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THE IDEAL TEACHER

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INTRODUCTION

On the whole the American people are sincerely and deeply appreciative of their schools and teachers. The teachers themselves are for the most part contented in their work, strenuous and baffling as it may be. And whatever may be said of the shortcomings of teaching as a life, they stand loyally by it. In spite of moments of pessimism, they seldom change to another work, so tenacious are its ultimate attractions.

But it would be quite wrong to assume that either the public or teachers have no just criticism to make upon the life and the product of schools. The educational ideals, and consequently the expectations of both, are too high to permit a smug satisfaction with things as they are. The layman wants better service from teaching. The teacher wishes a happier life in his work. They will probably continue to demand these till the end of time, though the schools grow constantly better. There is no ungratefulness in this attitude; it is part of the idealism that attaches to the work of schools and keeps them forever progressive.

It is for the body of teachers to strive earnestly to do their part to achieve both these ends — to increase the social service of their teaching and to perfect

their joy in the work. This is what we mean when we say that we should make of teaching both a profession and a fine art.

Teaching will be a profession when we have learned the need of thorough scholarly equipment, and single-minded devotion to our daily and hourly duties in the school-room, under the guidance of those larger ideals which the world has set up for the protection of its cherished values. Nothing less than expert knowledge, tempered by a spirit of reverent ministry to those placed under our tuition, will ever make us professional teachers.

Teaching will be a fine art when the situations of schoolroom life are made to call for the best in teacher and pupil. In such a soil of noble motivation the highest powers of human beings thrive. The teacher who drives or is driven, who forces himself or his children through stated tasks, without any sense of their significance, will not find teaching congenial. He will never know that absorption which is the essence of art. Half-heartedly he will teach, his other, more imperious impulses beckoning him away to another life. And while he stays, he will know only that pain of conflict which destroys the possibility of happy work. To achieve real success, teaching must be kept an interesting business, where the free impulses of children and teachers are so used as to accomplish useful things happily.

Ideal teaching, then, will be at the same time professional and artistic, socially useful and personally pleasant. It will always be a goal which we constantly approach but never reach, its approximation whetting our hunger after perfection, and giving us the satisfaction of a thousand victorious adjustments in every school day. Such an ideal is not for laggards or the indifferent. Only the man of fine qualities can enter the lists and joyously achieve. What these qualities are, how they are to be developed, and how used, will be told in this volume.

THE IDEAL TEACHER

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In America, a land of idealism, the profession of teaching has become one of the greatest of human employments. In 1903–04 half a million teachers were in charge of sixteen million pupils. Stating the same facts differently, we may say that a fifth of our entire population is constantly at school; and that wherever one hundred and sixty men, women, and children are gathered, a teacher is sure to be among them.

But figures fail to express the importance of the work. If each year an equal number of persons should come in contact with as many lawyers, no such social consequences would follow. The touch of the teacher, like that of no other person, is formative. Our young people are for long periods associated with those who are expected to fashion them into men and women of an approved type. A charge so influential is committed to nobody else in the community, not even to the ministers; for though these have a more searching aim, they are directly occupied with it but one day instead of six, but one hour instead of five. Accordingly, as the tract of

knowledge has widened, and the creative opportunities involved in conducting a young person over it have correspondingly become apparent, the profession of teaching has risen to a notable height of dignity and attractiveness. It has moved from a subordinate to a central place in social influence, and now undertakes much of the work which formerly fell to the church. Each year divinity schools attract fewer students, graduate and normal schools more. On school and college instruction the community now bestows its choicest minds, its highest hopes, and its largest sums. During the year 1903–04 the United States spent for teaching not less than $350,000,000.

Such weighty work is ill adapted for amateurs. Those who take it up for brief times and to make money usually find it unsatisfactory. Success is rare, the hours are fixed and long, there is repetition and monotony, and the teacher passes his days among inferiors. Nor are the pecuniary gains considerable. There are few prizes, and neither in school nor in college will a teacher's ordinary income carry him much above want. College teaching is falling more and more into the hands of men of independent means. The poor can hardly afford to engage in it. Private schools, it is true, often show large incomes; but they are earned by the proprietors, not the teachers. On the whole,

teaching as a trade is poor and disappointing business.

When, however, it is entered as a profession, as a serious and difficult fine art, there are few employments more satisfying. All over the country thousands of men and women are following it with a passionate devotion which takes little account of the income received. A trade aims primarily at personal gain; a profession at the exercise of powers beneficial to mankind. This prime aim of the one, it is true, often properly becomes a subordinate aim of the other. Professional men may even be said to offer wares of their own — cures, conversions, court victories, learning — much as traders do, and to receive in return a kind of reward. But the business of the lawyer, doctor, preacher, and teacher never squares itself by equivalent exchange. These men do not give so much for so much. They give in lump and they get in lump, without precise balance. The whole notion of bargain is inapplicable in a sphere where the gains of him who serves and him who is served coincide; and that is largely the case with the professions. Each of them furnishes its special opportunity for the use of powers which the possessor takes delight in exercising. Harvard College pays me for doing what I would gladly pay it for allowing me to do. No professional man, then, thinks of giving according to measure. Once engaged, he gives his best,

gives his personal interest, himself. His heart is in his work, and for this no equivalent is possible; what is accepted is in the nature of a fee, gratuity, or consideration, which enables him who receives it to maintain a certain expected mode of life. The real payment is the work itself, this and the chance to join with other members of the profession in guiding and enlarging the sphere of its activities.

The idea, sometimes advanced, that the professions might be ennobled by paying them powerfully, is fantastic. Their great attraction is their removal from sordid aims. More money should certainly be spent on several of them. Their members should be better protected against want, anxiety, neglect, and bad conditions of labor. To do his best work one needs not merely to live, but to live well. Yet in that increase of salaries which is urgently needed, care should be used not to allow the attention of the professional man to be diverted from what is important, — the outgo of his work, — and become fixed on what is merely incidental, — his income. When a professor in one of our large universities, angered by the refusal of the president to raise his salary on his being called elsewhere, impatiently exclaimed, "Mr. President, you are banking on the devotion of us teachers, knowing that we do not willingly leave this place," the president properly replied, "Certainly, and no college can be managed on any other

principle." Professional men are not so silly as to despise money; but after all, it is interest in their work, and not the thought of salary, which predominantly holds them.

Accordingly in this paper I address those only who are drawn to teaching by the love of it, who regard it as the most vital of the Fine Arts, who intend to give their lives to mastering its subtleties, and who are ready to meet some hardships and to put up with moderate fare if they may win its rich opportunities.

But supposing such a temper, what special qualifications will the work require? The question asked thus broadly admits no precise answer; for in reality there is no human excellence which is not useful for us teachers. /No good quality can be thought of which we can afford to drop! Some day we shall discover a disturbing vacuum in the spot which it left. But I propose a more limited problem: what are those characteristics of the teacher without which he must fail, and what those which, once his, will almost certainly insure him success? Are there any such essentials, and how many? On this matter I have pondered long; for, teaching thirty-nine years in Harvard College, I have each year found out a little more fully my own incompetence. I have thus been forced to ask myself the double question, through what lacks do I fail, and in what direction

lie the roots of my small successes? Of late years I think I have hit on these roots of success and have come to believe that there are four of them, — four characteristics which every teacher must possess. Of course he may possess as many more as he likes, — indeed, the more the better. But these four appear fundamental. I will briefly name them.

First, a teacher must have an aptitude for vicariousness; and second, an already accumulated wealth; and third, an ability to invigorate life through knowledge; and fourth, a readiness to be forgotten. Having these, any teacher is secure. Lacking them, lacking even one, he is liable to serious failure. But as here stated they have a curiously cabalistic sound and show little relation to the needs of any profession. They have been stated with too much condensation, and have become unintelligible through being too exact. Let me repair the error by successively expanding them.

The teacher's art takes its rise in what I call an aptitude for vicariousness. As year by year my college boys prepare to go forth into life, some laggard is sure to come to me and say, "I want a little advice. Most of my classmates have their minds made up about what they are going to do. I am still uncertain. I rather incline to be a teacher, because I am fond of books and suspect that in any other profession

I can give them but little time. Business men do not read. Lawyers only consult books. And I am by no means sure that ministers have read all the books they quote. On the whole it seems safest to choose a profession in which books will be my daily companions. So I turn toward teaching. But before settling the matter I thought I would ask how you regard the profession." "A noble profession," I answer, "but quite unfit for you. I would advise you to become a lawyer, a car conductor, or something equally harmless. Do not turn to anything so perilous as teaching. You would ruin both it and yourself; for you are looking in exactly the wrong direction."

Such an inquirer is under a common misconception. The teacher's task is not primarily the acquisition of knowledge, but the impartation of it, — an entirely different matter. We teachers are forever taking thoughts out of our minds and putting them elsewhere. So long as we are content to keep them in our possession, we are not teachers at all. One who is interested in laying hold on wisdom is likely to become a scholar. And while no doubt it is well for a teacher to be a fair scholar, — I have known several such, — that is not the main thing. What constitutes the teacher is the passion to make scholars; and again and again it happens that the great scholar has no such passion whatever.

But even that passion is useless without aid from imagination. At every instant of the teacher's life he must be controlled by this mighty power. Most human beings are contented with living one life and delighted if they can pass that agreeably. But this is far from enough for us teachers. We incessantly go outside ourselves and enter into the many lives about us, — lives dull, dark, and unintelligible to any but an eye like ours. And this is imagination, the sympathetic creation in ourselves of conditions which belong to others. Our profession is therefore a double-ended one. We inspect truth as it rises fresh and interesting before our eager sight. But that is only the beginning of our task. Swiftly we then seize the lines of least intellectual resistance in alien minds and, with perpetual reference to these, follow our truth till it is safely lodged beyond ourselves. Each mind has its peculiar set of frictions. Those of our pupils can never be the same as ours. We have passed far on and know all about our subject. For us it wears an altogether different look from that which it has for beginners. It is their perplexities which we must reproduce and — as if a rose should shut and be a bud again — we must reassume in our developed and accustomed souls something of the innocence of childhood. Such is the exquisite business of the teacher, to carry himself back with all his wealth of knowledge and understand how his sub-

ject should appear to the meagre mind of one glancing at it for the first time.

And what absurd blunders we make in the process! Becoming immersed in our own side of the affair, we blind ourselves and readily attribute to our pupils modes of thought which are not in the least theirs. I remember a lesson I had on this point, I who had been teaching ethics half a lifetime. My nephew, five years old, was fond of stories from the Odyssey. He would creep into bed with me in the morning and beg for them. One Sunday, after I had given him a pretty stiff bit of adventure, it occurred to me that it was an appropriate day for a moral. "Ulysses was a very brave man," I remarked. "Yes," he said, "and I am very brave." I saw my opportunity and seized it. "That is true," said I. "You have been gaining courage lately. You used to cry easily, but you don't do that nowadays. When you want to cry now, you think how like a baby it would be to cry, or how you would disturb mother and upset the house; and so you conclude not to cry." The little fellow seemed hopelessly puzzled. He lay silent a minute or two and then said, "Well no, Uncle, I don't do that. I just go sh-sh-sh, and I don't." There the moral crisis is stated in its simplicity; and I had been putting off on that holy little nature sophistications borrowed from my own battered life.

But while I am explaining the blunders caused by

self-engrossment and lack of imagination, let me show what slight adjustments will sometimes carry us past depressing difficulties. One year when I was lecturing on some intricate problems of obligation, I began to doubt whether my class was following me, and I determined that I would make them talk. So the next day I constructed an ingenious ethical case and, after stating it to the class, I said, "Supposing now the state of affairs were thus and thus, and the interests of the persons involved were such and such, how would you decide the question of right, — Mr. Jones." Poor Jones rose in confusion. "You mean," he said, "if the case were as you have stated it? Well, hm, hm, hm, — yes, — I don't think I know, sir." And he sat down. I called on one and another with the same result. A panic was upon them, and all their minds were alike empty. I went home disgusted, wondering whether they had comprehended anything I had said during the previous fortnight, and hoping I might never have such a stupid lot of students again. Suddenly it flashed upon me that it was I who was stupid. That is usually the case when a class fails; it is the teacher's fault. The next day I went back prepared to begin at the right end. I began, "Oh, Mr. Jones." He rose, and I proceeded to state the situation as before. By the time I paused he had collected his wits, had worked off his superfluous flurry, and was ready to give me an admirable

answer. Indeed in a few minutes the whole class was engaged in an eager discussion. My previous error had been in not remembering that they, I, and everybody, when suddenly attacked with a big question, are not in the best condition for answering. Occupied as I was with my end of the story, the questioning end, I had not worked in that double-ended fashion which alone can bring the teacher success; in short, I was deficient in vicariousness, — in swiftly putting myself in the weak one's place and bearing his burden.

Now it is in this chief business of the artistic teacher, to labor imaginatively himself in order to diminish the labors of his slender pupil, that most of our failures occur. Instead of lamenting the imperviousness of our pupils, we had better ask ourselves more frequently whether we have neatly adjusted our teachings to the conditions of their minds. We have no right to tumble out in a mass whatever comes into our heads, leaving to that feeble folk the work of finding in it what order they may. Ours it should be to see that every beginning, middle, and end of what we say is helpfully shaped for readiest access to those less intelligent and interested than we. But this is vicariousness. *Noblesse oblige.* In this profession any one who will be great must be a nimble servant, his head full of others' needs.

Some discouraged teacher, glad to discover that