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HOW SHALL WE BEST CONSERVE OUR NATION'S MORAL FORCES?



By
ELIZABETH HARRISON

An Address Delivered Before the National Congress of Mothers
in Denver, June 12, 1910

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History will probably record as one of the most far-reaching movements of the Roosevelt administration the call of the Governors of the States to meet in conference concerning ways and means for conserving the natural resources of America. The waterways, the forests, the hidden treasures of mines and all of the God-given riches and sources of wealth and power suddenly assumed new significance. They revealed themselves as trusts committed to us, for our natural use, to be sure, but to be passed on to future generations.

We are beginning to learn how much of the future welfare of our nation depends on our right comprehension of our responsibilities concerning these sources of material prosperity. We are learning that the devastation of our forests means not only loss of forest incomes, but the impoverishment of all the land which is on the same water-shed, the deterioration of climate and of health. We are beginning to realize that the great waterways are the arteries of the commercial world. We are learning that coal mines are not the property of a few millionaires, but are God-gifts to mankind, and are to be administered as such. At least this seems to be the consensus of the more thoughtful portion of our nation.

If deep and earnest conference is needed as to the conserving of our material resources, how much more important is it that we should call

together the educators, the sociologists, the doctors, the religious leaders and, last but not least, the thoughtful parents in order that we may consult concerning the protecting and conserving of our human resources! If forests and waterways and coal mines are "trusts" to be rightly administered that future generations of citizens may have prosperity and wealth, how much more important is it that the children of to-day should be studied, protected, developed and their sources of intellectual wealth and spiritual power be conserved and not wasted! We may preserve the remnant of forest lands left to us by the greed of the get-rich-quick man, and may wisely plant new forests, but unless we can preserve a well and wholesome posterity and lay check to the deterioration of morals that is going on, of what avail are forest lands to us? We may clean out our waterways and make new ones that shall band together the commercial activities of our nation, but unless we can band together in sympathetic co-operation individuals who have different inherited tastes and prejudices, and can cause to cease the warring of classes, of what avail are continuous waterways? We may preserve our national wealth of coal and iron and extend national ownership to gold mines, but unless we can preserve and develop the inner resources of the children of our land, our future citizens, of what avail the silver and

gold? It is as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals! Of what use to mankind is a land that is rich in bank stocks and poor in brain power? Or one that has cheap transportation and cheap thoughts? Shall we boast of a country that can supply the world with coal and gold but cannot add to its art, its literature or its religious ideals? What can the *World Spirit* (which uses first one nation and then another to give forth its message) do with such a nation but dash it to pieces as it has dashed to pieces Sodom and Gomorrah, or lush its boasting as was hushed the boasting of Nineveh and Tyre! Of what avail was their wealth? Their very names have become a byword and a mocking. The theme is so great that it is hard to find words in which to express it. Not the future of America alone, but the future of the world, depends largely upon whether or not we can make a success of this gigantic experiment of a free people, in a free land, freely governing themselves.

Abraham Lincoln was right when, in his first presidential journey to our nation's capital, he said, "There is something more than national independence in this struggle. That something holds out a *great promise to all the people in the world for all time to come.*" So, too, now I would say this child-saving problem is greater than a national problem. The world is looking to us educationally. Only recently I received in my office in Chicago a representative of the great Empress of China, who had been sent to America by her Majesty to examine into the educational methods of this country and bring back such methods as would be helpful to China. Not

very long before we entertained members of the Mosley Commission, who had come from England to America to examine our educational system, and I presume I am no exception in this matter of international educational contact.

Soon after the calling of the council of the Governors, Mr. Roosevelt issued another call for a conference concerning the welfare of "dependent children." The result of this conference was significant in the extreme, inasmuch as it laid stress not upon the rescuing of the children from injurious surroundings, but upon the education of irresponsible parents, thus showing that they had gone a step beyond present child-misery to the cause of that misery. But let us here in conference look at this all-important subject from a still broader basis. Are not *all* children dependent? Do not *all* parents need education as to the supreme significance of their work?

The material wealth that is derived from natural resources, it is claimed, is God-given. Is not the *spiritual* wealth of a nation also God-given? Whence comes that power in the mind of man to conceive of ideals that have never yet been; of things never yet made; of conditions never yet attained unto? Ideals are the dreams of something higher and better than man has ever accomplished. Whence come these visions of the great "yet-to-be?" If we claim that the coal beds which have slowly been deposited through uncounted ages, the gold and silver that have been formed by an alchemy far beyond the ken of man are gifts from God, surely we may also claim that the human spirit, with its immense power of emotion, which can

make any sacrifice a joy and can lift a life out of any external condition unto the exact opposite of inner condition, is from God! Whence comes the Titanic will of man which surmounts all difficulties, transforms all obstacles, transfigures mere animal existence into civilization; and how are we to account for the work which human intelligence has accomplished if not by attributing it to a supreme source? The nation which has ideals is great, rich, powerful. The nation which has lost its ideals is poor, weak and contemptible.

We are awakening to the realization that the God-given wealth of forest, mine and stream must be studied and protected, that it may not be exhausted. Are we awakening with equal earnestness to our still greater duty of protecting and developing the spiritual wealth that comes with each generation of little children who helplessly look to us for guidance and protection?

The best, clearest-headed men of our nation are rousing themselves to the task of conserving our material wealth. Are the best women of our land striving with equal earnestness to preserve our spiritual wealth? Let us counsel together and see if we are doing our part of the work of up-building the great new thought of the newest, grandest nation on earth.

What are the moral resources of a nation? Is not the greatest of these *character*? Say what we will, deep down in the heart of each and every one of us we *know* that material prosperity is *not* the highest form of success; we *know* that worldly pleasures do not produce happiness; we *know* that poverty does not always mean

misery; we *know* that the human soul craves the approval of its own conscience more than it craves the applause of men. I do not need to cite instances to prove this statement. Do we women realize that our supreme duty in life is to foster and protect this spiritual wealth? Do we realize that all which is of infinite value in a nation, or an individual, is that which comes from *within*? No heaping of wealth, no piling on of culture, no development of physical powers is of any lasting value unless the heart within is right. How many more penitentiaries must we fill; how many more divorce courts must we crowd before we realize that neither education (so-called) nor social position gives to man or woman that inner power which makes life rich indeed and which adds some value to every other life with which that life comes in contact?

Even from the standpoint of mere financial needs, what is the whole business world seeking? Men and women of sterling character, of inner poise, of creative resources. As a mere business asset it behooves us to develop the inner life and strength of children. Reputation for reliability of character sells high in the market of the world. When we come to the deeper, less tangible demands of our nation we find that character is absolutely indispensable in any great educational, philanthropic or religious undertaking.

Let us, then, turn our attention to the consideration of how best to develop character, as the richest resource of our nation. No external coercion, no argument, no entreaty can develop character; all assimila-

tion, all effort, all growth must come from within the child. We are only beginning to realize the undreamed-of possibilities that lie in each child's soul. Psychology, the science of the soul, is as yet in its infancy. It is this inner life of children that is of so much worth and that is so little understood. Not until the mothers realize that the feeding and bathing and dressing of their infants are but a small fraction of their work will we begin to comprehend the greatness of our task of the moral and spiritual conservatives of our nation.

First of all, we mothers and teachers must realize that it is only by means of an ideal of some sort that we can awaken any human soul. Froebel, the founder of the kindergarten, would have the mother realize that with the first spontaneous kicking of her baby's limbs, the first tossing of his arms, he is trying to outer or utter his inner self, albeit though he is as yet unconscious of that inner self, and that with these earlier manifestations of power her work of nurturing this precious inner life of her child begins. Every effort of a child to put forth his inner life ought to be understood as of immense value if he is to unfold and develop the power within to do and to be all that he is capable of doing and being. I do not mean by this that a mother's entire time should be given to watching her child, but that she should understand and value childish efforts.

The care of her child's body is important, but even more important from this standpoint of the spiritual development of character is her participation in his *play period*. She should be ready to respond to his coo

or his smile. The coo is the beginning of his effort to communicate with another soul, and the smile is the dawn of the social consciousness. Later on, when little hands reach out to disarrange her orderly table, or to destroy her bric-a-brac, again she should understand that these are but the manifestations of an awakened power within the child which is reaching out to master the outside world. These are the child's inarticulate calls for help and guidance in its learning, the use of its chief instruments—its voice and body. Still later, when the little one begins to trot around after the busy house-wife and tries to brush and dust and scrub as he sees her doing, let her remember that it is this precious inner life of her child reaching out and trying to understand what she is doing by imitating her and so to get in touch with her inner life. This imitative instinct in children is such a wonderful thing, if we only understand it aright. The wise mother will spend a moment or two in arranging some bit of work which the child can do, or with a word or two will let him feel that he is helping her, and thus will bring her child nearer to her than any amount of kissing or caressing. She has responded to his inner self and thereby drawn him nearer to her by that invisible bond of sympathetic understanding of an unconscious appeal. The so-called destructiveness of many a child is but this inner desire to master the outside world, crying for help and guidance. Still later, when the child's almost ceaseless questions begin to fret and tax her tired nerves, let her but think "It is my *child's real self* trying to stretch and grow" and

half her fatigue will vanish. I have often noticed that children who are answered sensibly rarely ask senseless questions. Do you say, "But this takes too much time?"

Does it take any more time to thus make a comrade and friend of your child than to scold and punish him? Because, forsooth, after his inner being has reached forth for help and has been refused by you, it turns to some other activity by which it can exercise its God-given power! It is as natural and as necessary for a child to keep testing his powers as it is for a tree to put forth its leaves.

How can we best help to develop and train toward usefulness this in-born, God-given power that is forever struggling to put itself forth, to express itself in the outside world? In other words, how can we help a child's inner life to grow? This is the most subtle, the most delicate, the most vital of all problems that the lover of childhood has to solve. "Unless a man hath a will within him, you can tie him to nothing," says Emerson. We may coerce a child into doing as we command, but that is not growth. Punishment is often necessary, but it is not of any real worth unless it is *remedial*, and for it to be a remedy it must be accepted and assimilated by the child's inner self. A vast saving of the inestimable spiritual riches of love and peace and tender, close companionship lies in the understanding of how to punish a child in the right way for any real wrong-doing; that is, the child must feel the justice of the punishment.

The question of questions is, "How are we to come in touch with these hidden inner powers of the children

committed to our care?" No man can force himself into another man's soul. The worst possible injury that can be done to a child is to attempt to force confidence. It brings forth lying, deceit, and oftentimes that deadly poison, hatred. How, then, can we win our way into a child's heart? Surely not by yielding to his caprice or being blind to his wrong-doing. This is almost as injurious as unjust harshness.

Let us turn and examine our own souls. Who are the people who win our confidence? To whom do we tell our inmost longings and aspirations? Is it not to the person that we think best understands us, who never ridicules any real effort on our part, but who rather encourages it, who criticizes us, if criticism is necessary, in so kindly and helpful a way as to encourage us rather than discourage us? In other words, is it not the person who believes not blindly but intelligently in our possibilities? Can we not try to be that person to the children around us? It is this close sympathetic companionship with their shy inner life that counts for more than everything else. We talk of advantages that this or that child has; the greatest advantage that any child can have is an intelligently sympathetic mother-heart near him.

We are apt to speak of such a childhood as that of Abraham Lincoln as poverty-stricken and forlorn. Lincoln had the greatest advantage that a child can have—his poor, obscure, ignorant step-mother gave to his childish efforts loving, sympathetic interest. Without the nurturing mothering of Nancy Hanks it is safe to say there would never have been

the Abraham Lincoln that we all revere. We may talk of the God-sent messenger who will grow into his mission, notwithstanding the most adverse circumstances, just as there are seeds that will burst into life on stony ground or on parched soil. Burbank's cactus, as contrasted with the cactus of the desert, will tell us what that seed might have become had it had the right kind of nurture. Comfortable surroundings, clean bodies, advantages of education, travel, contact with people of culture may count for much or they may count for nothing in real growth of the inner self. We all know this. Sometimes the most advantageous circumstances bring forth the worst failures in character, but the *one thing that never fails is loving sympathy and nurture of a child's effort to put forth that which is within him.* Thank God! this every mother, rich or poor, has it in her power to give to her children!

Let us, then, sympathize with a child's tasks, enter into his trials, rejoice in his triumphs. But the greatest of all opportunities to get close to a child's *real* life is when he is in his creative mood. These are his highest moments, and if the mother can join in his creative efforts she need have no fear of being shut out in his lesser hours. With small children the creative impulse manifests itself most generally in play. The child in play is putting forth his inner understanding of the world about him. The door of the inner sanctuary of his real self is partially open then as at no other time.

As a child grows older, playing at life does not satisfy him. Discovery,

investigation, technique, skill begin to be sought as means of growth. The boy begins to whittle on a top or to build a kite; the girl begins to make doll clothes or she begs to be allowed to try to cook something. The result may be what is generally known as "a muss" or "a littering up the room," but the real significance of the effort has been an attempt on the part of your boy or girl to enter into the work of the world, to become of some real value in life, to put forth some of his or her inner self. Are such moments of less importance than the conning of text books, or of the reciting of lessons which some one else had put forth? Grafting a young tree may be a beneficial thing to do, but the grafting cannot be a success unless the sap within flows freely. Whether it be leather work or letter-writing, crocheting or composing that the young soul is endeavoring to use as a means of self-expression, it matters not; the point is, that it shall be helped in its creative effort, not by dictating this or that improvement, but by wise and genuine interest in the effort, then a suggestion here or there as to a possible betterment of the work in hand will be received as the thirsty land receives the rain. Let us remember always that at this period it is not the result that is important, but the effort, the feeling within the child that he is able to do things.

Louis Agassiz ascribes his wonderful success in creating the great Peabody Natural History Museum at Harvard College to the impetus he received when, as a nine-year-old boy, his mother helped him to clean out an old stone chicken trough in the

back yard, in order that he might use it for an aquarium, in which, in his boyish confidence in himself, he declared he was going to collect every kind of fish that was to be found in the Swiss lakes. A famous writer of children's stories declares that it was her family's loving interest in her childish stories that made her persevere in writing. I do not mean that we should engender conceit by undue praise, but that we should value effort at its real spiritual worth—namely, that all real effort at self-expression is inner growth.

The older youth or maiden begins not merely to enter into the world's work, but to long to be a part of its ideal activity. He or she begins to write stories or, perchance, to try to live poems or romances, to dream dreams of greatness and fame. Again, this is the mother's opportunity to keep in touch with her child's inner life. All the spiritual longing and aspirations of the young life are put forth at that marvelous time of adolescence as surely as the physical body adjusts itself for its future office.

I will never forget one of the turning points in my own life that came to me as a romantic girl of fourteen. After having read of some fine thing a public man of that day had done, I exclaimed, "Oh, dear! If I were only a *man* I might do something worth while!" My blessed mother, who sat by quietly sewing, looked up and said, "My dear, have you already accomplished all that a *woman* can do that you desire a larger sphere?" Her gentle words set me to thinking of what a woman *might* do if she set herself to work, and ever since then I have been striving to be all a woman

can be, to do all a woman can do, and it has been so much larger a field than I can possibly fill that discontent with my sex has never again risen.

I had a young man once tell me that he was changed by a single remark made by a teacher when as a youth of fifteen he was boasting of his physical strength; she smilingly witnessed some feats of agility and muscular power, and then she said, "That's fine! Now are you going to be a St. Christopher or a Goliath?"

I speak of these seemingly trifling incidents (and I could give many more) simply that I may show it is when the young soul is uttering itself that the most precious opportunities come for giving of higher ideals. This is the greatest real help we can give to any one—to enlarge his ideals. And yet—how many mothers do we see blindly missing these golden opportunities! They send their children to the nursery or they turn them over to an ignorant nurse-maid, because the mother wants to embroider the baby's carriage blanket, or to add another ruffle to some undergarment, or, perchance, to play bridge whist, and she loses her best possible means of studying her child and her supreme opportunity of becoming his comrade. How many homes have a work-room where parents and children can work together? How many boys have to improvise their own work-shop in the wood-shed, or in some neighboring boy's barn?

I know a man who has the most exquisite taste in music, and the keenest appreciation of it, who tells the pitiful story of buying an old violin on the sly and keeping it hid in the wood-pile and of practicing on it only

when his father was away from home. He never became a musician. Another man, whose talents lay in the direction of mechanics, once told me of his ambition as a boy to construct an engine. His father put a stop to it as a piece of foolishness. Six or eight months afterwards the father dropped dead on the street, and while the preparations were being made for his funeral the boy went to the barn and eagerly began once more to work on his beloved engine. He said he could recall no feeling but that of "now I am free to make my engine!" What possible influence could that father have had over that son?

Even more do young lives need close sympathetic companionship when the attraction of the opposite sex begins to demand "primping up." I was once complimenting a boy on a new suit of clothes which he had just donned. He had been laughing good-naturedly over them, when suddenly he turned to me and said, "I tell you, clothes make a lot of difference as to whether you feel like a fellow or a gentleman."

We older ones know that "worth makes the man and want of it the fellow," but just at that time no sermonizing on my part would have helped that boy. He longed for and

needed the external expression of a gentleman, having been somewhat deprived of good clothes in his earlier life, and I was glad that I was near enough to him for him not to fear to express his longing to me, and that I had sense enough to understand that it was not mere dudish vanity which made him say what he did. I know some other boys who wished their mother had been with them in their camping out expedition in the Rocky Mountains, because, as they expressed it, "she would have made things hum!"

To sum up this very inadequate statement of an all-important subject, let us see to it that the priceless efforts of childhood, priceless because they mean the development of inner power, are never ridiculed nor discouraged, nor set aside as worthless, but, rather, that they shall be encouraged. And if the effort fails, let us strive to renew the courage. Never let a child rest in the feeling that any failure is ultimate. We can always say, "Well, we learned that time how not to do it. Let's try another way." *God never meant that any human life should be a failure.* And could we carry true mother-love to all humanity no life need be a failure. *Great is the work before us!*



