind for us.

Heading her list of concern were matters tied to the definition of one's life aspirations and the

role that The Buffalo Seminary should play in helping to define those aims.

"The reason for going to church is to grow a soul." What is the reason for going to school?

When Miss Angell asked the school to grapple with the profound insight of her subsequent thought, "**The real test of a school is recess,**" she was setting everyone up to appreciate that school was not an end in itself. It had a mission to prepare us for a worthy life. She emphasized the insight further as she raised relevant questions:

What are the satisfactions of mature life, after school days, toward which you are heading as the ideals for you?

What in your life that neither money can buy nor another can do for you gives you the greatest satisfaction?

What ought you because you are what?

Of course, concern with the aims of life leads directly to an analysis of the need for a dynamic drive in the life experience. How we were to direct our lives had to be a function of the way we defined fulfillment and the way our dreams would eventually lead to our sense of accomplishment.

"Make the most of yourself, for that is all there is of you." Emerson.

Around the School

A short life in the saddle, Lord, not a long life by the fire.

Nature has neither rewards nor punishments, but only consequences. (It is interesting to note that here Miss Angell marked one answer to this question with a hearty "Good!" That answer read: "We are not punished or rewarded for our actions but *by* their results.")

"I count life just a stuff to try the soul's strength in."

"What has helped you most in overcoming the great obstacles in life?" a successful man was asked. "The other obstacles," he replied.

"I have to make whatever has happened to me good for me." How can you?

Clearly Miss Angell advocated what would now be termed a "proactive" life, that is, a life in which one moves toward goals, faces disappointment squarely and keeps trying to make things better. The eye remains on the prize: a worthwhile, satisfying, but, above all, dynamic life.

Yet Miss Angell was quick to include in her yellow slip issues some admonitions about the possible excesses of the dynamic life:

The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

At every single moment of one's life, one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. De Profundis.

The future comes not from before to meet us but streams up from behind over our heads.

Yes, life is dynamic, said Miss Angell, but it cannot be willy-nilly. Every moment counts. And every moment must be approached with care and thoughtful respect. She was not as much concerned with the substance of any specific discipline as she was with the process of discovery which would serve us well throughout our lives.

"It cannot be too strongly emphasized that in study, not in studies, lies salvation." E. F. Nichols.

There is a principle which is a bar against all information, is a proof against all argument, and that which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance. This principle is contempt prior to examination.

In how far should a girl be influenced by her family's fine standards of character and conduct?

Here Miss Angell advocated not only a life of thoughtfulness and reason, but also a life founded in open-mindedness. Examine your life, she told us, while warning us to be aware of any tendency to pay unearned allegiance to convictions not challenged or explored. That she raised the issues contained in these questions puts Miss Angell well ahead of her time. Traditional, established authorities were generally accepted as good and worth preserving in her day. It was not until the student revolutions of the late 1960s and early 1970s that questioning accepted authority, especially the authorities of school, home and religion, became fashionable.

On the other hand, even though Miss Angell recognized the need for a questioning approach to life, she was firm in her conviction that

Yellow Slip Views on Friendship

Q. In forming friendships, in choosing friends, just what should be the basis of choice?

A. Fidelity. I should ask myself: Could I show faith to her no matter what her actions might be? Could she to me?

A. Always be yourself and be friends with people who are not thickly veneered. A long, easy friendship is better than a short crush.

A. In choosing my friends, I look for the girl who has the "give and take" spirit, who is a good sport and who can be friends with everyone.

A. In choosing a friend, I think you should decide whether that friend is going to pull you up to a higher standard or pull you down to a lower standard.

A. In forming friendships and in choosing friends, I think one should consider the question, "What greater understanding of people will I get and what benefit will I derive from this friendship and what can I do to make the friendship pleasant for the other one so that she will wish to keep the friendship?"

A. A girl should choose another girl for her friend who can give her something mentally and morally that she herself is lacking. Also a girl she knows will always be her friend and not a changeable girl.

A. Common interests and sympathy, and above all, faith and understanding should be the basis for choice.

(Answers are from a Yellow Slip exercise in the late 1920s.)

Around the School

Those Yellow Slips

I.

*Little bits of paper,
Little bits of time,
Make the bitter subject
Of this woeful rhyme.*

II.

*"Listen to the portent
Of this mighty theme,
Paraphrase its meaning
As it best you deem.*

III.

*Put away your pencils;
Lay aside your pens—
Use your little brainlets
For these mighty ends."*

IV.

*See the foreheads pucker,
See the brows contract,
As they rack their memories
For some useful fact.*

V.

*Hear the minutes tick-tick
As the hands go round!
In these little brain cells
Nothing can be found.*

VI.

*"Write!" you look around you,
All the heads are bent.
Quick, you grab your pencil
To your thoughts give vent.*

VII.

*Now you grow excited,
For your paper's read;
On to heights alluring
Rising hopes are led.*

VIII.

*Fancy then your feelings
(Oh, to be now dead!)
To learn that you've naively hit
The wrong nail on the head!*

*(by M.W., printed in the 1910
Seminaria.)*

manners, carefully cultivated in keeping with an ideal of civilized behavior, were of the utmost importance. She started with a key question:

Why should a training in manners be placed next in importance to moral and religious training?

The answer was clear to her that manners were, indeed, the expression of morality within a society while morals were the rules of behavior tied closely to religious imperatives. She made certain that the role of The Seminary be clearly defined.

In how far, in your opinion, is a school like The Seminary responsible for the manners of its girls, collectively and individually?

The questions that follow demonstrate that manners for Miss Angell went well beyond artificial niceties.

In your opinion is sincerity included in true politeness?

In your opinion has a pupil any obligations toward her fellow pupils in the classroom?

May a girl be an excellent student and still be selfish in the classroom? Why or why not?

Explain what seems to you courteous streetcar behavior for a school girl.

How important to the girl are the school's requirements in regard to her manners?

What do you yourself mean by manners?

With manners tightly connected to basic morality, it was not a great jump for Miss Angell to ask questions focused on every day moral choices, especially those centered around fair play, honesty and loyalty. Honesty and loyalty, like manners, made civilization work. They ran to the root of human interaction and positive community growth.

In your opinion is cheating a railroad as wrong as cheating a person?

Which girl is, in your opinion, of greater value either to Hornets or Yellow Jackets in any contest: the girl of great excellence in sports or the girl with the highest standard of honor. Give reasons for your answer.

What do you mean by an honest person? Is a person honest if she simply never tells any lies or steals another's possessions?

What is your definition of loyalty? What would you do in case loyalty to two causes conflicted?

The way in which Miss Angell tied honesty and loyalty to friendship demonstrated the complete scope of her moral agenda. It is life, itself, we are talking about, she implied. And she knew where to reach us: through our strong, typically adolescent friendships.

What, in your opinion, is the highest service one can render a friend?

Is there any infallible test of the value of friendship?

Is there anything that you would rather have at the hands of your school mates than

Around the School

popularity? If so, what and why?

"He did for me the finest thing one person can do for another." What do you think the finest thing was? Why?

Then came the true zinger:

If your school and your best friend are in disagreement, and you believe your friend to be in the wrong, which will you support? Why?

It was not unusual for Miss Angell to challenge us to define exactly what we meant by loyalty (to whom and why), just as it was not unusual for her to use the yellow slips to help us define exactly what it was that The Seminary was all about. Not that Miss Angell was running a democratic institution when it came to standards for The Seminary. She knew exactly what we were to do to get where she was directing us. Yet she wanted us to engage in a dialogue about The Seminary and its goals. The potential for this dialogue led to group questions, not as profound as the general issues of morality, but important for our understanding of the school and its mission.

What, in your opinion, are the three things The Seminary as a school ought most to strive for in this year of our Lord 19--?

What, in your opinion, is the greatest service a girl can render her school?

What makes a girl a desirable member of a student body?

Name five qualities of character which are requisites for the ideal Seminary girl.

Has a Seminary instructor the right, or obligation, to insist upon the best possible mark her pupil can do? Why or why not?

Are examinations helpful or harmful to the normal girl? Why?

What, in your opinion, is the greatest thing a teacher can, through her teaching, do for her pupils? Give briefly the reason for your answer. (It is interesting to note that Miss Angell gave this same question as a yellow slip to the faculty. They struggled to answer just as the students did.)

Clearly Miss Angell was looking for answers that reflected the same basic morality she had been expounding all along. What she wanted, of course, was an internalization and application of her standards.

As Miss Angell addressed the issues of friendship, manners, morals and goals (again, she never separated the elements), she also grappled with the question of punishment as it related to her desire to mold positively our young minds.

When, if ever, is punishment valuable?

"Correction is civilized; punishment is brutal." (This statement led to considerable debate which included definitions of "to punish"—"to discipline," "to chastise," "to castigate"—and concerns about the need of punishment in the case of crimes.)

In your opinion, is a school like The Seminary ever justified in using a slight offense as the occasion to expel a girl? Yes or no and why?

One answer to Miss Angell's queries may be found in the rather oblique, singular yellow slip question:

Let not him that girdeth on his armor boast himself as he that putteth it off.

At the heart of Miss Angell's morality could be found a respect for conciliation. Take off the fighting gear, she was saying, and help create a society in which all can live with dignity, energy and a positive sense of self. She wanted us to take part in a process of self-appraisal, a process through which we would come to appreciate the wisdom inherent in a community of civil people who could help each make the most of themselves.

We all remember her favorite quotation from Proverbs: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding." I believe that she had a conviction about the wisdom she sought which was grounded in morality which, in turn, was grounded in clearly defined teachable values. That conviction led her to struggle to help her girls become internally motivated so that they could, indeed, become wise and achieve their finest potential. Why else can every student who sat in her chapel still repeat:

Across the fields of yesterday
He sometimes comes to me:
A little boy just home from play,
The boy I used to be.

And yet he smiles so wistfully
Once he has crept within;
I wonder if he hoped to find
The man I might have been.