DANGER OF TOO MUCH SYSTEM IN EDUCATION, AS OPPOSED TO THE REAL TRAINING THAT COMES FROM DIRECT EXPERIENCE

INDUSTRIAL training, such as will fit our boys and girls to bear their full share in the work of the world, is a question that is now being brought very definitely before our people. Our own backwardness in this respect is contrasted most unfavorably with the progress made by certain European nations, and it is prophesied that our commercial prestige will inevitably suffer diminution if we do not take some measures to bring up a new generation of workers as highly skilled as those of the foreign countries which are held up to us as examples. Also, the need for greater interest in farming and for more energy and intelligence in the pursuit of agriculture is urged upon us at every hand. The Government, through the manifold activities of the Department of Agriculture, is placing at the disposal of the farmer the results of all manner of scientific research, and the plan for establishing a national system of agricultural schools keeps pace with the plan for adding industrial training schools to our present public school system.

All these efforts are unquestionably in the right direction, and the investigations and experiments carried on by some of the most able men in the country cannot result otherwise than in a better understanding of present conditions and, ultimately, in a great improvement of our educational methods. Nevertheless, it seems to me that one point is in danger of being neglected, namely, that in the effort to perfect our present system of education up to the last degree of practical efficiency, we are apt to lose sight of the fact that too much system is a hindrance rather than an aid to natural growth and development and that where there is an abundance of education there is apt to be a paucity of real learning. We all know what the primitive district schools a generation or two ago did toward the development of the nation. But do we know just why the little red schoolhouse, with its meager equipment, turned out leaders of men, while our present elaborate educational system fails, in the vast majority of instances, to give to the student that mental stimulus which induces him to seek knowledge for its own sake and to apply it to all the affairs of life?

To me the answer is plain. The more primitive schooling that our fathers had was almost entirely suggestive in its nature. There was just enough of it to whet the appetite for more, and both boys and girls—especially those brought up on the farm—encountered in daily life problems that they were eager to solve. It was considered a privilege to go to school and many a boy worked hard all summer and did chores for his board and lodging in the winter time in order to gain the coveted winter’s schooling. That boy did not go to school because he was compelled by his parents or the truant officer to do
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so. He went because he wanted to know things; because he wanted to add to the lessons learned from his own daily experience a knowledge of the discoveries and achievements of great men; the history of nations which have left their impress upon the world, and enough of the exact sciences to enable him to use his own brain to the best advantage in doing the work which he himself had to do. Therefore, although the curriculum was but meager in comparison with that of today, it gave the essentials of learning and—which is much more important—cultivated the habit of study and investigation that resulted in the practical alertness of mind which has come to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of the American.

This was what happened when few things were done in our schools and done thoroughly. Education now, in spite of all the pains taken to make it suggestive, is almost entirely imitative, but under the more primitive conditions that prevailed in those days, it was genuinely suggestive in its relation to life. We talk learnedly of the efficiency of this system or that, and balance industrial or vocational training against that of a purely cultural nature, but we lose sight of the fact that the main purpose of any kind of education is to teach children how to live. That, in doing this, it should teach them how to work goes without saying, for work—by means of which we sustain life and without which there would be no growth—lies at the foundation of everything and should be the first object of any kind of training.

While it must be admitted that work now is a very different thing from what it was a generation or so ago and that methods must change with changing conditions, yet it would seem that to pile system upon system and to train skilled workers to machine-like perfection, at the expense of individual development, is hardly the way to bring about a healthy national development. Nature demands room for growth, and growth comes only as the result of actual experience in the overcoming of obstacles and the conquer-
to give us tools with which to work; that it is only through our own experience that we progress and that the best way to gain this experience is not to trouble about theories and methods of education, but to teach each youngster to go to work and do something and to regard each thing done as the stepping-stone to whatever comes next.

We have been so proud of our rapid growth, our great achievements and our borrowed culture that I am aware that it is a large undertaking to convince the American people that the simpler conditions are, after all, the most genuinely and permanently progressive. To hold such a point of view would involve nothing less than the entire revolutionizing of our attitude toward life; but I have faith to believe that this revolution will yet come to us and that our national common sense will lead us, not in the direction of ironclad system such as prevails in Germany, for example, but in the direction of individual development such as belongs to a youthful and vigorous national life.

NOTES

Mrs. Fiske is a great woman,—unquestionably the greatest upon the American stage today. And in “Salvation Nell” she has a great play,—a play that shows humanity in the raw, and human passions, struggles and weaknesses stripped of every merciful veil of convention, tradition and the self-control which comes from knowledge and fear of what people will say. It is the kind of play of which the average theater-goer will say: “What is the use of it? It is not amusing; it is not pretty; it is not instructive,—and when I go to the theater, I go for recreation or for instruction. I can see this kind of life any time that I want to go over to Tenth Avenue or down around the docks, and it is the kind of life about which I would rather my women-folk knew nothing.” All very true,—one would not go to see “Salvation Nell” for the purpose of gaining an hour’s amuse-