

In the Service of the Country

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On August 1st 1844 Emerson delivered an address at Concord, Mass. on the anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves in British West India. In the concluding paragraph of this address appears the prophecy of the emancipation of the slaves in this nation. Mr. Emerson says,

Seen in masses, it cannot be disputed, there is progress in human society. There is a blessed necessity by which the interest of men is always driving them to the right; and, again, making all crime mean and ugly. The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery. The intellect, with blazing eye, looking through history from the beginning onward, gases on this blot and it disappears. The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom. The Power that built this fabric of things affirms it in the heart; and in the history of the First of August, has made a sign to the ages, of his will.²

Thus said Emerson of the fate of slavery in 1844. Without any manner of doubt he foresaw the outcome of the great struggle for freedom and right, not because he knew how it would be accomplished, nor indeed were the evidences of an encouraging situation before him. But knowing the nature of man, he saw clearly that as soon as the people of America had directed their attention to the question as to whether or not one man has a

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from May 22, 1908 to August 9, 1908. The date for this sermon may be incorrect as Sunday fell on the 24th of May in 1908.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), "Address on the Anniversary of Emancipation in the British West Indies," 1844. In *Essays and Addresses in Ralph Waldo Emerson Complete Works*, Delphi Classics, 2013, location 44883.

right to hold another as property, to treat him as a thing, to ignore his essential nature, just so soon would the bonds of the slave be broken asunder and the negro in these United States be accorded the freedom which belongs to him by right.

In less than twenty years the nation was [at] arms, fighting on bloody battlefields, sacrificing the comforts and ease of peace, for the purpose of establishing that truth which had already been revealed to them, the truth that one man cannot hold the person of another as property in a land of freedom and moral order.

During the coming week we shall pay a simple and formal, but not the less sincere tribute to the memory of those men who gave their life for the cause of human freedom, in a terrible war, whose consummation marked the fulfillment of the prophecy of Emerson. While we abhor the fact of war, and regret its necessity at that time, yet we recognize the tremendous moral strength and courage demanded by the times in which they lived, and honor the men who saw the naked truth of a terrible duty, and knew that,"

Though love repine and reason chafe
There comes a voice without reply;
" 'Tis man's perdition to be safe,
When for the truth he ought to die."³

Each successive generation is faced with some aspect or other of the moral problem which was beneath the surface disturbances of the civil war. The great moral issue of slavery has always been whether or not one man has the right to secure his own ease and comfort at the price of another man's suffering and degradation. In the civil war we were face to face with a particular and concrete case in which the slave owners of the country were making use of the colored man for the purpose of gaining the advantages of ease and luxury which would be his as the fruits of the slave labor. In order to enjoy these desirable things the slave owner was willing to entirely disregard the personal qualities of the slave, to ignore the relationships of the family, to ignore the inherent right of personal development, in short, to treat a human being as he would any

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), "Sacrifice," a Quatrain in The Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1867, p. 296.

other piece of personal property. Those men who fought for the abolition of the slave saw the gross immorality of this situation, and the efforts of their moral zeal at length changed the conditions. In this is their honor, and in this is their service to the nation.

Last Sunday I called to your attention the fact that today in this nation there still exist conditions in which there is a violation of the same moral law that was violated in the fact of slavery, namely, the treatment of a human being as a thing. As evidence of this situation I reminded you of the fact of child labor, of the tendency among employers not only to disregard the interests of their employees, but also to treat them in much the same spirit as the slave owner treated his slave, that is to disregard their interests as human beings. I also pointed out the fact that there are men who are perfectly willing to make money for their own comforts and the comforts of their families from trafficking in the weaknesses and moral deficiencies of men, directly, for example, in the saloon, and places of immorality, and indirectly from rentals received from property thus used. This state of affairs is a violation of the same moral laws and the same Christian doctrine as was violated by slavery.

I wish to present a little more clearly the significance of this situation and its bearing upon the moral progress of the nation. And remember above all things that the moral condition and the moral progress of the nation is determined by. The moral progress and the moral conditions of the individuals who make up that nation.

In Edith Wharton novel, *The Fruit of the Tree*,⁴ there is a clear cut illustration of the way in which things work out, when people are willing to treat human beings as things which must contribute to their comfort and well-being. In a little country town there is a mill. IN the town dwell the workmen and overseers, through whose ingenuity and labor the mill is carried on. The wages paid are small, the general condition of the town is poor and not altogether satisfactory from a moral point of view. In short, the community is just what most such communities are and must of necessity be when the inhabitants are just

⁴ Edith Wharton (1862-1937), *The Fruit of the Tree*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.

barely able to pay their current expenses and keep out of debt if they have good luck. Now this property was owned by a woman who knew nothing about the mill except the fact that it was her source of income. In truth, she did not know very much about anything over and above her insatiable thirst for pleasure and excitement, and the ways and means of gratifying it. She did nothing more than to go the rounds of social functions, the theatre and dinners. She was not bad. She was just purposeless, ignorant and selfish. When an attempt was made to interest her in the property which she owned, and the people who lived in the town, she could not rise to the occasion, simply because she did not have it in her to do it. It matters not how well she graced her social functions, how punctiliously she attended church, or how liberally she contributed to foreign missions, or how generously she supported some city charity, the fact is that her life is a denial of the basic principle upon which society and the moral order exists. Men are of more importance than money, and if one is moral and does not treat persons as things, one must recognize that the payment of good wages is of more importance and has a prior claim to the payment of large dividends. The condition pictured in that novel is a violation of a fundamental moral law, and a primary doctrine of the religious teaching of Jesus.

It is hardly necessary to say that the picture is also largely true to the actual conditions of industrial life today. It matters not whether the man who receives the profits is of world-wide reputation, who gives his money for public institutions by millions, or is simply the owner of a small plant, the principle is just the same, or rather the lack of principle is just the same. The man who has marked organizing ability should receive good liberal compensation for his ability and his work. The capital that is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a plant should also receive a return for its part in the establishment, but, and this is the important point, the interest of personality should take precedence over accumulated wealth, because, for the purposes of moral progress, wealth of good men with a fair opportunity is of more importance than the accumulation of wealth of the nation. The wealthy nation without good men is dead, but the poor nation with good, sound able men has its future before it.

Out of this situation, which I have suggested above, in which men are treated as things, arises the discontent of our times,

and in that discontent is suggested the moral problem which awaits our solution, which calls the young men of the times to the service of the nation.

But, as it appears, the present more or less rough and tumble grab for dollars, either in the form of dividends, or in the form of wages does not express the deeper meaning of the ever-increasing protest against existing industrial and social conditions. Beneath it all there is a more or less clearly defined idea that under our present conditions the value of the human personality is not being properly recognized. For example, in one of our great industrial plants of the present times, there is a remarkable tendency to obliterate the personality from all considerations. Such a plant is run by a great cumbersome mechanism of system and machinery. The appeal to the development of the individual is reduced to its lowest terms. The opportunity for natural and proper self-assertion hardly exists, except for the man of uncommon strength and ability. The man of ordinary capacity becomes a sort of a molecule in the pact of the machine, while the man of rather superior ability enjoys the privilege of such freedom of movement as will enable him to move about for the purpose of oiling the machine or tightening up a loose nut here and there. The function of human life is to express itself in its broadest and best terms. Men chafe under the grinding and personality-destroying process by which they are made to become servants, not to say slaves, of a system that is in itself entirely lacking in the characteristics of personality. Men are individuals and their primal instinct is to foster and develop their personality. The reign of a lawless individualism, in which each man is for himself, and utterly unmindful of the interests of all other men, has created the conditions and developed the systems which now bind us hand and foot. The protest against this situation, as voiced by hundreds of organizations and almost countless books, rests finally upon the fact that men realize, or at least are coming to realize that the development of men of character and worth is of far greater importance than the development of great industries, great commerce and great wealth. When the present protest is stripped of all its accidental and local colorings, it is found to contain the same moral principle, and to be founded upon the same moral laws as the protest against slavery. Human personality by its very nature demands the opportunity of self-expression, and when conditions deny that opportunity, then it is so much the worse for the conditions. By the power of

personality have nations been developed, but when the developed nation became a millstone about the neck of persons, those persons simply threw it off. So also in the history of the religious interests of men. As a result of the work of great personalities, the Catholic Church was formed, but when men awoke to the fact that it was no longer the opportunity for the true and natural expression of their religious life, but had rather become the suppressing medium of the natural religious nature in man, then man broke through the system, and left to its fate. The same things is now being done throughout all the Christian churches. I repeat that beneath the great discontent and unrest of our time is the demand for a larger and a freer opportunity of expressing the inherent and latent possibilities of the human personality. Below the surface froth of money grabbing, of greed for dividends and salaries, of demand for increase wages and better conditions of work is the deep undercurrent of moral progress of individual men and of mankind as a whole. Again we are rising to a point of self-assertion and true to human nature we are proclaiming that men shall be perfect even as their Father in Heaven is perfect, or to say the same thing in our everyday language, "we shall be true to the inherent possibilities of man's nature. We are men, we shall treat ourselves as men, we shall treat others as men, and we shall demand that they treat us as men."

Seventy-five years ago the people of this nation faced the fact of slavery as the great and pressing moral problem of their time. They saw the truth, heard the call, and that form of treating men as things disappeared. I have tried to point out that the nature of the moral problem which is immediately pressing upon us today, and is calling us to the work of its solution. As citizens of the community, as citizens of the larger nation, we have before us this great problem of how to free men from the products of their own handicraft, from the evils of a top-heavy and over-wrought complexity of the times. The body of this problem as it is presented to us bears the appearance of an economic creature, and, true to the prevailing customs, it is dressed in the clothing of commercialism, but the moving power of the body, the directly influence of it all is not economic, is not commercial, but is essentially moral. To realize that this movement is fundamentally moral is the truth that we must see, or indeed it is the truth that has already been seen, and has found expression in some of the best

literature that has been produced in this country, and in Europe.

It is a lamentable fact that men who are in the midst of this movement, who have to act on concrete problems that it presents to them, either in their relationships as citizens of the community, or in their social or industrial capacity, are almost entirely ignorant of the forces with which they are dealing. Because of this gross and unnecessary ignorance, they make decisions and execute acts that are not excusable, and often lead to injurious and threatening situations. As men who are in the service of the nation whose protection we enjoy, and whose accumulated advantages gives us a large part of our opportunities, it become a plain moral duty for men to avail themselves of the knowledge which experience in the dealing with these problems offers for our consideration. To know what is going on, to know why it is happening, and to understand its importance and its meaning, it the first duty. To realize the pressing necessity of this firs duty one has only to make a few experiments in the way of asking questions of such men as one ordinarily comes in contact with. For the most part, one finds only ignorance, or mere personal opinion defended by ill-assorted facts gleaned from the daily paper. I say, we not only need to understand, and ought to understand, but in truth we must understand, either by our own efforts, or by sad experience forced upon us by the events of the movement.

But still beyond that we must transform our knowledge into conduct. But it is hardly necessary to say this, for the careful study and the comprehension of the conditions will of itself compel men to action. That is a profound sentence of Emerson's, "The intellect, with blessing eye, looking through history from the beginning onward gazes on this blot, and it disappears." This always has been true to human nature, that when men see the truth presented by a problem and understand its bearing upon the development of the human personality, it will give itself without reserve and with noble consecration to the task before it. Indeed that is the satisfaction of life, which is the happiness that absorbs both pain and pleasure, which in the language of the Bible is called the peace that passes all understanding, that lifts one from the grub necessities of living in the passive voice and being entertained through life, that high satisfaction that drives away pessimism and dependency, and makes life glorious can only be experience as

one faces one of these problems and gives himself to its solution. "The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but evermore articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces freedom." But this sentiment of right is low and indistinct only because we permit it to be so. True indeed it is that it is the voice of the universe, but in the affairs of men the will of the universe finds its expression only through the mind and the will of man. And the voice of the universe now awaits for man to proclaim its essential truth that men shall be men, shall treat themselves like men, and shall recognize the same rights in others, and demand the recognition by others of those rights in themselves. History has already proclaimed the fact that this is the will of the universe. We are already working for the vindication of that proclamation. That there are any circumstances under which men may be treated as things is a false principle of life. That such actual conditions exist is a blot upon our life today. The fact that we know it to be a blot is already the warrantable assurance that the blot will disappear. But it will disappear only through the unceasing efforts of men.