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THE RECORD

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SECTION 6



## A local teacher's greatest legacy

By Alan C. Miller

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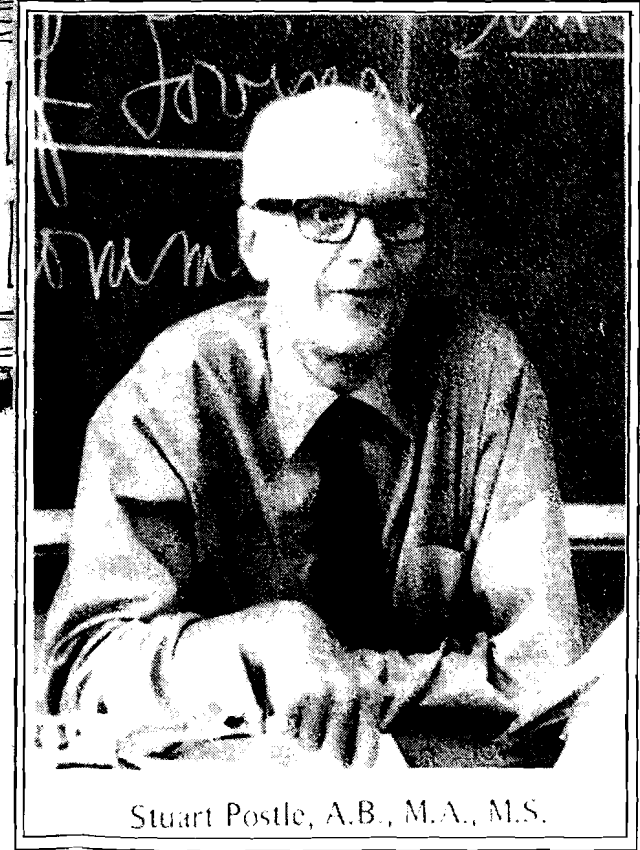
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As students graduate from high schools throughout America this month, it seems a fitting time to recall Stuart Postle, who died in February at the age of 73. If every student had a teacher like Mr. Postle at least once, it would go a long way toward solving the nation's educational woes.

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Stuart Postle, A.B., M.A., M.S.

RIDGEWOOD HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

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# A local teacher's greatest legacy

By Alan C. Miller

**G**OOD AFTERNOON, people, what's on your minds?" From 1969 to 1979, that's how Stuart A. Postle Jr. began each class in psychology and literature at Ridgewood High School.

As high school seniors in the turbulent early 1970s, we had plenty on our minds. One minute we'd discuss "A Clockwork Orange," and "The Catcher in the Rye" or the killings at Kent State in the next.

Almost anything was fair game. There was never criticism for a wrong answer, only prodding to think more deeply, to express oneself more clearly, to expand one's personal horizons.

As students talked, Mr. Postle paced. A trim 6-foot-1, immaculately clad in well-tailored suit, dress shirt, silk tie, and pocket handkerchief, he was a portrait in pensive elegance. Never so much as one strand of his thinning white hair was out of place; even his wire-rim glasses shined smartly.

You could almost hear the mental wheels spinning, the synapses clicking. He'd silently stride to the blackboard and scrawl the names of books, plays, essays, authors — anything that the discussion set off in his fertile imagination. When the talk ebbed, his ideas flowed, introducing us to different works or encouraging us to see

familiar ones in a new light.

As students graduate from high schools throughout America this month, it seems a fitting time to recall Stuart Postle, who died in February at the age of 73. If every student had a teacher like Mr. Postle at least once, it would go a long way toward solving the nation's educational woes.

He was, in some ways, like an older, flesh-and-blood version of the charismatic teacher portrayed by Robin Williams in the movie "Dead Poets Society."

Mr. Postle's classes were a cerebral provocation, a challenge to think critically and independently. They were about literature and theater and films and world events. And, in some measure, they were about Mr. Postle himself, an intellectual inspiration and a remarkable, if enigmatic, man.

He had honed his educational technique — which he ascribed to the student-centered philosophy of Carl Rogers — during decades of learning and teaching, and more learning.

"The student knows the kind of class he's in," Mr. Postle once explained to me. "And within the confines of what the class is concerned with, I like to let students who are willing lead the class. I am convinced the things that need to be covered will be."

An only child, he recalled that his mother had waged an undeclared campaign to instill in him a love of learning. In his youth, he'd reach out from his bed to find books on either side. Each week, they would be replaced. The same process

sorb every worthwhile creative work in sight before it disappeared — and to inspire that same voracious appetite in his students.

By the time he reached Ridgewood, Mr. Postle had compiled a daunting résumé. Since graduating from Oberlin College, he'd gained two master's degrees and earned another 350 college credits throughout the country.

A scholarly Johnny Appleseed, he had traversed the world, sowing the seeds of erudition. He'd taught in five countries and more than 20 states, most recently in Hawaii, where he stayed the longest, eight years. Though he claimed he'd always wanted to teach, he had also spent time as an actor, a profession equally well-suited to his theatrical temperament and talents.

He believed that "the greatest test of the human mind is its ability to adjust" and, for whatever reason, he seemed determined to measure himself perpetually against that yardstick.

He was, in fact, a quintessential loner and something of an eccentric, a figure who could well have wandered from the pages of one of his cherished novels. If his mind was chock-a-block with great works, his life appeared remarkably uncluttered.

He arrived in Ridgewood with only two suit-



Stuart Postle, A.B., M.A., M.S.

RIDGEWOOD HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

"If every student had a teacher like Mr. Postle, it would go a long way toward solving the nation's educational woes."

familiar sight striding about town, book always in hand, or to the bus stop for one of his frequent forays into New York city.

Incredibly, in this automotive and video age, he never owned a radio, television, or car. That did not stop him, however, from greatly admiring the incisive writing of The New York Times television critic.

His cultural intake was prodigious. He told me he re-read certain works by Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy at least once a year for more than 40 years (he speed-read at a dazzling rate). When he was captivated by a play or movie, he'd see it over and over until he could say the lines right along with the actors. On a "marvelous" Saturday — and there were many, mind you — he'd catch a film in the morning, a matinee performance of an opera, and a play in the evening.

I reluctantly walked out of his class for the last time in 1972. But that did not stop me from thinking of myself as Mr. Postle's student. I spent four richly rewarding years at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

Alan C. Miller, a 1972 graduate of Ridgewood High School, was a reporter at The Beacon from 1982

# TEACHER: Remembering Mr. Postle

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many of the works that I'd first glimpsed on his blackboard: William Faulkner's novels, Eugene O'Neill's plays, William Butler Yeats' verse.

Thereafter, I'd make periodic visits to see Mr. Postle. After he retired in 1979, he could always be found on Friday afternoons at the Ridgewood Public Library keeping unofficial office hours. He'd be reading with that laser-like concentration until some former student or other friend stopped in to

chat.

As much as he'd revered teaching, he seemed to relish this full-time ongoing self-education more. He said retirement was wonderful. His only regret was that he had not had the opportunity to discover it sooner.

Once I spotted him striding along crowded Fifth Avenue in New York. Deep in conversation with himself, he did not notice me. Realizing that this monologue was undoubtedly far more interesting than any other two people

conversing, I eavesdropped for several blocks.

I was not disappointed.

Then, using a favorite Postle-ism, I interjected: "Splendid to see you, Mr. Postle."

He was, as ever, inquisitive, stimulating, charming. I walked and talked with him for 20 blocks downtown — even though I had been heading uptown. It didn't seem possible to go wrong when you were going with Mr. Postle.

Besides, he taught me that where you're going can be far less

important than how you get there.

Shortly thereafter, I moved to California and we lost touch. Then, earlier this year, my wife and I were passing through Ridgewood on a drizzly Friday. I wanted her to meet this singularly inspiring man, but we were running late. We decided we'd have to visit the library next time.

Sadly, I learned a few weeks later there would not be a next time. Mr. Postle died of pneumonia in February following surgery. He was 73. The obituaries did not begin to do him justice.

Fittingly, friends and former colleagues read poetry and performed music at a memorial service. A scholarship fund was started in his name.

He remained solitary until the end. He had no survivors and left no will.

But he did leave behind an indisputable legacy with legions of students: love of learning, independence of thought, and education as a life-long process.

Goodbye, Mr. Postle, my teacher, my friend. It was splendid.



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