A DEMOCRATIC VIEW OF EDUCATION: BY WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

THOMAS JEFFERSON, who seems to be the father of our American democracy, also seems to have been the father of the elective system in American colleges. The elective system was educational dynamite. Before Jefferson's day the education of a gentleman was fixed. It required a certain amount of Latin, a certain amount of Greek, a certain amount of mathematics, a dash of Hebrew and a drop of philosophy, the mixture being as rigid as to formula as a mint julep. The youth who swallowed the educational concoction were educated; all other youth were not. Jefferson added modern languages, physics, a study of natural phenomena, government, law and ideology. And he made most of these subjects elective. With the coming of the elective system of higher education the classical triumvirate—Latin, Greek and mathematics—abdicated in favor of the Democracy. Education ceased to be a formula and became an influence. But economic forces stopped the growth of the elective system in America until after the Civil War; and after the War the country witnessed the rise of the industrial democracy and the progress of more truly democratic higher education.

During the three months just passed all America, young and old, has had its nose in the college catalogue. It is a wilderness of monkeys if there ever was one. Fathers and mothers devoutly wish their children to have what is called an education. But the more college catalogues father reads the surer and surer he becomes that there is no such thing as an education. The elective system introduced by Mr. Jefferson has been elaborated until it includes every conceivable branch of investigation. If a B.A. degree from a standard college or State university is an education, it may be obtained with the widest latitude. A State university like that of Kansas—one of the big State schools, with over two thousand five hundred students—has but four required subjects for the B.A. degree—English, rhetoric, hygiene and physical culture—though in Kansas University sixty year-hours of work are required upon the studies to be elected in the course. But even the number of hours
of work necessary for the B.A. degree varies in our State universities from fifty-two in Virginia to seventy-one in Florida. And the tendency in higher education, in the State universities and in the colleges is to veer further and further from any standard. Looking over the catalogues of the leading colleges and universities of America, one is surprised to find how far removed are the courses which young men and women may and do elect for this degree of Bachelor of Arts. And the thing that gives the fond parent, trained in the straight-jacket of the sixties and seventies, the creeps, is the wide variety of things once believed to be essential, that the youth today may ignore and still march forth from the university with the rank and insignia, privileges and emoluments of an educated gentleman. Democracy is saying with all the emphasis possible in all the college catalogues that education is for use, not for adornment; and as a corollary we may infer that man is made for use and not for show. Education seems to be in a state of confusion, possibly preceding some period of coherent organization; but while it is reasonably true that there is no such thing as an education—definitely and certainly prescribed today, yet we may be well assured that when it is declared and set, education will be more of a handsaw than a plume. It will be cultural only as it is vocational. It will fit men and women to live and aspire as workers—not as drones. That much Thomas Jefferson did when he deposed the classical triumvirate.

THEREFORE at the coming of the harvest season, after we have had our summer’s course in the unsolvable puzzle of the college catalogue, and after the winnowings of the harvest have been invested in college haberdashery and college banners and the chaff in college books and impedimenta, it may be well to pause for a moment and to inquire with an humble and a contrite heart—what is the proper education for a democracy? We may not hope to define it. But we may hope to consider education in its relation to a democracy, and we may then reach down with the consecrated ballots and help such poor devils as are delaying progress by lagging behind.

We must not expect the coming of democracy to change human nature; though it may change the exterior forces that play upon human nature. But men always must have leaders. The qualities of men differ so widely that there may be no equality save that of social inheritance—that is, equality of youthful opportunity. But the leaders of their fellows—men with those widened perceptive faculties that make for high quality, must be leaders in a democ-
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racy, by reason of their quality, not leaders by mere chance of birth or fortune. The schools of democracy must solve this problem. They must develop the latent qualities of leadership in men, and at the same time breed into the social body the talent for recognition of wise leaders. To establish a system of education that will make men useful, and at the same time make them wise enough to choose leaders who will shrewdly direct the usefulness of the masses—that is the problem of democracy. Will not a plan help that will insure an approximate of justice in the schoolroom by promoting industry and sincerity in youth? Vocational work, honestly graded and arranged so that promotion may go as a reward of exceptional industry and sincerity, must be given to those who by their limited qualities always must be followers. It is also necessary to develop leaders; but will not the same plan that rewards inferior humanity according to its merits, the plan that promotes for qualities of industry and sincerity, also stimulate high qualities? It is a difficult problem. But if democracy is to prevail this problem must be solved. Let us restate it: We must promote social justice; to do that requires men and women who know what social justice is and who can tell it to the people in any crisis; and second we must develop in the masses an enthusiasm for social justice so sufficiently unselfish that they will recognize it in spite of their self-interest, and follow wise leaders at whatever temporary sacrifice, when the general welfare demands it. We must put into each that spirit of abnegation that controls men in war. We must educate men worthy of a great people and a people worthy of great men. That is humanity's puzzle; no one knows the answer now. But there is an answer. Democracy is one side of the equation. The answer is the other side. And to quote Captain Cuttle: "When found, make a note of."

To realize the aspiration of democracy must be the chief business of education. It must pour into society men and women capable of sustaining a sane wholesome public sentiment; for without vision the people perish. To encourage righteous public sentiment men and women in their youth must be inculcated with a spirit of industry, with a feeling for justice amounting to enthusiasm, and with a kind of indomitable sincerity that marked the old Puritans. The public schools as they stand do not produce the citizenship needed for the work ahead of the country. The spirit of sham in them that mocks justice, is the theory that everyone is educated to be a prince or a princess. The grades aim at the high school, the high school aims at the Bachelor's degree, in the college the Bachelor's degree is pointed at the Master's degree, and that, at the Doc-
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tor's, and the Doctor's degree is tipped toward the clouds. That is hitching one's wagon to the stars; but it is neglecting the good roads movement on earth—which is highly important.

EDUCATION must prepare for the life that is to be lived. It must be in a sense vocational. It must not teach even by implication, the "degradation of hard work." Yet by example, as well as by precept, youth is taught that the gentleman is the idler. Schools must teach industry. But to teach men to work, the rewards of work must be sure. The snap course makes drones. And the snap course is the bane of the elective system; and today the elective system begins in the grades. A snap course is a snap teacher—one who either because he is lazy or vain "gives good grades." The child who sees that he can get good grades for easy work will have a low opinion of human justice, no matter how it is preached at him. Grades must be uniform. The law of averages teaches us that the few who are absolutely perfect and the few who absolutely fail, form the same small per cent.; that those who do excellently and those who do poorly, form another per cent., a little larger than the perfect ones and the failures, and that those who do fairly well and fairly ill, form the great bulk of humanity. Why should not this fact be brought into the classroom; and every teacher be allowed a certain per cent. of perfect marks in a hundred to correspond with the absolute failures; a somewhat larger per cent. for those who are excellent and those who all but fail, and a much larger per cent. for the tolerably good and the tolerably bad. Would not this end snap courses? Would it not in some measure stop favoritism? Would it not implant a belief in justice in the minds of youth that this country needs in its progress?

Another thing: in school, boys and girls should be taught by every mechanism of the system that good work pays better than poor work. As it stands, it takes the tolerably bad student and the excellent student the same number of years to go through the grades into the high school and through college into life. Aside from the injustice of this plan, consider how it propagates laziness by rewarding it. Does not the system of counting equally for promotion every grade except absolute failure, instil in youth the belief that life is a lottery? Suppose that the student who does excellent work—perfect work—in every branch might be graduated from the grades into the high school and from the high school into the college and from the college into life two or three years ahead of his easy-going fellows—all accomplished from a system of grades based not upon the temperament of teachers of snap or hard courses, but
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upon the law of human averages; would there not be an immense gain in the moral sense of that youth? All about him he would see industry rewarded. He would see justice prevail, and he would see that sincerity counts. What an important lesson! For sincerity is one of the few things that does count for ultimate happiness in life. It may be demonstrated that it makes little difference in a youth’s education what studies he elects; he may choose a classical course, a scientific course, a business course, a philosophical course—or what not, and succeed or fail, according to the sincerity he puts in and the character he takes out of his work. For it is not what, but how well; not the facts he acquires, but the habits he forms which make the character that marks out his career. And if the educational system from the grades through college tempts him to snap courses, to shoddy work, to believe in the value of indolence, of trickery, of shams—what kind of a citizen is he going to make in a crisis that demands fundamental faith in the triumph of industry through justice and sincerity?

The problems affecting this democratic movement will not be solved by young men coming from the schools imbued with the damnable doctrine “what’s the use?” Cynicism is an intellectual sloth. It is a moral atrophy, that expressed in public opinion becomes a social leprosy. Is not our educational system based upon the sham that manual work is degrading? Is it not erected upon a plan that permits favoritism, and offers no substantial rewards to sincere effort to achieve? Will it not pour into the democracy millions whose pessimistic folly may poison the wells on the way to progress?

But after we have established something like justice in the school system, it will be necessary to teach youth more practical things than are now generally taught. Having implanted in the boy or girl a conviction of the righteousness of industry, justice and sincerity, it is necessary to make youth effective.

Consider at least what education should not be in a democracy, and determine some of the ideals of democracy to be fostered by education. For education—whatever it is—must be the most potent weapon in the hands of the prophets and dreamers who are striving in a sad world to realize the day of the psalmist when “the needy shall not be forgotten,” and “the expectation of the poor shall not perish.”

IT WILL be well in this discussion to define our terms. Let us, therefore, call education that influence which prepares adolescence for the employment of the full measure of its inherited capacity, remembering always that man’s inheritance is twofold,
physical and social. Let us call democracy that ideal form of society that guarantees to the individual equality of opportunity for useful happiness, remembering always that while character in a large measure controls human happiness, the environment of man often directs character. Therefore the education of a democracy must be that influence which trains the body and the mind of youth so that men and women generally may be happy; presuming, of course, that to be happy they must be in the environment wherein they may enjoy their highest economic use. So much for our problem and its terms.

The coming of democratic forms into European and American civilizations seems to be inevitable. The movement toward self-government as opposed to delegated government is as strong in Europe and Australia as in America. Everywhere in Christendom power is falling from the representative into the hands of those who are represented. The representative who remains in public life remains as a messenger bringing the registered convictions of some one else. Freedom of choice is bestowed upon public men in smaller and smaller measure. The atrophy of the electoral college in America is spreading. Legislatures are instructed by the voters how to vote for senatorial candidates, and the congress itself through the rise of the party system is become less and less deliberative and more and more mechanical. The individual in the masses is acquiring strength; crass majorities are conquering cunning minorities.

But to what end? There is nothing essentially good in democratic forms. The politics of the world are struggling to gain engines of popular powers, but there is nothing righteous in them merely because they are large, or because they are accurate in their register; for unless the rule of the exact majority approaches justice more nearly than the rule of the minority, the world will profit nothing by the democratic movement. Moreover, unless the institutions of democracy are manned by a militant righteousness, they will be turned against the masses. Exalting the man in the crowd, gives power to the men who control the man in the crowd. It will be found as easy to beat the democratic game as it is to beat the representative game, unless we put something besides self-interest in the ballot box.

FOR man is a gregarious brute. Every year his faculties for organization are becoming stronger. Circles outside of circles, groups of groups, and groups of groups of groups are continually forming. Self-interest has proved a potent glue; it holds men together in the partnership, the company, the corporation, the trust, the community of interests. In commerce this irrepressible
spirit of organization based upon the faith of men in one another to conserve mutual self-interests, has organized every great industry into a marvel of economic perfection. In American politics, the party system similarly has organized men, drilled them, inspired them with faith in the party as a means to their own ends, until American partisans are drilled better than Napoleon’s soldiers. It was inevitable and—according to the ideals of the time and the place—altogether commendable that the two great organizations, business and politics, should merge. For half a score of years commerce has financed politics; politics has protected business. The two organizations ran the country. It was a great and not at all blameworthy scheme—if one believes that self-interest, enlightened or unenlightened, is a sufficient motive to govern the destinies of this world.

The altruistic spirit of the average man was the sand in that vast machine of government by the benevolent despotism of commerce. In the past ten years that sand has broken cogs, worn down bearings, and twisted cams, so that today the machine seems almost ready for the scrap pile. Democracy, which appears to be altruism trying to express itself in terms of government, has been moved by the spirit of organization. Democracy is now forming groups outside of groups, rings beyond rings, inner and outer powers. Its aim is to dominate politics and thereby control commerce; to become a great enveloping circle, embracing the merging circles of business and politics. Democracy would not destroy the inner wheels of commerce and politics; it would harness their power and direct it toward the common good. The organizations of commerce, such as companies, corporations, combinations, trusts and communities of interests have more good than bad in them. They represent the faith of humanity in itself. They are as necessary and as powerful as the spirit of democracy, indeed they manifest the spirit of democracy, but today they are hitched to the wrong belt; the problem of democracy is to change the belt without stopping the machine; to make these great organizations of industry and these other mighty organizations of politics pull more and more of the load of the general welfare.

For the common sense of the people tells them that something is out of gear in the economic machine. Nature is impartial. Babies of a given race are born equal; the vices of the rich are about as bad on babies as the vices of the poor. But the social inheritance often is stolen from the baby in the tenement and given to the baby in the mansion. No one pretends that if the stations of life would change babies, the following generation would change
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stations. Disparity of environment makes inequality of opportunity in youth, and that inequality of youthful opportunity rests as a blight upon the individual. The environment of the slum or the environment of the normal home casts the die for the average child. Social environment is entirely a human device. The environment of the slum is a remediable condition. Democracy sees this. It is forced upon the average man day after day, that certain industrial conditions are abnormal, that they are purely artificial, and that it is the business of the average man to remove these conditions. So he is whetting the tools of democracy, whistling hopefully as he contemplates his job. He is taking more and more political power directly into his own hands for a purpose, but the purpose is not political—it is social and economic. The subconscious mind of the civilized world recognizes the evils that have accumulated with the growth of industrial organization, and civilized humanity proposes to remedy those evils. The coming century will see marvels of justice as wonderful as the marvels of industrial enterprise that crowned the last century. The norms or standards are in the public mind today. The industrial evils of today are not merely local evils; they are as universal as the use of steam, spreading over civilization. And the aspiration to cure those evils is also distributed throughout the world. Broadly speaking the aspirations of democracy of today seem to be these:

1. Public utilities must be sold impartially at cost under public supervision; public utilities are transportation, fuel, communication, power and water; also their by-products and probably the land itself.

2. As society guarantees certain capital wisely and honestly invested in necessary industries a living rate of interest, so certain kinds of honestly and wisely directed necessary labor should be sure of a living wage.

3. Society must bear through increased prices of commodities the waste and wear of labor in sickness, accident and death due to the peculiarities of any useful industry.

4. To conserve the public health the hours of labor and the kinds of labor of women and children must be rigorously controlled by society.

5. The collective bargaining of labor with capital, insured under public supervision, and the rights of capital to combine must be equally and similarly safeguarded.

6. When by industrial necessity labor is congested, or when by specialization the laborer loses his general manual skill, society should see to it that the laborer’s hours are short, that he is pro-
vided with a decent home at a reasonable rent, and that he has places and means of public recreation and public libraries for his intellectual improvement.

This is not an unreasonable program. Every demand of it is now in successful operation in some part of the civilized world. The whole program has already penetrated the politics of every country in Christendom and is being thoroughly discussed in our cities, our States and the Federal Government here in America. Much of it has been achieved by us. Yet, as a completed program, it is not so simple as it seems. For while here and there a part may be written into law, when all these propositions are made a part of our life, an economic evolution will have been accomplished.

To accomplish this industrial change, it must be done with justice to all. And to show that justice, a greater social intelligence than we now have is needed, and a deeper sense of social responsibility. To acquire that deeper, wider social morality among the masses must be the work of education in our democracy. For, no matter what weapons of democracy we have now, to proclaim this program today would invite public calamity. To complete that program and to make it work successfully will require a sense of public restraint, a feeling of social justice, that we may find only in another and a wiser generation. For we must not hope to pass a few laws, however just, and thereby be transported to the millennium with a hop, skip and jump. The spasmodically benevolent democracy can do little more than the spasmodically benevolent despot. Social evolution is slow. Permanent gain in social institutions depends less upon the result of any particular election today than it depended upon battles in the old days. How slow men are to learn that social institutions determine elections and battles; countless millions hope for a better day; many millions believe in a better day; a few millions earnestly desire a better day, but the world must jog on in the old rut until the desire of the few becomes the passion of the multitude. Institutions grow only as men put emotion into their common sense. When the man on the street is willing to sacrifice some real, vital part of his life for an idea, anxious to be taxed for it, then say it is public sentiment. Until the program of democracy is public sentiment, it is the mere shadow of a dream.

What the youth learns, must help him to live—to get all out of life that his capacity warrants. The man who thinks must do it at his leisure; he must do his stint of work in the least time if he expects to be worth much to public opinion. Education in a democracy must offer to the boy or girl something
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concrete; it must help him in his daily life. It appears from our school statistics that about one-tenth of our American population over ten years of age is illiterate. This is much more than the per cent. of illiterates in Germany, Switzerland, in France and England. Moreover, the American schools do not hold the children. Of one thousand children who start to school in our American cities, nine hundred and forty-four drop out before finishing high school. And a competent authority has testified that "the most potent reason why children are in the factory is the school system." Our schools fail to interest a vast majority of our boys and girls after the age of fourteen. Andrew S. Draper complains that "our elementary schools train for no industrial employments; they lead to nothing better than the secondary schools which in turn lead to the college." Seven-eighths of the American children never enter high school.

The end of all schools—high and low—must be life or public education will fail, and the fabric of democracy rests upon education. To aim at a cultural target and hit it once in a thousand times with a waste of the other shots, is folly. We may with propriety and good sense keep all that is cultural in our educational system. There is always need of it. But in keeping the cultural part of our education, we must provide also for the practical, the vocational. Industry has been revolutionized. Machines are making everything. Boys and girls used to leave school to learn trades; but today there are few trades to learn. Boys and girls now leave school to watch great machines do the work that their fathers did as apprentices. Industrial life demands specialists, men and women who can do one thing expertly. Our schools are not supplying the demand. They are turning youths from the grades into the streets or factories and from the high schools into the stores and offices to make what their class-conscious fellows call "the poor plutes." And how many of them we know are poor plutes indeed; afraid of losing caste by manual work, spending all their scant earnings upon "appearances," place-seeking, unscrupulous, social climbers, their humanity squeezed and soured, they are skimping, fretting, covetous, jealous failures. We put more money into our schools than into any other public institution. We are unselfish enough, heaven knows, and we mean well. But as matters stand aren't we kowtowing more than we should to the pale god of a false respectability? He is a sham god and he loves shams. Yet unless education makes men and women who know shams and hate them, education is a failure. The children of democracy some way must be taught how to live well and see the truth. They must work themselves into a better environment than their fathers knew.

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Race histories are repeated in the individual, and the story of life is pictured in our human social organism. Life's first forms are those in the instinctive group, fixed and unprogressive, inheriting everything, learning nothing; its secondary form is the plastic group that learns by imitation, that has a social as well as a physical heritage; this group learns something, not much. But when imagination enters the group men stand up and walk. Over and over during the ages in human social organization these groups are repeating themselves; men who do the rough hard work motivated for the most part instinctively grope in darkness; men above who see some small light and know the pattern of their caste form the middle group, while a little lower than the angels stand God's messengers, the inventors and dreamers, the poets, prophets and martyrs, the great democrats and saviours of men. Slowly through the ages the tide of life has been rising. Those whose work in life kept them always upon the edge of physical need, those to whom a large number of motives, instincts and habits were biological rather than social are coming into a higher type of life. Comfort is replacing necessity in their scheme of things. The plastic or social group is enlarging. It dominates the world. And the earth is filled with leaders, men of constructive imagination who are quickening civilization. The absolutism of kings led men from barbarism; the power of the nobles led men from ignorance; democracy should lead them from poverty. Let us hope that this century will see the last of the belief that starvation is needed as a prod to make men work. It is as foolish to maintain the slum as a social or industrial necessity as it was to keep the Bible a sealed book. Chronic poverty among a civilized people is as wicked and foolish as chronic ignorance, and the fact that illiteracy and poverty are twins should make us think. Perhaps ignorance causes poverty and poverty reacting causes ignorance. Teach men to read and they will aspire; teach them to aspire and they will work; guarantee them a living wage and they will rise. Poor folks have poor ways—exactly, but you may not starve people into thrift. It has been tried for ages and has failed. A book and a bath and a steady job will make a worthier citizen than all the laws of supply and demand freezing his fingers, breaking his wife and starving his children. While there are thousands of idle acres and thousands of hungry men looking for work, while there is a closed mine and a freezing family anxious to earn a living, while there is a hungry man and a rotting crop, it is grotesque to talk of the inexorable laws of supply and demand. The conditions that make many men rich as we all know are partly artificial. The same artificial conditions make other men poor.
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One man gets what he does not earn from society which takes from a thousand others the right to get what they do earn. There are, of course, personal injustices in the world due to character; but where there is class injustice it is due to ignorance. The school teacher must precede the judge into the slums before class wrongs may be righted and it is one of the enigmas of democracy to bring the school teacher to the slums, to bring truth to those who need it. For after all democracy is an experiment. It must be tried in fear and trembling. The establishment of democratic forms will avail nothing unless we have the democratic spirit—the spirit of altruism. To give men power who have a world-old grievance is merely to invite vengeance and anarchy. But give them wisdom, give them an enthusiasm for social justice and they will generate their own power and use it in the fear of God. Education that teaches men merely to read and write and figure, is not sufficient. Real education must teach men to sift the false from the true; without that education democracy will be the mockery of the ages. And to detect a sham, men must cease being shams. To know the truth, one must live the truth. The world will not be ready for democracy any more than it was ready for Christ, until the masses are ready to be fair to those who seem to have wronged them. Until those who believe they are oppressed desire something more than the right of oppression for themselves, democracy will right no wrongs. Liberty, equality, fraternity will be a phantasm of rhetoric, until industry, sincerity and justice control humanity. In short, it all amounts to this: until we can organize in laws the altruism of the world in a practical working plan of applied righteousness, as the egoism of the world is organized in combinations of capital, democracy must be merely an aspiration. Men must cease to serve to live and begin to live to serve. This is the truth they must have before they can be free. The great servants of men have been its great democrats. They lived life to the full because they served to their capacity. All men must know something of this before they may be liberated. Education must teach it by example as well as by precept. Laws will do something—a little; they will change the sordid environment of hopeless men and that will help some. But education—education that teaches men to do their best and live their wisest, education that gives man a love of industry, justice, sincerity—that must save. That education must be the hope of democracy. It must teach men the restraint that makes for social justice, it must bring them the freeing truth which shall lead them into that abundant life for which our Greatest Democrat gave His.