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HUMAN EXPERIENCE




An address given at the Annual Meeting of the
**SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF
BOYS' CLUBS**

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HUMAN EXPERIENCE

I do not intend to speak directly of the work of the South Australian Association of Boys' Clubs. Our very able Secretary has dealt fully with that subject in the excellent report he has presented this evening. It is sufficient, I think, that I endorse his statement and remind you that those most competent to express an opinion have declared their satisfaction with what has been accomplished and predict that the Association will continue to extend its influence in an ever-widening sphere of activity as time marches on. I propose to speak of human experience and its relation to youth service generally.

In case there are any students of psychology present I must point out that I shall not venture on a psychological treatment of my subject. I shall endeavour, in the language of the man in the street, to analyse human experience, very superficially, from birth to maturity. I desire to place emphasis upon the importance of childhood as a preparatory or foundation stage, upon the dangers that come in adolescence which is so crucial a period where character is being considered, and upon the responsibility which falls upon those who reach manhood and womanhood.

1. CHILDHOOD.

The new-born babe is a very helpless creature, but this little bit of living matter, weighing perhaps seven or eight pounds, inherits a tremendous capacity for learning, and, given opportunity, it will develop and in course of time gather to itself, for itself and round itself a wealth of conscious activity which we call human experience.

This experience is a combination of what the child knows, feels, and desires, all inseparably blended into a state of mind or consciousness which governs his actions.

His experience is something which includes his sense of pleasure as well as pain, and into it there comes all his actions both voluntary and involuntary. Everything of which he is conscious comes within the scope of his experience.

We talk of schools, colleges and universities, but "babies' chairs are in no mean sense the great seats of learning in any land" and wise is that country which cares for its children. Childhood is a very vital learning period for the human being. There are many things which if not learned then can never be learned at all. A child is a child only once. Nature provides no second chance.

It is remarkable that the term of childhood in human beings is longer than the whole lifetime of many animals, and yet the young lamb, foal or calf is not nearly so helpless as the young child. But in the end, the helpless babe rises to far greater heights of conduct, intellectual achievement and purposeful effort than any mere animal can ever experience.

Whether adults accept it or shirk it they have a golden opportunity, coupled with a grave responsibility where children are concerned. Many a bonny boy has

grown up to be a bad man through no fault of his own, and many a lovely girl has become an unlovely woman, because someone—not the boy and not the girl—failed in his or her duty. There is an unsuspected amount of truth in the old saying, "The child is father of the man." It is while the child is a child that the type of man he is to become is determined.

It is for adults to take up the challenge which the very presence of children in their midst throws out to them. They must shoulder the responsibility of developing the best that nature has implanted in these little folk or posterity must suffer. The responsibility is essentially that of the parents, but if for any reason good or bad they fail, then society must come to the rescue.

2. ADOLESCENCE.

Important as the period of childhood is in relation to human experience generally, I think that it is in adolescence that lives are most likely to be permanently marred or made. There is some measure of protection in the helplessness of a little child which disappears as he begins to feel his independence and is energized by the freshness and the vigour of youth.

Anxious to throw off restraint and live his own life the young lad from 14 to 18 years of age is a very "large order", and is likely to take the wrong road unless someone who knows the way, someone who has already travelled the road, can somehow guide and direct him. Youthful intellect and the physical energy characteristic of adolescence demand an outlet, and if not directed into useful channels will inevitably get the youth into trouble.

Youthful crime is not necessarily a sign of general deterioration in our young people. It is much more likely to be a display of individual initiative which is natural, but is misdirected or undirected. The blame

cannot always be attached to the youthful evil-doer. Often the charge could more fairly be laid against those adults who look with cold indifference on any organized effort to assist youth in its perilous passage from childhood to manhood.

All the natural propensities of mankind that make for the ordered development of society are latent in the infant, and will have germinated and made some progress toward maturity in the childhood stage; but it is in the adolescent years that opportunity comes for the full development of those qualities of mind and heart which build robust individual character and make for clean and healthy society.

Truly, a country marches forward on the feet of its youth, and it is a matter of patriotic duty that adults shall direct the activities of young people in the days when they are too young to be expected or trusted to work out their own salvation.

3. MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD.

St. Paul wrote: "When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things."

In actual fact neither Paul nor any man present knows just when he became a man, neither does any woman present know just when she became a woman. A child does not become a youth, or a youth become an adult suddenly or at any particular time.

What we men do know is that we are what we are largely by reason of what happened to us when we were boys. Many of us are conscious of a debt which we owe to our parents, to our teachers in day school and Sunday school, to our club leaders, to preachers, to

authors of books, and to friends who, in our childhood and in our youth, took an interest in us and very largely made us what we are.

We are living in days when civilization has lost its balance, days of unthinkable horrors, intense suffering, great sorrow, and irreparable loss. These are days which make the cynic and the pessimist vocal. Ready at any time to strike a mournful and damaging note they seem in times of adversity almost to shout that civilization is doomed, that the world is going from bad to worse, and there is no hope in it or for it. I do not say that the world is not temporarily going from bad to worse—it surely is—but I do say there is hope in the world, and that hope is in our youth. If youth can be saved, our country and civilization can be saved. It is for adults to see that youth is saved.

There is, as I have said, no particular time when a boy becomes a man. His manhood is coming upon him continuously throughout his boyhood. If we wish him to be a good man, all we have to do is see that he is a good boy. It is just as easy as that: but is that easy? I say, "No." That is why this State needs an Association of Boys' Clubs and that association needs support. We must remember that there must be no time when the state of a boy is allowed to become really bad. I do not mean that a boy shall never be naughty or never do wrong, but he must never be permitted to go so far as to be capable of doing wrong without sense of guilt or shame.

These are bewildering days when there is conflict of ideals on every hand, and much to disturb the minds and damage the characters of our young people. Hovering between a thousand possibilities and harassed by an equal number of temptations, the personalities of the rising generation will dissolve and not develop, unless something is done to clarify the position for them.

Young people have a right to know what is expected of them as citizens and we would do well to remember that where little is expected little is given. The youth of to-day is in need of a common faith and a code of values stated clearly and sincerely. It needs to know just what is right and what is wrong in life.

It has been said, "German youth has not forgotten the principles of Christianity: it has never been permitted to learn them. The rulers of Germany have taught the young Germans, lying, deceit, treachery and cruelty. It is not surprising that foul and filthy deeds should flourish in a land where the swastika has taken the place of the Cross." This criticism of Germany is at the same time a recognition that she is teaching and training her youth.

What are we teaching our young Australians?

What are they being permitted to learn? Are we by word and deed setting before them national ideals that are Christian: ideals of truth, justice and freedom? Ideals exercise tremendous sway over the lives of men and nations. As the Bible teaches us in the Book of Proverbs, "Where there is no vision the people perish."

It is well-known that youth unconsciously indulges in hero-worship. Their ideals are not abstract things, but persons who have in some way commanded their admiration and invited imitation. Are adults in our country behaving in such a way as to become heroes in the eyes of youth: and if they are heroes are they of such type that by copying them young people will be approaching an ideal of life which is noble and elevating?

The more we can organize and develop youth in accordance with high ideals the stronger we as a people shall become physically, mentally, morally and spiritually. Ideals generate enthusiasm and driving power even though those ideals are beyond attainment.

Without idealism life would become stagnant and all culture and progress would soon disappear.

It is for men and women to provide the example and inspiration to children and youth so that in passing from birth to manhood and womanhood they may grow strong in body, mind and character, and be fitted in their day and generation to do equal service to the succeeding generation.

And so, I have tried to analyse very roughly human experience in its three stages of childhood, adolescence, and manhood, and I trust that we have caught something of the spirit and meaning of Tennyson's lines in his well-known poem, Ulysses. He wrote:—

"I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where-thro'
Gleams the untravelled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move."

Adults must provide for youth a goal or ideal, because, as someone has written, "it is only by striving to reach that which is beyond us, that we can hope to achieve the best that is in us."

Do you know Robert Browning's poem, "Andrea del Sarto", or as it is sometimes called, "The Faultless Painter." Listen to the words which he puts into this painter's mouth:—

"I painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
Morello's outline there is wrongly traced
His hue mistaken—what of that? Or else
Rightly traced and well ordered—what of that?
Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp
Or what's a Heaven for?"

What is needed is that young people shall apply to life an idealism as inspiring and fortifying as that which guided the painter. He knew what he wanted to paint. He had applied himself to a task and so clear was his vision of what he desired to produce that he was not affected by the criticism of onlookers.

If we can place before the youth of to-day national ideals that are sound, attractive, and challenging to them, if we can give to their lives a purpose that will fire their imagination and provide a field where they can compete with each other for places of responsibility and greater opportunity, they will display the same spirit of concentration and determination as Browning's painter showed.

One generation follows another in unbroken succession. That is how history is made. The greatest contribution which any generation can make towards the good of humanity in general is to see that some way, somehow, the generation which follows it, is better than it has been.

Truly youth service is national service of the highest order. I appeal to you all to support this Association and do all in your power to induce others to take a practical interest in this and similar institutions, so that our young people may have the sympathy and help which they need so much in these troublous times.