THE REWARD OF LABOR

YOUNG men went very often to the late John Bigelow to ask his advice about the ways of attaining success in life. John Bigelow was in the main a wise man, a very successful man, and a man who had won the respect of both hemispheres. And yet so complex are our present economic conditions in America that on one occasion he gave the following advice to a young friend: "Save money," he said; "put aside this money every week in the bank, so that when you are middle-aged you will be independent and can turn away from earning your living and be useful."

"Turn away from earning your living and be useful." These are the exact words, I understand, that Mr. Bigelow used. And these words must have been born from the widest experience of life, because they were uttered a short time before his death, and he died at the age of ninety-four. He must have known life very well; he must have known young people very well. What words could be used that would be a more terrific denunciation of modern business conditions,—a more serious accusation of commercial futility, of vast human waste!

What has happened to us as a nation, to our ideals, to our sense of values, that we can no longer be useful and earn our living at the same time? In what way are most of us earning our living that we must put aside labor as undignified, unworthy, when we become wise and middle-aged in order that we may amount to something?

Formerly the busy people proved their worth by the kind of work they did. We remember Sir Christopher Wren by the cathedrals he built, not by the ways in which he spent his declining years. We think of Rembrandt not in connection with his views on social and political conditions, because he was interested in all matters as an older man, but as a worker, a painter, an etcher, a goldsmith. The world’s estimate of great men really begins and ends with the period of their activity. How do we recall Wagner? Surely we think of him as the overworked, heart-broken man who gathered in the hidden melodies of the singing earth, not in the later days of his leisure, when he was argumentative and wrote biographies.

Yes, these men were artists, but that does not make any difference, for all good artists are hard workers, and the best work the hardest, and their value to the world is because through their work they have been able to express the vision of their souls. The men who have accomplished, who have left records of what they saw and felt in life, were not waiting to stop work in order to accomplish great things. Theirs was the sane, right valuation of life that made success inherent in labor, a man’s achievement depending upon the quality of his daily toil. There is no other high standard of usefulness and success than that based on personal achievement through individual endeavor. No man can be of value to the world who has not first of all proved his capacity to be useful to himself. If a man has made his work sincere, progressive, productive, his own personality will grow with the development of his work, and he will find himself opening up pathways of value not only for himself, but for others, and this is the way, the only way, that a man may be useful to the world.

We have slowly grown to realize that the success of a scientific civilization must depend very largely upon its capacity for producing wealth, that in spite of intent to hold to civic and personal ideals, money has more or less become the terrible, dazzling "ideal" for which here in America we are all struggling. We often forget what we want it for, or what use it can be to us, or the fact that it is merely a symbol of the most valuable thing, work. And we debase work, we put it into vicious channels for the sake of acquiring its symbol, and then we use the symbol to gain conditions which are valueless, which have no relation to the essential development in life. We have gone to the point, many of us, where for the sake of this money we are not only willing to give our labor, but to sell our strength, our conscience, our spirituality, and in the end all we can do with the money is to conform to social conditions that are born out of the misuse of money.

This is why Mr. Bigelow grew to believe that the only way a man could do good works was to get away from the conflict between the spiritual and the material, take his bank account, and try to develop his ideals. But I feel that this is impossible. A man could no more develop his ideals in later life than he could with a weakened body and constitution suddenly start to build up vital, glowing health. He may turn his face toward ideals instead of toward financial conflict; he
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may exercise his flabby muscles instead of weakening them, but right spiritual and physical growth must be involved in the whole course of life. A man's later life is but a reflection of his early days, and as in America the early manhood of most men must be spent in labor, there is no possibility of final spiritual development that is not a part of the man's work. It must be inherent in it. We must learn the one fact, that as we work, we are; that work is not a means of livelihood, but life itself. We have no right to debase it, to use it as a vulgar currency. It is the essence of life, not a means of exchange for prolonging life. It is only in our present civilization that work has been made a mean and unholy thing, where men do the least they can, in the worst way they can, and hope for the greatest return for it. For ages and ages men stood in relation to civic life according to their work.

Of course, we realize that it may be better for a man's declining years to be turned toward what he thinks is useful than for it to be spent in idleness and weariness; but more often than not, these belated ideals of usefulness will not be very practical or very valuable either to the man or to the people with whom he experiments. For usually the middle-aged gentleman who suddenly decides to be useful turns his unformed idealism into a career of philanthropy. In other words, he attempts to meddle in the affairs of the workers, whom he does not understand, and more often than not he unfitts them for their own career of work, and renders them at least, if not idle, dissatisfied.

And this state of society must continue so long as we regard money as success, so long as we feel that the spiritual is something which can be approached when a man's income is secured, so long as we expect nothing in return for our life's work but a bank account. Mainly in life we get that for which we seek most earnestly. If it is achievement through work, we become in our own way, great or small, a part of the progress of the world. If we are willing to sell our great heritage (the divine right to labor) for a mess of pottage in a gold bowl, we will find it hard suddenly to reclaim that heritage after we have sacrificed our lives to our gold standards. For the sordid pursuit of wealth involves the sacrifice of those very qualities which are essential to a life of usefulness,—qualities of courage and patience and self-restraint and abstinence, wise self-sacrifice, and still wiser reticence. These fine perfections of the soul we do not take up at will; we get them through the training of our spiritual natures from the beginning of life. And when the time comes that our bank account is large enough for us suddenly to be willing to flaunt these qualities for the edification of our neighbors, the chances are that we have not a banner to stream in the wind; we have bartered everything for the bank account which we have been advised to get. We have given up all our chances to become a great citizen in order to become a rich one. And when we have become the rich one, the qualities which make for greatness are atrophied. Our sinews have shrunk and the wings of our spirit are trailing in the dust.

We beg that our readers will not misunderstand for one moment our attitude in this argument toward money. We value money, we must have it to live wisely. Every man must understand that the right handling of money is only a part of the general wisdom of life. But to make money a useful factor in life, it must be earned through the work which is a part of our own development. Money must become a symbol of good work, which in turn must become a part of our own life progress. We must seek not to separate work from life and money from spirituality. In no other way can we bind together the varying, divergent essentials of modern life. We must meet our present kind of civilization with willingness to compromise; that is to say, we must combine the wise and understanding use of money with the realization of the spiritual value of labor and the desire to make of the earlier years of life and labor a preparation for the complete usefulness of our later days.

BOOKS RECEIVED


"The Adventure;" By Henry Bryan Binns. 96 pages. Price $1.00 net. Published by B. W. Huebsch, New York.
