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## Round Robin

Dorothy E. Smith

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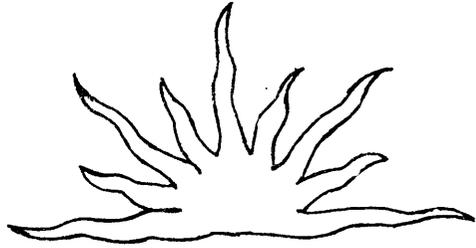
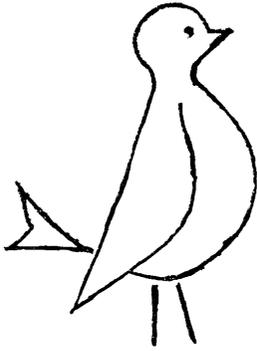
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## ROUND ROBIN

*Dorothy E. Smith, Editor*

In our very real concern for the inadequacies, the frustrations, the problems of the teaching of reading we tend to lose sight of the tremendous strides forward which have already been made. Counting our blessings instead of our woes might give us a rewarding change of perspective.

These thoughts were brought forcibly to mind when reading the following from Gerald Janousek, principal of the College of West Africa, in Monrovia, Liberia. The College of West Africa is a secondary school, comparable to our junior and senior high schools.

Dear Editor:

In most emerging and underdeveloped nations, reading is a major educational problem. The students of the College of West Africa, which includes grades seven through twelve, were given a reading test. It was found that the average Liberian student above the primary level has a reading comprehension score at the 2.0 grade placement level. Possibly even more alarming, the *teachers* in the elementary schools, those teaching from kindergarten through the sixth grade, were given the same reading test, and their median score was 3.0 grade placement level.

Of the many contributing factors to this problem, one of the most important is the language itself. Although English is the national tongue most people habitually use their tribal dialect, learning English as a second language. There are twenty-eight different dialects and in most cases there are no similarities between them.

Historically in tribal life there are no written records. Therefore, tribal law and history were, and still are in many instances, passed

on from one generation to another through oration. The only reading or writing that is customarily used by most Liberians is a purely phonetic approximation of English which they have worked out for themselves. This makes it even more difficult to teach the reading of proper English.

Another of the major factors which contribute to the problem is the matter of health. It has been estimated that ninety percent of the population has one or more ailment such as malaria, parasitical disease, faulty eyesight, or dysentery. The great majority of children eat one meal a day, usually late in the afternoon, after the school session. This one meal consists mainly of rice and a gravy, called "soup." Protein in any quantity is infrequent.

Inadequate and crowded school facilities with little or no equipment and few libraries also take their toll. The teacher in the classroom may find as many as one hundred students per class and no materials with which to do the task. Even such basic necessities as a chalkboard are seldom provided. It is not unusual to have a father and son in the same class, or an eighteen year old sharing a desk with a ten year old.

The home, which is such an important factor in a child's growth, adds to the problem. Children often can be found trying to study under a street light since most houses do not have electricity nor any means of artificial lighting. Added to this is the paucity of mental content provided in the home. Parents and children alike are innocent of experiences with the outside world which would enrich their lives.

Psychologically the people find themselves in a state of frustration and anxiety. Materialism, secularism, nationalism and competition from outside forces are beginning to replace old tribal ways and the communal security. From whence is to come direction? What goals are there? Where to turn to find a foundation in this new life?

The last graduating class at the University of Liberia produced two teachers out of a class of thirty-three. Most of the educated persons understandably prefer employment by business or the government. There is a very small but growing group of dedicated people in education. There are strides being made, but they take so long.

The problems are complex, and many. The one bright hope is education. Although the process is agonizingly slow, it is inexorable. It will come to pass.

Sincerely,  
Gerald Janousek  
College of West Africa  
Monrovia, Liberia