

Some Questions of Municipal Housekeeping

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The near approach of the city election gives an opportunity for the consideration of two or three questions concerning the general life of the city in which we live. What I shall have to say is connected with certain features of municipal life as a whole, and features too, which demand fundamental change.

The point of view from which I speak is that of a man who looks upon the city as a community of people living together in a more or less congested center of population, and organized into a civic body for the purpose of doing together those things which we can do most efficiently in this manner. It is self-evident that such functions as protection from fire, supply of water, and sewerage systems, education, protection from lawlessness, are most effectively fulfilled by cooperative effort. The extent to which this cooperative effort may be carried depends [on] our common needs and the state of our intellectual and moral development. In the barbarous and ill-organized community of frontier towns the question of law and order was hardly a community affair. Each resident carried law and order in his pocket, and avenged his injuries, and protected his rights and dignity on the spot. In comparison with such a town, our little colony up here in the hills seems like the kingdom of heaven. Should a typical citizen of a frontier mining town drop in upon us, he would probably lament over the abridgement of his freedom, the denial of his inalienable right to self-expression, and go into a hysterical tirade over the loss of the romantic days when a man was allowed to drink poor liquor in any store and pay for the same in lead. Individuality is destroyed. No man has a right to show how good a shot he is, and with what display of braggadocio he could exploit the town to satisfy his own ideas of comfort, pleasure and full expression of his individuality. If he were compelled to live

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

here, he would doubtless die of a broken heart, sighing continually, "farewell romance."

What is the difference between these two towns? To the man who belongs in the present town, there is more freedom, more opportunity for life and development than in the uncivilized town. For him, everything works in his direction, provided his direction is in harmony with general public opinion. The schools, the business organizations, the political machinery, law and order, all conspire to protect and support the man who is tuned to the predominant note of the times. That is freedom. Such freedom is an achievement. Through the natural processes of experience, education and enlightenment, we develop from anarchy to comparative cooperation for the realization of the values of human life.

Having compared the worst of the past with the average good or bad of the present, we are apt to say that we have attained the acme of development in this direction. We are doing all as [a] community that we ought to do. To go beyond this present cooperative effort would be foolish. It would deprive life of its zest and reduce the mountains and hills to the level of the plain, and stamp us all with the common stamp of mediocrity. Life would cease to be worth living.

What then is the limit to this cooperative effort in the city life? There is no insurmountable limit. As we progress in culture, in education, as we adopt ever higher values in human life, and set ourselves to ever newer tasks, we are constantly adding to the tasks and work which we do together. The advance guard of human progress are ever on the frontier discovering new values, throwing new light on old values, showing up the folly of maintaining worn-out standards. Slowly, steadily, the human race, imitative, and growing as it is by nature, follows the advance, takes possession of the outposts that they have established, closes in upon them and appropriates for common use all the new values and aims that the historic development demonstrate to be of real wealth to human life.

All this process of growth and evolution is going steadily on. It is not without its conflicts, and its turmoil, its mistakes and errors, not without its dramatic and picturesque elements. The man who has been the star shooter of a new town, who has carried law and order in his pocket, laments over the advent of

the sheriff, the court, the cooperative effort at law and order. He does not always accept the new standards with grace and complacency. Sometimes he resents the approach of the new values [with] violent opposition. He will have his conflict with these upstarts who are interfering with his inalienable rights to shoot up the town and give free vent to his individuality. But in the long run, the commonweal will prevail, and he will be compelled to restrain his individuality in these directions, and either seek new lines of self-expression, or new fields for his activity. Evolution in the long run works for the survival of the fit and eliminates the unfit. There are many apparent injustices in the process, but perhaps we are working towards an end which will include the process.

Now there are plenty of temporary limitations. We are always declaring that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It always is, and yet, it never is at hand. Had there been a clear-minded reformer working in the mining camp praying for the rule of decency and justice, and should he be suddenly transplanted into our midst, I imagine that he would say that the kingdom had come to earth as it is in heaven. Or, on the other hand, should we suddenly remove all the citizens from Pittsfield, and fill their places with an equal number of such men and women as made up the high and low rank and file of a raw uncivilized mining camp, there would be a merry time administering the laws, doing the business, and carrying on the affairs of our municipal housekeeping. The processes of development and growth are not matters of machinery and mechanism, but of thought and life. The goths could understand the civilization of the Roman world, even though they contained the undeveloped power that was to overthrow it, and to outshine it. First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.

These general principles are the background for the consideration of one or two concrete problems of our municipal life.

I said that the idealist who lived and died in the mining town would probably feel quite satisfied could he have been dropped into our town. But should that same idealist live in our midst today he would be just as uneasy as anyone who does live here. He would see the serious limitations under which we live, the serious evils that are a part of our present mechanism, the

serious limitations to the life values that the community, as a whole, clings.

To such a person, at least if we are to give any value to the opinions of the great thought of our time as well as to our own observations, the most important need is to break through the present mechanism and get an opportunity to have the wishes, and purposes of the population carried out. As a city we have no sovereign powers. We exist by grace of the state. We have no rights except those conferred upon us by the state. It seems a cruel nemesis that in this state of all others the grip of the state and the political ring back of the state, and the vested interests back of the political ring, should be so firmly clutched into the very vitals of the civic life. The administration of civic affairs is carried on as well as they can be without sacrificing the interests of the political machines. The weekly letter in the *Springfield Republican* for last Sunday stated the facts clearly when it said that the real issue of the campaign is a fight for the control of city offices. The purpose is to maintain the grip of the successful machine on the affairs of the city in the interests of the state machine. Here, and all over the country, cities are struggling to free themselves from this death grapple. More than anything else in our whole civic life we need to free ourselves from a city charter which was constructed so as to foster ignorance in civic affairs and establish partisanism upon a firm and solid foundation. Here we need a charter which shall give us a fair amount of home rule, effective expert administration, and a liberal supply of the initiative, referendum and the recall. This principle of democracy has departed from our city life, and we sadly need it today. We have a right to some sovereign powers, and we must have them and will have them.

Then there is no reasonable ground for objection to the extension of municipal functions. Our electric light and gas rates are beyond all reason. Even the corporations themselves are squeamish about the size of their profits. We ought to have the right, the insight, and the will to own and operate these public utilities on the same basis as the water supply and the sewerage system. In the matter of street lighting, we have had no end of trouble. Why should we be bothered with that sort of thing? This is a public utility and should be operated directly for the benefit of the people as a whole.

One more thing that seems to me to be of vital importance. The tone of the civic life depends in no small degree upon the character of the amusements that people enjoy, and their advantages for enlightenment. We have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in school buildings. They are used but a fractional part of the time. They would afford excellent centers of education, and recreation. With a smug sort of a smile on our face we prate about the advanced condition of our New England Educational Systems. We forget that in the cities that are alive, these school buildings are open evenings for lectures, gymnasium classes, and all sorts of interests that are of real moral value in the civic life. The spirit of the old lyceum, the spirit of the old red schoolhouse, the spirit of the old neighborhood intelligence, is developed by this method. Yet our parsimonious city government with its political interests, and its shortsightedness, begrudged the money expended in the evening schools, cut down the appropriation for that, and had to be told that unless more money was forthcoming the evening schools would have to be closed.

To open up centers of educational influence, and wholesome social activities in buildings owned by the city, free from the insidious greed of those who exploit pleasure, and introduce every degenerating influence that they dare, to open up our school buildings for such purposes as that, would be a great step forward in the life of the city.

But no, that is not the way we do. We close the schools evenings and open the saloons. No opportunity is given for the development of good in human life, but every license is afforded for the exploitation of vice. The ostensible reason for all this stupidity is the matter of expense. It would cost the city something to open the schools for the education, recreation and enlightenment of our citizens. On the other hand, we are told that the business interests of the city demand the saloon, and the exploitation of vice. Money is paid into the city for the right of carrying on a business, which even its own defenders admit is an evil business, but although evil, it is necessary. Europe was once turned into a battlefield for the purpose of eliminating the sale of indulgences. I do not suppose that this form of exploitation of human beings will cease so long as there is an eight-percent profit in a ten-cent drink, or so long as the struggle for existence is so openly commercial that, on the one hand, men and women are willing to purchase their own

comfort and luxury at the expense of another's degradation, and, on the other hand, there are men and women, whose lives are so brutally low that the only relaxation from the grind and drudgery of life they are capable of is low dissipation.

Extra:² When I see it demonstrated by cold facts that there are many less arrests under no-license than under license, when I see that there is more money for schools, more for streets in no-license cities than in license cities, when I see that it costs less for police protection, and only about half as much for the care of the poor in no-license cities, I am convinced that there is every reason to vote and work for no-license.

Every voter is asked to say on election day whether or not indulgences shall be granted for the sale of intoxicating liquors in this city. I used to think that the best and most effective way of dealing with this problem was to permit the open sale of such liquors and maintain the grip of the law on the traffic. But the more I see into the political alliances of the city, and the undercurrents of civic life, the more firmly I am convinced that the only way to deal with the matter effectively is to put the stamp of disapproval on it and reduce it to a minimum. The alternative, which the state puts up for us to choose between, is not the best in the world. But I can see no valid grounds for the granting of indulgences in this matter, except the difficulty of enforcement. I received a great deal of light on that point last year. A written complaint was presented to the board of license commissioners given the evidence to prove that at least one place was flagrantly violating the provisions of the law as to Sunday selling. One member of the commission became very uneasy and impatient while the document was being read. At last, he broke out with the explanation, "There, I told the fools that they would be caught." A direct connivance between the commission of liquor traffic regulation, and the saloon keeper for the deliberate and habitual violation of the law. That incident, plus many observations, has disposed of my bugaboo about enforcement. For economic and ethical reasons as well, I vote against the granting of license for the sale of intoxicating liquors. I believe that to be by far the best that one may do under present conditions.

² This paragraph is from a page with the heading, "Extra," that was inserted between manuscript pages 13 and 14.

In addition to the above, there seems to be one thing more that should characterize the municipal housekeeping. The shame of American cities has been terrible. For a long time, the cynical remark that politics are too dirty for the hands of a decent man has been the watchword. That appears to be changing. There is appearing again the spirit that to the victors belongs the spoil. In its essence, the duty of a public official is that of public service. Politics for revenue only is being tabooed. The men and the principles that are coming into vogue bespeak an era in which democracy shall have a chance to show its efficiency, and era when the forces of society shall make for manhood and womanhood.