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Ada Comstock Address, Fiftieth Anniversary (1937)

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In the spring of 1915, when I was on leave of absence in California, my friend and I took refuge from a shower one afternoon in a little roadside eating place on the slopes of Mount Wilson. The owner and sole attendant was a weather-beaten man of more than middle age. As we sat eating our sandwiches, he asked us where we came from. "From a place you never heard of, probably, " I said. "From Moorhead, Minnesota." "Never heard of Moorhead!" he replied. "Why, forty years back I was assistant cook in the Headquarters Hotel in Fargo. I remember going on horseback to call a doctor in Moorhead. I went across a little pontoon bridge; and after I'd told the doctor what to do, I rode around for a couple of hours all over the prairie around the town." Walter Scott Douglas was his name, and he was as good an example of the rolling stone as I have ever seen.

There are not many in this audience besides myself who can have any recollection of the scene which Walter Scott Douglas called up that day. The doctor, I suppose, was Doctor John Kurtz. The river was still regarded as a navigable stream, and steamboats bound for Winnipeg made their way up its winding channel. The unbroken prairie stretched for miles around the little town which had grown up to the north of the Northern Pacific tracks and close to the river, the residence area being what we then called "the Point." The charm of that prairie of which he spoke is something I have never forgotten - the great expanse of rather sparse grass, starred with a succession of flowers, modest and clinging close to the earth in spring, flaunting in red and yellow and violet in late summer and fall, exciting for a child with its gopher holes, its nests of meadow larks, its broods of prairie chickens, its occasional skull or bone of buffalo. I have never forgotten the velvety softness and smoothness of an ungraded road through such prairie land as we rode over it in that horse and buggy era.

As for the little town itself, the picture is not so romantic. Even to a child's eyes it was unimpressive. The trees planted along the streets were still saplings. The streets themselves were morasses of black mud of incredible slipperiness after every rain. The sidewalks were of plank, not always in good repair; and along them high rank weeds often flourished, as also in the vacant lots. It was new, and it was raw; and its lack of age was evident not only in its material setting, but in its people. Almost everyone was young; and old people were so rare that, as a child, I was afraid of them. Their wrinkles and gray hair and bent frames made me think of gnomes or witches as I had seen them in picture books.

But it was a period of development and of vast hopefulness. The earlier adventurers had followed the railroad westward; and those who remained were the men and women who, as pioneers, came to convert the wilderness to the uses of civilization. They came from the eastern seaboard, many of them; and this valley of enormous fertility, offering the farmers no problems of hill or rock or thin barren soil, seemed to them better than a gold mine. Settlers came, not only from the eastern part of this country, but from across the sea and especially from the Scandinavian countries. There was land for everyone. People who came with nothing soon found themselves with homes and acres worth many thousands of dollars. Fargo became one of the great distributing centers of farm machinery; and when it also became the Reno of that day and hotels rose to take care of the floating population of divorce seekers, a curious kind of mushroom metropolitanism was added to the thriving little cities and gave them for a time an unwholesome notoriety.

Underneath all the froth and foam, however, outside all the hotels, saloons, restaurants, and places of amusement, the more stable development proceeded rapidly. On one of the gates at Harvard is a quotation from an old chronicle, telling the story of the founding of the University.

"After God had carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear'd convenient places for Gods worship, and setled the Civill Government: One of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity.."

The men who established Moorhead and Fargo were strong men of their hands, but they were men also of active minds, many of them at least as well educated as the average American of their times, believers in education, eager to establish schools and churches, and libraries. The Bishop Whipple School for Boys made an excellent start and erected a substantial building now a part of Concordia College. Hope Academy led a brief existence north of town. It was in a community committed to an ambition that Moorhead should be an educational center that this teachers college - or normal school as it then was - came into existence fifty years ago.

The wording of our national anthem, with its reference to rocks and rills, woods and templed hills, shows that the author had in mind a part of the country very different from our own. Yet now in this year 1937 we can say of this region of ours that it is the land where our fathers died, and land of the pioneers, if not of the pilgrims! pride. It is our inheritance, not easily to be held, perhaps, for it is a land not to be mastered once for all. Rich as it is, it has its own savage and incalculable ways. No weak or degenerate pupulation can make anything of this inheritance. It is like the sea in the challenge it gives to strength and ingenuity. But the highways and the railroads which have been thrown across it, the perpetual study of methods of dealing with the pests which menace it and of maintaining its fruitfulness give us weapons which our fathers lacked; and with the aid of all the modern means of transportation and communication we have no longer the sense of being in any way remote.

Perhaps it may seem to you that these very advantages have banished much of the interest and romance of our life. So little room is left on the globe for the fascinating exploits of discovery and exploration. That call from behind the ranges, come and find it, come and find it, which will be heard forever in some souls, may seem to be a delusion in days when the mountains screen few secrets, when the stratosphere is explored, and the depths of the sea, and when news of a settlement at the North Pole makes us feel that excursions will soon be set up to it, and that we shall be urged not to litter the polar floes with orange peel and egg shells. To fare forth at the risk of your life but with the dream of opening up a new land of hope and glory for those who follow you is no longer so easy; and to settle down to make the most of what you have inherited seems, perhaps, an uninspiring lot.

What we have to remember, of course, is that not all the frontiers are geographical. A noted scientist with whom I had the opportunity of talking not long ago put it in this way - that the scientific mind is forever busy at the border line which lies between the known and the unknown. That border line in science is easy to draw, and yet is a perpetual source of amazement to those of us outside the field. I have seen a group of middleaged men and women, some of them of great distinction in history, government, the arts, sit enthralled and astounded as a young astronomer told them and showed them by means of slides what her researches in spectroscopy were yielding in the way of knowledge, not only of the composition of the stars, but of the nature of matter. Not long ago I heard a young physicist describe the researches going on in respect to the utilization of sources of energy. The prospects, both for the benefit of man, and for his destruction, which these researches envisage were far more sensational than any discovery of

new lands could afford. The medical sciences move forward little by little in the conquest of diseases once thought incurable; and psychology, working in a substance far more sensitive and hard to manipulate than living tissue, is yet advancing steadily the border line of ascertained and provable fact. The excitements and triumphs of archaeology are known to all of us.

But it is not only in the sciences that men are finding satisfaction for the spirit of adventure and discovery. It is easy to go to an exhibit of surrealism in painting and sculpture in a spirit of derision, and to read the works of Gertrude Stein and some of the modern poets with a belief that somebody is being made a fool of, whether the reader or the writer. Modern music, the new art of the dance may seem aberrations of grotesqueness and discord. Modern architecture may give one a sense of being designed for creatures of steel and cellophane rather than flesh and blood. Yet in all these arts and in art in general the incentive of the artist is to find new forms of beauty, new modes of expression for the aesthetic sense; and, as truly as the scientist, he has his borderline to push forward, his new territory to conquer.

Just as truly, just as painfully, just as slowly advances the effort to extend in human affairs the application of character, conscience, reason. The struggle to find ways of preventing war, of curing poverty, of dealing with crime and delinquency, of giving every human being a chance to develop to his uttermost is all on the borderline between the ways of the past and the unexplored ways of the future. Because it must be a widely cooperative effort, because it demands so much in the way of intelligence and imagination and persuasiveness, it often seems like the least encouraging department of human affairs. "You can't change human nature," we say, and regretfully postpone improvement until the millenium.

But those who believe that of all frontiers this is the most important, and that gains are being made on it console themselves with that pregnant saying of Thornton Wilder : "Of all the forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age." It cheered me very much the other day to find in Arthur Morgan's little book, "The Long Road," this declaration of faith in the capacity of men to pass from that awkward age into maturity. "I am satisfied, " he says, "that there exist in human nature and in the circumstances of our environment all the resources necessary to accelerate social evolution to perhaps a hundred times its present rate, resolving internal conflicts, achieving new cooperation and new harmony, conserving old values and creating new ones, bringing into being a new social world, as science and industry have created a new world of communication."

But these are very broad generalizations, and here are you and I this morning in a situation which is special and concrete. We have been celebrating the pioneer spirit which founded and developed this school. Many of us are the children of pioneers. Those of you in the graduating class at this fiftieth anniversary are about to begin the active work of your lives; and it may seem to you that to prove yourselves worthy heirs of your college and your forebears you should find a frontier no less real and challenging than that your fathers knew. You would like to break new ground.

I do not need to tell you that as teachers you are studying a science and practicing an art which have their borderlands of knowledge, their rash adventures, their exponents of the safe and sane. But this is no lecture on new theories of education or new methods of teaching. You have had such instruction from people far more fitted to give it than I. What I am thinking of is your day-by-day work next fall and for years to come, and whether and how it is work on a frontier. I believe that it is most definitely and concretely pioneering work,

and that it has a frontier, a multiple frontier, in the mind and character of every child with whom you deal. When you advance, with your equipment of English or history or mathematics or science or art, to your encounter with that child, you have a little wilderness to conquer - ignorance to be replaced with knowledge, prejudices and misconceptions to be cleared away, inaccessibility to be remedied, and productivity to be established. Sometimes the task is easy, as if that little wilderness had been waiting to be opened up. Sometimes it is hard and stubborn and, at the best, never to be very rich and fertile. Always the little segment of your frontier which each pupil represents is different from every other, and not to be given identical treatment.

The hardest part of the task is that, even in these days of measurement, results are not easily gauged. Standards of achievement can be established for a group, and are useful; but they cannot take account of the problems presented by the individual pupil. An inch gained in the development of his mind may represent more effort and a greater triumph than a gain of a mile in another case. The teacher himself is the best judge of what he has done, if he can abandon his creative role for awhile and become the dispassionate appraiser. If he can, he will have some gratifications for which others will see scant reason, and some disappointments obvious to no one else. I have had excellent students, graduating from college with high honors, over whom I have mourned, knowing that so far as their development of strength in any particular field was concerned they had advanced not at all since freshman year. One of the last sections of freshman English I ever taught was one of the most delightful. The students were interested in the class and in each other, and to this day refer to the course as one of the high lights of their college experience. Yet in the June of that year when I reviewed their work since September, I was unable to find that a single member of the class had really gone forward in her

ability to define or analyze an idea and express it in written form. With great animation and good will they had been prancing up and down in the same place. It was one of the most disconcerting and disappointing experiences I have ever had.

There is no measure of success, however, except that of progress on the part of the individual student. One may have an admirably organized course; one may deliver beautiful lectures against a background of the soundest learning; one may be able to stimulate lively discussion; but the teaching is successful only to the extent to which it is addressed to each member of the class, and has resulted in his enlightenment and advancement. Nor is teaching to be confused with the ability to compel students to read, to study, to memorize, and finally to pass a stiff examination. On whatever level, from the first grade to the graduate school, to teach is to advance the area of ordered thinking, of understanding, of controlled and rational handling of material in the mind of an individual; and nothing else is teaching. It is as definitely pioneer work as that done by our fathers, and there is as much difference between the uninstructed, undisciplined mind and the mind which has been taught and developed as there is between the unbroken wilderness and smiling, fruitful fields. Indeed, the difference is far greater, for though the teacher addresses himself especially to the minds of his pupils, his work, if thoroughly sound, flowers in character and qualities of spirit. Integrity, clarity, imagination, love of truth, freedom from the domination of the personal and the egocentric - these are some of the traits fostered by the good teaching even of a narrow subject, and capable of diffusing themselves through the whole personality. I am always a little distrustful of obvious efforts to mould character, but I believe that good teaching goes so straight to the inmost spirit of a student that effect upon character is the inevitable result.

And so, the teacher may think, if my frontier is the mind of the individual student, am I not committed to an endless task and one without coherence? Oppressed by that fear teachers of ambition and strong desire to be useful to society may give up their work for administrative posts, preferring to leave their mark upon some institution or organization. It is well to remember then what William James once said: "I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny, invisible, molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride."

To Arthur Morgan, the issue presents itself in a way which, to me, is even more stirring. You know who he is - a man who spent part of his boyhood in this state, one of the foremost hydraulic engineers of this country, president of Antioch College for sixteen years, and ~~recently~~ at present Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority. He is a remarkable person, with more than a little of the qualities of Lincoln in his make-up, quiet yet fiery, delighting equally in the solution of a difficult engineering problem and in the transforming of an individual or a community by some redemptive idea. In a little volume published last fall he states in some detail his reasoned opinion of the way in which this world can arrive at a better economic and social condition. Summarizing his own extensive experience, he arrives at the conclusion that our greatest need today does not lie in the direction of changes in governmental and economic machinery. We have yet to make full use, he says, of that which we have. "In the United States, in general the form of government has been better than the people. The American form of government, imperfect as it is, has given greater opportunity for the creation of a good society than the character, vision, and intelligence of the American people have fully used." "We must begin far back," he goes on, "in the slow, thorough building

of character which will be tried out in the realities of everyday living, and which by aspiration, disciplined by open-minded, critical inquiry, will mature a philosophy of life reasonably adequate to the present day. As that quality of character is matured, it will result in leadership that will apply itself to the issues of the time. It will give concrete expression in everyday life to a new vision of the quality that life may have. When that vision is clearly expressed and clearly defined the people will gradually receive it as their own, and we shall in large measure have found the solvent for the complexities and limitations of government and of business - and of human life itself. The long way round, of building character, in the end will prove to have been the short way home to a good social order."

I have done his idea an injustice in failing to give it the support of all the instances and arguments with which he presents it. Perhaps, however, I have quoted enough to suggest its significance. If we were to act upon it, the effect would be little less than revolutionary. In an America devoted to machinery and building, to the formation of great organizations and institutions, to the framing of legislation, to the application of science to material problems, he tells us that the frontier of character in every class of society still awaits attack, and that until we have brought it up to the level of our other achievements, great progress in building a much better social order is impossible. To dream that so wide a transformation in millions of people can be brought about is to share the dreams of the great founders of religions; and indeed it is an idea which deserves the term religious.

But that is the dream, the revolution, the frontier to which as graduates of a teachers college you are not only called but committed. You will never be able to advance like an army with banners and martial music. You will never have the picturesqueness of the prairie wagon train making its way westward. You will have as great need of courage, but it must be of a different kind, moral rather than physical; and you will have even greater need of patience, and a perpetually renewed ingenuity and skill. In the heart and mind of every teacher there always glimmers a hope, I believe, that his work is better than he knows, that it will bear fruit beyond his imagining. If such words as those of Arthur Morgan can transform that glimmer into a strong and unfailing light, if you can believe with Arthur Morgan that the greatest need of this country is the transformation and development of the national character, you will envy no pioneer his opportunity. Yours is as great if you have eyes to see it, and the demands on the strength of your manhood and womanhood are even more exacting. Remembering those who opened for the uses of men these broad lands of ours, let us resolve, so far as in us lies, to make ourselves and those with whose education we are charged into fit users of our national heritage.

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