

"IN THE HEART OF A SEED" A Talk to Students

The following address was delivered by Richard L. Metcalfe on Washington's birthday before the students of Doane college at Crete Nebr:

"Those of us who are not too dignified to be human may find inspiration in the literature of the children. One who desired to arouse the imagination of the little ones wrote in homely verse: 'In the heart of a seed, buried deep, so deep, a dear little plant lay fast asleep. 'Wake!' said the sunshine, 'and creep to the light!' 'Wake!' said the voice of the raindrop bright. The little plant heard, and it rose to see what the wonderful outside world might be."

"Within the breast of every man and, of course, of every woman too, there are pure emotions that need but to be stirred, and great qualities that need but to be recognized in order to make the man or woman a potent power for good. As the little plant sleeping within the heart of the seed is summoned to duty by the sun and rain, so the great qualities in every human being are played upon by those mysterious forces which are ever operating in harmony with the eternal prayer of a troubled world: 'God give us men!'"

"To say that there are pure emotions and great qualities in every one does not mean that every one may be a genius, and fortunate, indeed, this is. Once upon a time it happened by mere accident that I was one of a party where every guest but myself was a genius. I was the only piece of common clay on hand, and I may add that I was not permitted to forget that fact. It was the most unsociable crowd I was ever in, and I dare say to you that during that evening of perhaps three hours I saw exhibited more enviousness and malice, and listened to more balderdash than I have ever witnessed or heard in all my experience with men. So it is well, after all, that every one cannot be a genius, but one may rise to the heights of real service when he strives, not to gain the temporary applause of the world, but rather to win its enduring respect by discharging his duty as citizen and man, according to that still, small voice within the breast which is constantly admonishing: 'Do this' and constantly warning: 'Don't do that!'"

"We owe our existence as a nation to men whose souls were awakened, perhaps primarily, because of the wrongs they had been required to endure; but from that awakening, which may have been due to anxiety for selfish interests, grew a broader consideration for the rights of all men and a larger concern for future generations. We are justified in believing that few who bore conspicuous part in the effort to sever the ties between Great Britain and the American colonies dreamed of the far-reaching results of their labors. But once aroused in defense of their own rights, it was but a short step to the recognition of the rights of others; and we know that the structure of government they built was not the work of a single day, nor of a single individual.

"A stranger ignorant of our history, and in attendance at a Fourth of July celebration, might conclude that the men who founded this government were one harmonious body of angelic creatures. He might imagine that the serenity of their existence was only disturbed when they dropped their wings long enough to seize a few rusty muskets and trounce an enemy to the tune of 'Yankee Doodle Dandy.'

"But 'the fathers,' as we affectionately call them, lacked a great deal of being harmonious. They even lacked something of being angelic. They had the same differences of opinion which we have today. They displayed the same intolerance which we show. They were mere men, having all the frailties with which we of the present generation are afflicted. They had dirty politics then as we have now. There were jealousies and malice among the politicians of those days as there are in our day. Men distinguished in the public service then, as now, were slandered; and then, as now, the partisan supporter exaggerated the virtues of his favorite statesmen, while the partisan opponent seized upon that statesman's smallest shortcomings to prove him unworthy of the people's confidence.

"Some of the stories told of the men of that day were 'human interest' stories, and if we were to judge these men by what some of their fellows said about them we would not care to give their portraits place in our homes. But we judge them rather by the composite picture provided by the deeds they wrought and by the character of the temple they erected in 'Liberty's unclouded blaze.' We judge them by that rule which we should be more willing to apply

to the men of our own day by being 'to their virtues ever kind and to their faults a little blind.' And in grateful recognition of the service they gave to liberty we stand uncovered at the mention of their names and kiss with reverential awe the holy emblem of the free.

"If some of the men of that day placed our heroes at too low a notch, we, of the present, make a mistake if we place them so high as to be beyond human ken. I never had great faith in that cherry-tree story, although I never regarded its accuracy as essential to the preservation of George Washington's fame. It might be difficult to persuade the American boy or girl of today that every one could reach the heights which Washington must have trod if he really 'acknowledged the corn' with the switch hanging over him. But there is inspiration for all boys and girls, and inspiration for all men and women, too, when they learn that in a decent, orderly way Washington discharged his duty as man, as citizen, as soldier and as president according to the dictates of his conscience.

"Of all the men of the revolutionary period Washington provides the best encouragement for the youth of today because by his lack of genius he is within our reach. He was not a dashing soldier like 'Mad Anthony' Wayne; he was not an orator like Patrick Henry; he was not a student of government nor an artist in giving expression to his thoughts like Thomas Jefferson; he was not a philosopher like Franklin, nor a financier like Hamilton. Perhaps among all the revolutionary figures he had the poorest education. Some even charged him with ignorance to the point of illiteracy, and it was often claimed by his enemies that he was unable to write his own public documents.

"But these charges are by the general agreement of reputable historians pronounced untrue, and in his farewell address—written unquestionably by himself—he showed the heights which a man, laying no claim to rhetoric, could reach when inspired by a holy zeal for the future of that great undertaking in the birth of which his had been a conspicuous part.

"As a soldier Washington was painstaking, capable, determined, brave. By the very lack of the dash that gave 'Mad Anthony' his sobriquet, by the very absence of the impulses which prompted other men to take undue risks, he became a successful commander of a poorly equipped army composed of poorly trained men, and proved to be the man of the hour in a military emergency. Where other men won applause as statesmen and financiers, he contributed, even in domains where he did not seem to shine, to the strengthening of our structure of government; and he left—apart from his glory as a soldier—an imprint upon our national character that serves even at this moment to remind us in a practical way of the things to be done by those who would perpetuate popular government.

"Admitting that Washington cannot be placed in the first rank among the world's great captains, and that as a statesman he must take a second place, Elson, who has recently published an attractive history of the United States says:

"Wherein lay Washington's greatness?"

He was not dashing, nor brilliant, nor original. His greatness consisted for the most part in his lofty motives, in his extraordinary sound judgment, and his unlimited courage when standing for a principle that he believed to be right. His patriotism was as pure as sunlight, and no element of selfishness entered into his motives. In all his public career he never made a serious mistake. As our first president he held himself above party lines, and amid the contending tempests of political passion he stood like a mighty oak in a storm; and his conservative strength was essential to the life of the infant republic.

"McMaster declares that while 'General Washington' or 'President Washington' is a well known man, Washington's true biography is still to be prepared. When at last Washington is set before us as he lived, McMaster says:

"Naught surely that is heroic will be omitted, but side by side with what is heroic will appear much that is commonplace. We shall behold the great commander repairing defeat with marvelous celerity, healing the dissensions of his officers, and calming the passions of his mutinous troops. But we shall also hear his oaths and see him in those terrible outbursts of passion to which Mr. Jefferson alluded, and one of which Mr. Lear

has described. We shall see him refusing to be paid for his services by congress, yet exacting from the family of the poor mason the shilling that was his due. We shall know him as the cold forbidding character with whom no fellow-man ever ventured to live on close and familiar terms. We shall respect and honor him for being, not the greatest of generals, not the wisest of statesmen, not the most saintly of his race, but a man with many frailties and much common sense, who rose in the fulness of time to be the political deliver of our country."

"To most of the men of his time Washington seemed a man of mystery. One writer in his day said: 'Something of stillness envelops the actions of Washington.' And another author in our time says: 'His contemporaries who met him during the revolution or during his terms of office seemed at a loss to account for his greatness; as if the man were constantly hiding behind his services.' But, as this same writer says: 'The farewell address is perhaps the most truthful portrait of him which remains, and that address is one of the most significant and important of historical documents because it embodies the very essence of a sober and faithful patriotism.' It had none of the earmarks of the politician; it was not written with the view of strengthening the writer's political fences; in Washington's own words, it was 'the disinterested warnings of a parting friend who can possibly have no personal motives to bias his counsel.'

"There is no need to dwell at length upon the farewell address. You have all read it and it will bear frequent reading by any one anxious to discharge his duty to his country. The warnings against extravagance with the public money, and the cultivation of sectionalism and factionalism; the protest against 'those over-grown military establishments which under any form of government are inauspicious to liberty and which are regarded as particularly hostile to republican liberty'; the admonition to be ever jealous for the preservation of the constitution and to be alert to prevent any effort to change that document through usurpation; the counsel that morality is an indispensable support of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity; the advice that institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge are objects of primary importance; the admonition to observe good faith and justice toward all nations, avoiding antipathies against any particular nation and passionate attachments for others; the particularly solemn way in which he warned us against the wiles of foreign influence, saying that we should resolutely set ourselves against every temptation to interweave our destiny with that of any part of Europe—these counsels are of special value to the American people today; and although in recent years we have, with various pretexts, been led into the very paths against which Washington warned us, the good sense of the American people will yet so operate as to rivet the attention of our public men upon that feature of the farewell address warning us of the very pitfalls which are today in the path of our national progress.

"It has, of course, often occurred to you as significant that many of the speeches and writings delivered by men famous in our history and given with respect to the conditions of the long ago, apply with equal force today. This quality 'of being not of an age but for all time' which Ben Jonson ascribed in a literary sense to Shakespeare is very true in a political sense of the men of the revolutionary period.

"The student must be impressed with the remarkable foresight of these men.

"Hamilton, whose peculiar views as to government we may not endorse, saw more clearly than his distinguished associates the tendency of the masses toward indifference, and sometimes ignorance, with respect to their privileges and their duties as citizens. While Hamilton's views on this point have not, on the whole, been justified, experienced politicians say that after more than one hundred years of American progress, along the lines of popular government, the catchy phrase and the big barrel have done more to win elections than all the solemn and profound arguments that have been advanced.

"Washington was able to foresee the disastrous operation of sectionalism, and from the large attention he gave that subject in his farewell address, we are justified in believing that he foresaw the complications resulting in our Civil war.

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