

Everett, William

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AMERICAN EDUCATION:

A THANKSGIVING SERMON

PREACHED BY

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ERRATUM.—On page 6, eight lines from bottom, “higher” and “lower” should be transposed.

SERMON.

PROVERBS I., 7.—“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge ; but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

AMONG the blessings which we are supposed to possess in this country, and for which we are called upon to thank God every year, are those of education. Our people possibly—though it is hard to believe it—have some deficiencies ; but of one thing there can be no doubt,—they teach their children, and do not let them, like so many nations, grow up in ignorance. I am willing to allow that this is a great blessing, a treasure devoutly to thank God for—if we possess it. I am not going to argue, as I have heard persons argue, that education is far from being always a blessing, and that many would be happier without it. I do not mean to remind you of the undoubted fact that many of our citizens, our voters, have to be compelled or bribed to send their children to school, and that one of the points of the free religionists, the Liberal League, is compulsory education, because the ungrateful people will not always recognize their blessings. Be it allowed that on Thanksgiving day an anthem of joy should arise to our Father for the diffusion of knowledge throughout our land—if it is diffused.

All the gifts for which we thank our Lord and God—whether those that come like light and air from the mere exercise of his sovereign bounty, or those, like the rich harvest and the enlightened government, wherein he is pleased to accept of the assistance our hands and thoughts may give him—are either blessings or curses, according to the temper in which our own hearts join in their production and their use. No wealth, though piled in mountains ; no power, though diffused over continents ; no knowledge,

though piercing to the farthest fixed star,—is a fit cause for gratitude, if it is gained or associated with cruelty, with corruption, with infidelity.

When the pious monarch of Germany was thanking God for the victory that had blessed his arms and the wealth that was pouring into his treasury, he chose to forget the rivers of blood and tears that flowed before he could wrench away those fair provinces from the agony of France; and, before they were well known as his, his riches were turning to ashes in his hands, and the very prostrate enemy, whom men said had only paid the penalty for her own past iniquity, had found sin atoned for by suffering, and was rising to a purer, nobler, chaster prosperity than she ever knew. I tremble to think, brethren, how, among the countless spoils we have seized from the age, and hung up as gorgeous trophies, there are many which reek with the foul stains of unhallowed passion. Our broad lands, our bursting granaries, our crowded cities, our glittering wealth, how have they all been gained? I leave the answer to others; and I ask now, when we thank God for the blessings of education, not if we are indeed learned, but if our knowledge is founded on the fear of God, which is the only corner-stone.

Brothers and sisters, God has given to most of you children. By the most wonderful, the most exquisite of all nature's mighty miracles, you have taken in your arms miniatures of yourselves. You will in the course of years see them go out into the world. Shall they go out as their own wills have made them? shall they have no characters but what chance instructors gave them? or shall they be what you have made them, and those to whom you solemnly entrust them? As Americans, you feel bound to educate them: you would as soon send them out naked or starving, racked with cough or fever, as give them no training in sound learning. Yet have you ever thought if there is open to them that knowledge of which the fear of God is the beginning, and if you have led them to that door? Are you sure that you have never led or never will lead them to the door within

which dwells the other wisdom, which is "earthly, sensual, devilish"?

Brothers and sisters, my present station, to which God has been pleased to call me, is that of a teacher,—a teacher not of grown men, but of children under rules. I hold that calling as an American citizen who loves his home, and as a Christian minister who fears his God; and I say in the face of this company, in the face of my professional brethren, in the face of this nation, that many who are seeking to educate their children, and many who are controlling the national systems of education, are forgetting and disregarding their obligations to their country, their obligations to their God, and their tenfold obligations to the immortal beings under their care, and thus the education imparted is imperfect in its character, injurious in its effect, and base in its tendency.

And, if this sentence seems harsh, I fear I must say what will seem to some harsher still, by insisting that the responsibility for defects in our education is not with the actual teachers. They are what the community, or those to whom the community delegates its authority, insists on making them. The American people has long since declared that its teachers shall be its servants, and teach according to its bidding, and the teachers, as they must, obey. They are not, as a body, allowed to know their own business; they are not left to teach as they ought, except in a few most fortunate cases. I desire, in order to substantiate and illustrate this severe opinion, to state what I believe to be the diseases of education; and you must judge for yourselves if I am right in asserting that they infect our land.

In the first place, then, that education is imperfect, unhealthy, rotten, which does not directly aim at the development of character; of making men and women, fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, in short, citizens. We receive from God children: we are to bring out, not merely animals, not merely scholars, not merely traders, not merely professional men, manufacturers, laborers, what you will, but

men and women. Their integral, indivisible nature is to be looked to, to be developed, moulded, created. There are teachers, and teachers acting under direction, too, who profess only to attend to practical studies, or only to fit for college, or only to prepare for business, or only to see that children are happy; there are those who say they are not concerned with a child's morals or his health; there are those, in short, to whom the character, the future man or woman is nothing: it is their branch only which they are concerned to teach. Their branch! "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me." The branch,—the study,—what is that in education, except as it trains, informs, strengthens, softens the child? There is no branch that is or shall be taught—Latin or algebra or music or gymnastics or sewing or German—which does not derive nine-tenths of its educating value from its power on the living beings that may never use it again—may forget it, may hate it,—but who leave its study a different man or woman; and every one and all of these branches, and of a dozen more, has been, and can be, and must be used as direct training to the character, or all education founded on it is rotten and ruinous. Are they so used? Do you expect your children's teachers so to use them? Ask yourselves the question, and ask your school managers.

But probably so much would be allowed by all thoughtful and reverent parents,—that education is to form the character, to make the entire man. But character is a complex thing: man is made up of many parts, intertwined and balanced in a wonderful system. It is the duty of the teacher to see that these are duly ordered, and that the higher yields to the lower. Character is of the mind and the soul,—“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,”—education is to give wisdom and knowledge, both of which begin with the fear of the Lord. What, then, shall we say of those who would make the body equal to the mind, and train men so; who would regard the mortal as equal or superior to the immortal, the perishable to the eternal, the animal to the divine, the flesh

to the spirit? To those who maintain bodily health to be the chief thing,—who, if their children are strong and hearty, will bear with their ignorance, and laugh at their mischief? I have no words to express my contempt and detestation for this revival of heathenism, which believes the body is the real man, and the soul but an exhibition of force and an airy unreality; and I know, as its votaries here do not know, the pernicious tendencies of such doctrine. A large part of my own education went on in England, where the boys and young men are trained to a perfection of bodily culture hardly known here; and the result is, in an immense number of cases, the production of magnificent beasts, with all the animal passions, slaughter and lust, developed to perfection, blighting the intellect and debasing the conscience. No! no! The mind, the soul, is the man and the woman: the body is but the perishable case of clay wherein God has breathed his spirit. Train, foster, purify it as the engine, the slave of the soul; but, if it once dares to claim superiority, or even equality, trample it down, chain it, and if need be kill it, lest the soaring spirit be kept from her native heaven.

Again, all education is untrue to its high purpose of training the character, which forgets that it is children we are dealing with, beings as yet undeveloped, forming, shifting,—beings in whom changes go on in the mind and soul with even greater rapidity than in the body. Scarcely have we learned how to guard and feed the infant than we have the child; we have just found out how to amuse and train the child, when there is the shouting boy, and the laughing girl; hardly have we brought ourselves to teach them, when we are confronted by the youth and the maiden; and, ere we speak, the man and the woman have mated with each other, and left us forever! And these changes are going on continuously, from instant to instant, so that every class in a school needs distinct processes to adapt the same subject to the ever-varying minds. And yet, throughout all the stages as soon as the child is capable of education, is seen that exquisitely individual character of youth, neither infant nor man, but

simply itself. Yet how cruelly is this lost sight of, even by affectionate educators! How foolishly does one party protract the toys and stories of the nursery, till the hearty and eager youth positively cries for stronger meat, to learn something, and not be a baby forever! How wickedly does another party seek to insinuate the accursed idea of money-making, and, just as the youthful mind has come to feel the delights of learning for learning's sake, begin to talk about practical studies, forcing that hard, crystallized manhood on the mind, which we all long to delay in the body! Above all, at the very age when memory is most active, most easy, most natural, when boy or girl will learn literally by heart—for it loves to do it—all you will teach it, and store its mind with golden facts and gems of poetry that it will never lose, lo! this divine power, which Christ told his weeping followers was the special gift of the Holy Spirit, must needs be crowded out between the observation of the child which has begun to pall, and the reason of the adult which is not yet born; and the poor boy or girl is hurried from a wilderness of sights and sounds to a desert of inferences, in accordance with preposterous theories about not loading the memory, at the very age when memory cries aloud to take up the precious burden.

And this same error of training the tender reason of the child, as if it were the matured judgment of the man, brings me to the more serious error of those who, from dread of tyranny, perhaps from remembrance of tyranny, renounce, in the training of children, the precious authority which God has placed in their hands for their children's good and their own. Friends, it is all in vain, this attempting to let our children educate themselves. Love them tenderly, watch their gradually advancing reason, consult their hopes and wishes, find out their opinions, if they have any; but in the last resort, nay, long before the last resort, your experience, your knowledge, your authority, must control, direct, master them. You have the right to say what they shall do, and God intends you shall say it. It is cruelty, and not kindness,

to let their whims, their fancies—what you strangely mistake for their tastes—lead them astray, as you know perfectly well they will do, when you have the power to keep them right. If you do not exercise a silken despotism now, sterner tyrants will exercise an iron one hereafter; and, the worst of all, their own passions will bind them with chains of fire. You say that experience will prove the best master. Yes, but it may prove too late: your child may be drowned by walking into the river which you thought it tyrannical to fence. Why insist that the child's cruel experience shall teach too late what your own can be brought in to order in due time.

And even when due authority is exercised, even when it is recognized that the mind must be controlled when young and unformed, it is a sad error to let education be guided, except, perhaps, in its very last stages, by what is termed inclination, or taste, or natural adaptation, which, after all, had better be named whim, or fancy, or accident. No doubt great natural geniuses suffer by being forced out of their bent; but there is very little fear that, when the great natural genius comes, he will not learn what he ought in spite of everything. But for the average mind, for such children as God ordinarily vouchsafes to our homes, there is no one of the great branches of education which cannot, with reasonable and affectionate attention, be made intelligible and interesting; and, if there is any that seems less so,—if there is any of which we all recognize the value, but which seems at the outset hard and dry to the child,—it should none the less be taught. First, because deficiencies must be supplied, as well as inclinations fostered; because, if anything seems hard, it is doubly incumbent, while the mind is young, to inculcate that very hard thing before it becomes impossible. But, secondly, as I am not afraid to maintain, old-fashioned as it sounds, it does good to teach hard things because they are hard, disagreeable studies because they are disagreeable; because a certain amount of hard, patient drudgery is a thing every child needs learn, and should be made to learn, as

a preparation for the life of man and woman; and any education which goes on the theory of making everything pleasant, without any hard work, is rotten and pernicious.

You will guess that I am no advocate of specialism,—of those systems that hurry into special branches, whether industrial or theoretic, our boys and girls before their powers are fairly acquired, their tastes fairly developed, and before they have had half enough of that solid and deep general training on which all specialties must be built. It is time to wait till they are fairly young men and young women for that. Do not, I beseech you, hasten their abandonment of any of these noble studies, whether language or science or history, which all may enjoy, which none can exhaust, but which, once abandoned for a special line, can never be recalled. Above all, do not push them too young into that single branch which is to be their livelihood. Wait, O wait, before you launch them in the sea of money-getting, till their minds are broad and deep and rich, till their souls are keen and pure and warm by practice in all those studies which cannot make a fortune, but will teach how to use honorably and generously the wealth when won, or, better still, to live contented if it never comes, and to smile resignedly if it flies away. The curse of our land is its eagerness for wealth. The first use it makes of reviving trade is to take its children out of school and to put them into the new business openings, and then it reproaches our college for not turning out practical men to rule a country that avows its contempt for her.

Brothers and sisters, you are Americans: you want your country to be perfect, you want her to need no blessing that she can acquire. See to it, then, that the education she gives her children does not foster her conceit and her self-satisfaction. See to it that she does not neglect those great branches of learning which are older than the Declaration of Independence and broader than the Western Hemisphere. From the history of past times, from the languages of other lands, from the sciences that do not touch on active and practical life, but go down into the depths or soar to the

heights of the unseen and eternal, we need to form an education that shall not accept Americans as perfect, but shall make them so by filling up their needs. When the late Senator Chandler was at Naples, he declared that he found nothing to see at the buried cities, and wondered why people went to Pompeii. The man who could say that was not fit to be a ruler of this nation. Eighteen hundred years have passed since the fiery shower consumed those cities; but the story of their fall and the treasures of their recovery are more valuable to you and me, here and now, than all the political conventions that will be held in the United States next year.

That education, again, is imperfect and hollow, which seeks only to teach what is useful as an end, and neglects that which is precious as a means. You will very often hear it as a reproach against many college graduates that they do not keep up their college studies. They did not study them to keep them up: they studied them to make themselves. Men do not row to become watermen, or practise in the gymnasium to become tumblers, but to become strong and healthy men. The statement that those who have succeeded best in college studies have not been the most successful in their professions afterwards is the direct reverse of the facts,—statistics confirming the theory that these hard but delightful studies, which it is the fashion of many to call useless, are as the whetstone of the wits which cut the sharpest through the obstacle of life, to say nothing of their elevating and purifying power on the soul.

But, while I would have American education thus draw into its grasp all the wealth of the ages, I would still have it be American. Believe me, if we do not always educate ourselves aright, we are quite competent to do so. There is no need of our young men going in shoals to Germany, in order to make good teachers or good scholars either. The present condition of Germany, either in politics, in religion, in social economy, or in literature, need not excite our envy or lead us to borrow anything from her system. We have borrowed too

many systems already. We have organized and planned and reported and systematized; now we need to teach, and to let our teachers teach with all but unlimited tenure and all but arbitrary power. Let them be encouraged to do for each boy and girl what they see it needs at every moment, without waiting till they can send to the library for Froebel or Arnold. Of all the words that can be used in education, I dread most "system" and "method"; for they generally mean attempts to grind out immortal souls complete by mechanism, and to afford teachers an easy way of shirking the duty to study the individual temper of every child committed to their charge. The only method of teaching I know is to teach.

I have said we have no special need to send to Germany to learn how to teach. We have no need at all to send to Rome. We know how to teach our children, and teach them religion, too, without applying to Leo XIII. His predecessor, the tenth of the name, excommunicated Luther: his own efforts to stop public schools will be about as effective. If we must fight on that issue, I am ready to do so at any time. It will not be the first time the battle has come. I am not afraid of the result. I believe the public schools, where America teaches historic truth, will hold their own against parochial schools, where Rome teaches consecrated delusion.

Brethren and sisters, we come back to my text: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Ay, and it is the end, too. Our children are sent by God. As he sent his own son, who was subject unto his parents, so he sends these darlings to us to be brought up in his fear and admonition. It is worth while to teach them anything,—everything, which shows them his power in nature and in history, which reveals to them the secrets of their own bodies and souls, which gives firmness and gentleness, patience and fire, energy and thoughtfulness, dignity and sweetness to their nature. Every language wherein reverence, and love, and patriotism have spoken, every science which shows God's

hand in star and stone, in plant or planet, in man or in mountain; every art which lifts us above the beasts that perish, and sets our feet on that ladder whose top reaches to heaven; every story of how true men and noble women have lived and died for God and man,—is a fit subject for their study. Every method of wisdom and kindness,—the watchful eye, the guiding hand, the voice of cheer or warning, the thoughtful head, the falling tear, the glancing smile,—above all, and through all, and in it all, the loving heart,—every one is needed by the humblest teacher of the youngest class, by the proudest authority in the most ancient university. But, oh! if our education is indeed a thing for thanksgiving and praise,—if our country may indeed boast that her children are not sunk in ignorance,—let all our instructors reverently form themselves on the example, not of Socrates or Abelard, not of Pestalozzi or Arnold, but of him who taught on the beach at Capernaum and in the porch of Solomon, and who promised to his disciples the Spirit of Truth, who should bring to their remembrance all things whatsoever he had told them.