

SOME TASKS FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING

DURING this period of confusion and anxiety, with stability giving way to instability, certainties to uncertainties, and hopes to fears, the outbursts against education have been widespread and vigorous. Those attacks have been rather extraordinary. In other crises education was pointed to as the foundation of public well-being and public well-doing and the certain means of recuperation. It was cherished as the source of our national life. If the records of the past can be believed, this is the first time since the idea of public education began its slow but steady conquest of this country, that so many severe criticisms have been aimed at it.

Much that the teachers have been paid by the public to do has been violently assailed. The elementary school has been denounced as aimless and based upon false beliefs; its curriculum is said to be outworn and its teachers lacking in standards of discipline and guilty of the unpardonable sin of teaching unrealities. The secondary school has been called an expensive and inert fetish. Higher education has been pronounced degenerate. These charges have been made by the alleged friends of education and in many cases by high authority whose opinions are respected. Some intelligent and influential people have not only questioned but actually denied the validity of some of the principles accepted and settled in the public educational policy of every American commonwealth.

The loyalty and patriotism of teachers have recently been put to an unfortunate if not an unnecessary strain. But those who find themselves discouraged should recall the history of this country. That record

Abstract of an address before the Maryland State Teachers Association, Baltimore, October 22, 1932.

shows how we have overcome difficulties in the past and it should inspire faith in our capacity to overcome the difficulties of the present. Ideals and a resolute spirit have always triumphed over obstacles as stubborn as any we now face. The schools of this country are the children of idealism and resolution. Therefore, the present conditions should dispose us to earnest reflection.

Whether the recent and current criticisms are even partially justified, school teachers and managers are facing an extraordinary test of merit. A reevaluation of their work is being made. Teachers and school administrators are summoned as never before to do something and thus to demonstrate that they believe something. What seems to be a most disheartening period should be looked upon as a most inspiring opportunity for those who go about the villages of this country teaching. But we must fling ourselves at the hard task of defining our place in times like these. What all of us need to learn—the teachers and managers of the schools, those who sit in judgment upon their work, the parents and public—is that “ruin and recover alike are from within,” as Epictetus said in his golden manner many centuries ago.

In the past, it appears, teaching was looked upon by many people as a dedication; it called for faith and a conscious devotion to effort in the cause of public well-being, often with no assurance of adequate and comfortable material reward. This spirit and faith served to give to the work of teaching much of its finest quality and to keep it elevated above that blind materialism that is said to have gained so much strength in recent years.

How to preserve that quality in teaching and retain that lofty view of education is probably our most insistent task at the moment. There are signs that the present crisis is more than economic—that there is real danger of a moral and spiritual depression in education. It may be well for us to

consider whether we have not lost some of the idealism that characterized our work in the past. It would be very unfortunate indeed if the school workers of this country should feel themselves hemmed in, and unable to do more than complain, to console one another in their distress, to denounce, and to sit supinely by waiting for the final execution. And it would be cruel if the philosophy of defeatism now likely to spread among us should find its way to the children and young people whom we teach. We need to restore in ourselves and in them and their parents confidence in the value of the co-operative enterprise we call education. We must reaffirm our faith in our ability to arise and to lead the way out of confusion. We must refuse to be disheartened.

The forces of evil that we are expected to combat are numerous, belligerent, and stubborn. So have they always been. But if we are useful in helping to find a cure for our present democratic stagnation and social confusion, we must be more eager than ever before to leave the world better than we found it. We must also be prepared to endure hardness. Above all, we must make sure that our work is excellent.

We must do our level best to prevent the schools from sharing in the loss of idealism that life in general is said to have incurred. Perhaps it would be well for us to ask whether the schools suffer in aims and purposes from the get-educated-quick methods as our national life is said to suffer from the get-rich-quick philosophy; whether they can actually help in showing what really makes life worth while and what is really worth striving for by men.

Perhaps school teachers and managers and the public alike should inquire whether we have been promising too much in the name of schooling—whether we distinguish in our work clearly between schooling and education. Have we encouraged ourselves and the public to look upon the school as a

magical institution? It does appear that some of the claims made for the beneficence of schooling, popularly considered education, have been extremely high if not a trifle extravagant, especially within recent decades when public schooling reached its loftiest triumphs.

But it now appears that many of the promises made in the name of schooling are unfulfilled. We have mastered the forces of nature, but we are oppressed with a feeling of insecurity. We witness the almost unbelievable extent of poverty. We know that racketeers and gangsters thrive with the knowledge if not indeed the consent of public officials. It is hard to believe the evidence of unfaithfulness, incompetence, cowardice, suffering, crime, indifference, and the strength of the monopoly of mediocrity among governing authorities. In other days we were almost lyric in our praise of our educational arrangements. Now we are almost violent in our criticisms of them, for almost daily we are informed that the work of the schools and teachers has failed.

In the face of these conditions, those who lightly assume the function of school teachers or managers must take care. We should never lose sight of the fact that the essential needs and aspirations of men and women today are not unlike those needs and aspirations that perplexed our forefathers. Perhaps we should consider also the wisdom of disencumbering ourselves of any superfluous pedagogical luggage that impede our real progress, and indulge ourselves less in theoretical generalities. We must be less apt at rapid vanities. The cult of freedom, license, indifference, and easy optimism, and the growing vogue of toleration for almost any and everything in modern pedagogy may reflect our eagerness to have education in the mode of fashion.

It is important for those who teach to feel their feet beneath them, to have positive convictions, and to know for a cer-

14

tainty what men live by in this world. The great teachers and educational workers of the past gained and retained lofty conceptions of their work among their fellows; they had high views of the functions of teaching and consistently magnified their office. They knew that those whom they taught should carry away from their teaching increased powers of endurance and liberation from slavery, prejudice, irrational fear and passion and be equipped to face the vicissitudes of life. Above all, they knew that teachers can never give their students that which they themselves do not have. They believed that genuine teaching is an art that no rash hand may profane.

Perhaps at no time in our history has transitory pedagogical opinion played so large a part in our educational life as in recent years. Especially has the immediate, which is only a mere fragment of our past and of our future, held a large place in the realm of education. It seems within the limits of the facts to say that much of our current educational philosophy is a creature of the immediate moment, a condition that may make it difficult for schooling to enrich deeply or to sustain fully those who have access to it. Education without a definite, worthy purpose cannot long endure.

To be a teacher today and indifferent to social problems is to deny the claims of the future. In a real sense the teachers of this nation are the trustees of posterity. Their main task is to teach. But before teaching we must learn how to teach. We cannot teach with a certainty that which we do not ourselves possess. The command to teachers to discover what men live by in this world is not often written in the books on pedagogy. It is not found in our traditional and conventional codes on school teaching. But this command is nevertheless written plainly in the great constitution of the race and bears the weight of the unquestioned authority of humanity.

EDGAR W. KNIGHT

ART AND MORALS

AN AGE which gives reign to social imagination, marked by a rising sense of beauty, is now laying a great responsibility for moral leadership upon the arts, upon the humanities. There is even the disposition to make theirs the chief responsibility, on the easy assumption that religious sanctions have lost their power, and good taste must function in their place.

In an age of shifting standards, we welcome every ally in the war against evil, which knows no discharge, and in the reinforcement of the good life, personal and social. Science is a powerful ally. Aesthetics, apart from extravagant claims and with less of obvious power, goes further in the realm of spiritual insight. It shapes ideals and aspirations.

To give free scope to this power, beauty must be cultivated in our universities with as much seriousness and confidence as truth. That it may do its rightful work in the world, it must, like science, be cultivated in and of itself, without subservience to ulterior purposes, without subservience even to moral purposes.

It will be found, nevertheless, that science, art, and morals cannot be grown in separate compartments. The beauty that runs through science is not an unimportant aspect of science. On the other hand in this age, as never before, the results of science are material for art; while now as all the way down from the beginning the intuitions of beauty find their way to truth, outstripping logic and research.

Morals are bound up with both inseparably. The conditions of public morals are subject to all manner of scientific investigations; and art at its highest deals with human life as shot through and through with moral struggle, hope, and retribution, with love and death.—ELMER ELLSWORTH BROWN, Chancellor of New York University.