

The Spirit of Learning*

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We have fallen of late into a deep discontent with the college, with the life and the work of the undergraduates in our universities. It is an honourable discontent, bred in us by devotion, not by captiousness or hostility or by an unreasonable impatience to set the world right. We are not critics, but anxious and thoughtful friends. We are neither cynics nor pessimists, but honest lovers of a good thing, of whose slightest deterioration we are jealous. We would fain keep one of the finest instrumentalities of our national life from falling short of its best, and believe that by a little care and candor we can do so.

The American college has played a unique part in American life. So long as its aims were definite and its processes authoritative it formed men who brought to their tasks an incomparable morale, a capacity that seemed more than individual, a power touched with large ideals. The college has been the seat of ideals. The liberal training which it sought to impart took no thought of any particular profession or business, but was meant to reflect in its few and simple disciplines the image of life and thought. Men were bred by it to no skill or craft or calling; the discipline to which they were subjected had a more general object. It was meant to prepare them for the whole of life rather than for some particular part of it. The ideals which lay at its heart were the general ideals of conduct, of right living, and right thinking, which made them aware of a world moralized by principle, steadied and cleared of many an evil thing by true and catholic reflection and just feeling, a world, not of interests, but of ideas.

Such impressions, such challenges to a man's spirit, such intimations of privilege and duty are not to be found in the work and obligations of professional and technical schools. They cannot be. Every calling has its ethics, indeed, its standards of right conduct and wrong, its outlook upon action

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and upon the varied relationships of society. Its work is high and honorable, grounded, it may be, in the exact knowledge which moralizes the processes of thought, and in a skill which makes the whole man serviceable. But it is notorious how deep and how narrow the absorptions of the professional school are and how much they are necessarily concentrated upon the methods and interests of a particular occupation. The work to be done in them is as exact, as definite, as exclusive as that of the office and the shop. Their atmosphere is the atmosphere of business, and should be. It does not beget generous comradeships or any ardor of altruistic feeling such as the college begets. It does not contain that general air of the world of science and of letters in which the mind seeks no special interest, but feels every intimate impulse of the spirit set free to think and observe and listen, – listen to all the voices of the mind. The professional school differs from the college as middle age differs from youth. It gets the spirit of the college only by imitation or reminiscence or contagion. This is to say nothing to its discredit. Its nature and objects are different from those of the college, – as legitimate, as useful, as necessary; but different. The college is the place of orientation; the professional school is the place of concentration. The object of the college is to liberalize and moralize; the object of the professional school is to train the powers to a special task. And this is true of all vocational study.

I am, of course, using the words liberalize and moralize in their broadest significance, and I am very well aware that I am speaking in the terms of an ideal, a conception, rather than in the terms of realized fact. I have spoken, too, of what the college did “so long as its aims were definite and its processes authoritative,” as if I were thinking of it wholly in the past tense and wished to intimate that it was once a very effective and ideal thing but had now ceased to exist; so that one would suppose that I thought the college lost out of our life and the present a time when such influences were all to seek. But that is only because I have not been able to say everything at once. Give me leave, and I will slowly write in the phrases which will correct these impressions and bring a true picture to light.

The college has lost its definiteness of aim, and has now for so long a time affected to be too modest to assert its authority over its pupils in any

matter of prescribed study that it can no longer claim to be the nurturing mother it once was; but the college is neither dead nor moribund, and it has made up for its relaxed discipline and confused plans of study by many notable gains, which, if they have not improved its scholarship, have improved the health and the practical morals of the young gentlemen who resort to it, have enhanced their vigor and quickened their whole natures. A freer choice of studies has imparted to it a stir, an air of freedom and individual initiative, a wealth and variety of instruction which the old college altogether lacked. The development of athletic sports and the immoderate addiction of undergraduates to stimulating activities of all sorts, academic and unacademic, which improve their physical habits, fill their lives with interesting objects, sometimes important, and challenge their powers of organization and practical management, have unquestionably raised the tone of morals and of conduct in our colleges and have given them an interesting, perhaps valuable, connection with modern society and the broader popular interests of the day. No one need regret the breaking-up of the dead levels of the old college, the introduction and exaltation of modern studies, or the general quickening of life which has made of our youngsters more manly fellows, if less docile pupils. There had come to be something rather narrow and dull and morbid, no doubt, about the old college before its day was over. If we gain our advances by excessive reactions and changes which change too much, we at least gain them, and should be careful not to lose the advantage of them.

Nevertheless, the evident fact is, that we have now for a long generation devoted ourselves to promoting changes which have resulted in all but complete disorganization, and it is our plain and immediate duty to form our plans for reorganization. We must reexamine the college, reconceive it, reorganize it. It is the root of our intellectual life as a nation. It is not only the instrumentality through which we must effect all the broad preliminary work which underlies sound scholarship; it is also our chief instrumentality of catholic enlightenment, our chief means for giving widespread stimulation to the whole intellectual life of the country and supplying ourselves with men who shall both comprehend their age and duty and know how to serve them

supremely well. Without the American college our young men would be too exclusively shut in to the pursuit of individual interests, would lose the vital contacts and emulations which awaken them to those larger achievements and sacrifices which are the highest objects of education in a country of free citizens, where the welfare of the commonwealth springs out of the character and the informed purposes of the private citizen. The college will be found to lie somewhere very near the heart of American social training and intellectual and moral enlightenment.

The process is familiar to every one by which the disintegration was brought about which destroyed the old college with its fixed disciplines and ordered life and gave us our present problem of reorganization and recovery. It centred in the break-up of the old curriculum and the introduction of the principle that the student was to select his own studies from a great variety of courses, as great a variety as the resources of the college and the supply of teachers available made possible. But the change could not in the nature of things stop with the plan of study. It held at its heart a tremendous implication: the implication of full manhood on the part of the pupil, and all the untrammelled choices of manhood. The pupil who was mature and well informed enough to study what he chose was also by necessary implication mature enough to be left free to do what he pleased, to choose his own associations and ways of life outside the curriculum without restraint or suggestion; and the varied, absorbing college life of our day sprang up as the natural offspring of the free election of studies.

There went along with the relaxation of rule as to what undergraduates should study, therefore, an almost absolute divorce between the studies and the life of the college, its business and its actual daily occupations. The teacher ceased to look upon himself as related in any responsible way to the life of his pupils, to what they should be doing and thinking of between one class exercise and another, and conceived his whole duty to have been performed when he had given his lecture and afforded those who were appointed to come the opportunity to hear and heed it if they chose. The teachers of this new régime, moreover, were most of them trained for their teaching work in German universities, or in American universities in which

the methods, the points of view, the spirit, and the object of the German universities were, consciously or unconsciously, reproduced. They think of their pupils, therefore, as men already disciplined by some general training such as the German gymnasium gives, and seeking in the university special acquaintance with particular studies, as an introduction to special fields of information and inquiry. They have never thought of the university as a community of teachers and pupils: they think of it, rather, as a body of teachers and investigators to whom those may resort who seriously desire specialized kinds of knowledge. They are specialists imported into an American system which has lost its old point of view and found no new one suitable to the needs and circumstances of America. They do not think of living with their pupils and affording them the contacts of culture; they are only accessible to them at stated periods and for a definite and limited service; and their teaching is an interruption to their favorite work of research.

Meanwhile, the constituency of the college has wholly changed. It is not only the bookish classes who now send their sons to college, but also the men of business and of affairs, who expect their sons to follow in their own footsteps and do work with which books have little connection. In the old days of which I have spoken most young men who went to college expected to enter one or other of the learned professions, expected to have to do with books and some of the more serious kinds of learning all their lives. Books were their proper introduction to the work that lay before them; learning was their natural discipline and preparation. But nowadays the men who are looking forward to the learned professions are in a minority at the college. Most undergraduates come out of an atmosphere of business and wish a breeding which is consonant with it. They do not wish learning. They wish only a certain freshening of their faculties for the miscellaneous contacts of life, a general acquaintance with what men are doing and saying in their own generation, a certain facility in handling themselves and in getting on with their fellows. They are much more interested in the incidental associations of college life than in the main intellectual occupations of the place. They want to be made men of, not scholars; and the life led at college is as serviceable for that as any of the tasks set in the class-room. If they want what the

formal teaching offers them at all, it is for some definite and practical purpose connected with the calling they expect to follow, the business they expect to engage in. Such pupils are specially unsuitable for such teachers.

Here, then, is our situation. Here is the little world of teachers and pupils, athletic associations, musical and literary clubs, social organizations and societies for amusement, class-room and playground, of which we must make analysis, out of which we must get a new synthesis, a definite aim, and new processes of authoritative direction, losing nothing that has been gained, recovering what has been lost. All the fresh elements we have gained are valuable, many of the new points of view are those from which we must look upon the whole task and function of the college if we would see it truly; but we have fallen upon an almost hopeless confusion and an utter dispersion of energy. We must pull the whole inorganic thing together under a new conception of what the college must be and do.

The chief and characteristic mistake which the teachers and governors of our colleges have made in these latter days has been that they have devoted themselves and their plans too exclusively to the business, the very commonplace business, of instruction, to well-conceived lectures and approved class-room method, and have not enough regarded the life of the mind. The mind does not live by instruction. It is no prolix gut to be stuffed. The real intellectual life of a body of undergraduates, if there be any, manifests itself, not in the class-room, but in what they do and talk of and set before themselves as their favorite objects between classes and lectures. You will see the true life of a college in the evenings, at the dinner-table or beside the fire in the groups that gather and the men that go off eagerly to their work, where youths get together and let themselves go upon their favorite themes, – in the effect their studies have upon them when no compulsion of any kind is on them and they are not thinking to be called to a reckoning of what they know.

The effects of learning are its real tests, the real tests alike of its validity and of its efficacy. The mind can be driven, but that is not life. Life is voluntary or unconscious. It is breathed in out of a sustaining atmosphere. It is shaped by environment. It is habitual, continuous, productive. It

does not consist in tasks performed, but in powers gained and enhanced. It cannot be communicated in class-rooms if its aim and end is the class-room. Instruction is not its source, but only its incidental means and medium.

Here is the key to the whole matter: the object of the college, as we have known and used and loved it in America, is not scholarship (except for the few, and for them only by way of introduction and first orientation), but the intellectual and spiritual life. Its life and discipline are meant to be a process of preparation, not a process of information. By the intellectual and spiritual life I mean the life which enables the mind to comprehend and make proper use of the modern world and all its opportunities. The object of a liberal training is not learning, but discipline and the enlightenment of the mind. The educated man is to be discovered by his point of view, by the temper of his mind, by his attitude towards life and his fair way of thinking. He can see, he can discriminate, he can combine ideas and perceive whither they lead; he has insight and comprehension. His mind is a practised instrument of appreciation. He is more apt to contribute light than heat to a discussion, and will oftener than another show the power of uniting the elements of a difficult subject in a whole view; he has the knowledge of the world which no one can have who knows only his own generation or only his own task.

What we should seek to impart in our colleges, therefore, is not so much learning itself as the spirit of learning. You can impart that to young men; and you can impart it to them in the three or four years at your disposal. It consists in the power to distinguish good reasoning from bad, in the power to digest and interpret evidence, in a habit of catholic observation and a preference for the non-partisan point of view, in an addiction to clear and logical processes of thought and yet an instinctive desire to interpret rather than to stick in the letter of the reasoning, in a taste for knowledge and a deep respect for the integrity of the human mind. It is citizenship of the world of knowledge, but not ownership of it. Scholars are the owners of its varied plots, in severalty.

If we recognize and accept these ideas, this conception of the function and the possibilities of the college, there is hope of a general understanding and accommodation. At present there is a fundamental misunderstanding.

The teachers in our colleges are men of learning and conceive it their duty to impart learning; but their pupils do not desire it, and the parents of their pupils do not desire it for them. They desire something else which the teacher has little thought of giving, generally thinks it no part of his function to give. Many of the parents of our modern undergraduates will frankly tell you that what they want for their sons is not so much what they will get in the class-room as something else, which they are at a loss to define, which they will get from the associations of college life: and many more would say the same thing if they were equally ingenuous. I know what they mean, and I am free to say that I sympathize with them. They understand that all that their boys get in the class-room is instruction in certain definite bodies of knowledge; that all they are expected to bring away from their lectures and recitations is items of learning. They have consorted with college men, if they are not college bred themselves, and know how very soon items of knowledge slip away from them, no matter how faithful and diligent they may have been in accumulating them when they were students. They observe that that part of the college acquisition is very soon lost. College graduates will tell you without shame or regret, within ten years of their graduation, that they remember practically nothing of what they learned in the class-room; and yet in the very same breath they will tell you that they would not have lost what they did get in college for anything in the world; and men who did not have the chance to go to college will everywhere be found to envy them, perceiving that college-bred men have something which they have not. What have they got, if learning is to be left out of the reckoning? They have got manliness, certainly, *esprit de corps*, the training of generous comradeships, a notable development of their social faculties and of their powers of appreciation; and they have lived under the influence of mental tasks of greater or less difficulty, have got from the class-room itself, from a quiet teacher here and there, some intimation, some touch of the spirit of learning. If they have not, they have got only what could no doubt be got from association with generous, self-respecting young men anywhere. Attendance on the exercises of the college was only a means

of keeping them together for four years, to work out their comradeships and their mutual infections.

I said just now that I sympathized with men who said that what they wanted for their sons in college was not what they got in the class-room so much as what they got from the life and associations of the place; but I agree with them only if what is to be got in the classroom is nothing more than items of knowledge likely to be quickly lost hold of. I agree with them; but I see clearly what they are blindly feeling after. They should desire chiefly what their sons are to get out of the life and associations of the place; but that life and those associations should be freighted with things they do not now contain. The processes of life, the contagions of association, are the only things that have ever got any real or permanent hold on men's minds. These are the conducting media for every effect we seek to work on the human spirit. The undergraduate should have scholars for teachers. They should hold his attention steadily upon great tested bodies of knowledge and should insist that he make himself acquainted with them, if only for the nonce. But they will give him nothing he is likely to carry with him through life if they stop with formal instruction, however thorough or exacting they may make it. Their permanent effects will be wrought upon his spirit. Their teaching will follow him through life only if they reveal to him the meaning, the significance, the essential validity of what they are about, the motives which prompt it, the processes which verify it. They will rule him, not by what they know and inform him of, but by the spirit of the things they expound. And that spirit they cannot convey in any formal manner. They can convey it only atmospherically, by making their ideals tell in some way upon the whole spirit of the place.

How shall their pupils carry their spirit away with them, or the spirit of the things they teach, if beyond the door of the class-room the atmosphere will not contain it? College is a place of initiation. Its effects are atmospheric. They are wrought by impression, by association, by emulation. The voices which do not penetrate beyond the doors of the class-room are lost, are ineffectual, are void of consequence and power. No thought will obtain or live there for the transmission of which the prevailing atmo-

sphere is a non-conducting medium. If young gentlemen get from their years at college only manliness, *esprit de corps*, a release of their social gifts, a training in give and take, a catholic taste in men, and the standards of true sportsmen, they have gained much, but they have not gained what a college should give them. It should give them insight into the things of the mind and of the spirit, a sense of having lived and formed their friendships amidst the gardens of the mind where grows the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a consciousness of having taken on them the vows of true enlightenment and of having undergone the discipline, never to be shaken off, of those who seek wisdom in candor, with faithful labour and travail of spirit.

These things they cannot get from the class-room unless the spirit of the class-room is the spirit of the place as well and of its life; and that will never be until the teacher comes out of the class-room and makes himself a part of that life. Contact, companionship, familiar intercourse is the law of life for the mind. The comradeships of undergraduates will never breed the spirit of learning. The circle must be widened. It must include the older men, the teachers, the men for whom life has grown more serious and to whom it has revealed more of its meanings. So long as instruction and life do not merge in our colleges, so long as what the undergraduates do and what they are taught occupy two separate, air-tight compartments in their consciousness, so long will the college be ineffectual.

Looked at from the point of view at which I stand in all that I have been saying, some of the proposals made in our day for the improvement of the college seem very strangely conceived. It has been proposed, for example, to shorten the period of general study in college to (say) two years, and let the student who has gone the distance our present sophomores have gone enter at once upon his professional studies or receive his certificate of graduation. I take it for granted that those who have formulated this proposal never really knew a sophomore in the flesh. They say, simply, that the studies of our present sophomores are as advanced as the studies of seniors were in the great days of our grandfathers, and that most of our present sophomores are as old as our grandfathers were when they graduated from the pristine college we so often boast of; and I dare say that is all true enough. But what

they do not know is, that our sophomore is at the age of twenty no more mature than the sophomore of that previous generation was at the age of seventeen or eighteen. The sap of manhood is rising in him but it has not yet reached his head. It is not what a man is studying that makes him a sophomore or a senior: it is the stage the college process has reached in him. A college, the American college, is not a body of studies: it is a process of development. It takes, if our observation can be trusted, at least four years for the completion of that process, and all four of those years must be college years. They cannot be school years: they cannot be combined with school years. The school process is an entirely different one. The college is a process of slow evolution from the schoolboy and the schoolboy's mental attitude into the man and his entirely altered view of the world. It can be accomplished only in the college environment. The environment is of the essence of the whole effect.

If you wish to create a college, therefore, and are wise, you will seek to create a life. We have allowed ourselves to grow very anxious and to feel very helpless about college athletics. They play too large a part in the life of the undergraduate, we say; and no doubt they do. There are many other things which play too large a part in that life, to the exclusion of intellectual interests and the dissipation of much excellent energy: amusements of all kinds, social preoccupations of the most absorbing sort, a multitude of activities which have nothing whatever to do with the discipline and enlightenment of the mind. But that is because they are left a free field. Life, at college, is one thing, the work of the college another, entirely separate and distinct. The life is the field that is left free for athletics not only, but also for every other amusement and diversion. Studies are no part of that life, and there is no competition. Study is the work which interrupts the life, introduces an embarrassing and inconsistent element into it. The faculty has no part in the life; it organizes the interruption, the interference.

This is not to say that there are not a great many undergraduates seriously interested in study, or that it is impossible or even difficult to make the majority of them, the large majority, pass the tests of the examinations. It is only saying that the studies do not spring out of the life of the place and

are hindered by it, must resist its influences if they would flourish. I have no jealousy of athletics: it has put wholesome spirit into both the physical and the mental life of our undergraduates. There are fewer morbid boys in the new college which we know than there were in the old college which our fathers knew; and fewer prigs, too, no doubt. Athletics are indispensable to the normal life of young men, and are in themselves wholesome and delightful, besides. In another atmosphere, the atmosphere of learning, they could be easily subordinated and assimilated. The reason they cannot be now is that there is nothing to assimilate them, nothing by which they can be digested. They make their own atmosphere unmolested. There is no direct competition.

The same thing may be said, for it is true, of all the other amusements and all the social activities of the little college world. Their name is legion: they are very interesting; most of them are in themselves quite innocent and legitimate; many of them are thoroughly worth while. They now engross the attention and absorb the energies of most of the finest, most spirited, most gifted youngsters in the undergraduate body, men fit to be scholars and masters in many fields, and for whom these small things are too trivial a preparation. They would not do so if other things which would be certain to grip these very men were in competition with them, were known and spoken of and pervasive in the life of the college outside the class-room; but they are not. The field is clear for all these little activities, as it is clear for athletics. Athletics has no serious competitor except these amusements and petty engrossments; they have no serious competitor except athletics. The scholar is not in the game. He keeps modestly to his class-room and his study and must be looked up and asked questions if you would know what he is thinking about. His influence can be set going only by the deliberate effort of the undergraduate himself who looks him up and stirs him. He deplures athletics and all the other absorbing and non-academic pursuits which he sees drawing the attention of his pupils off from study and serious preparation for life, but he will not enter into competition with them. He has never dreamed of such a thing; and, to tell the truth, the life of the

place is organized in such a way as to make it hardly possible for him to do so. He is therefore withdrawn and ineffectual.

It is the duty of university authorities to make of the college a society, of which the teacher will be as much, and as naturally, a member as the undergraduate. When that is done other things will fall into their natural places, their natural relations. Young men are capable of great enthusiasms for older men whom they have learned to know in some human, unartificial way, whose quality they have tasted in unconstrained conversation, the energy and beauty of whose characters and aims they have learned to appreciate by personal contact; and such enthusiasms are often amongst the strongest and most lasting influences of their lives. You will not gain the affection of your pupil by anything you do for him, impersonally, in the class-room. You may gain his admiration and vague appreciation, but he will tie to you only for what you have shown him personally or given him in intimate and friendly service.

Certain I am that it is impossible to rid our colleges of these things that compete with study and drive out the spirit of learning by the simple device of legislation, in which, as Americans, we have so childish a confidence; or, at least, that, if we did succeed in driving them out, did set our home in order and sweep and garnish it, other equally distracting occupants would crowd in to take their places. For the house would be empty. There must be life as well as study. The question is, not of what are we to empty it, but with what must we fill it? We must fill it with the things of the mind and of the spirit; and that we can do by introducing into it men for whom these things are supremely interesting, the main objects of life and endeavour, teachers who will not seem pedagogues but friends, and who can by the gentle infection of friendliness make thought a general contagion. Do that; create the atmosphere and the contacts of a society made up of men young and old, mature and adolescent, serious and gay, and you will create an emulation, a saturation, a vital union of parts in a common life, in which all questions of subordination and proportion will solve themselves. So soon as the things which now dissipate and distract and dissolve our college life *feel* the things which should coordinate and regulate and inspire

it in direct contact with them, *feel* their ardour and their competition, they will fall into their proper places, will become pleasures and cease to be occupations, will delight our undergraduate days, but not monopolize them. They are exaggerated now because they are separated and do not exchange impulses with those greater things of whose presence they are sometimes hardly conscious.

No doubt there are many ways in which this vital association may be effected, but all wise and successful ways will have this in common, that they will abate nothing of the freedom and self-government which have so quickened and purified our colleges in these recent days of change, will have no touch of school surveillance in them. You cannot force companionships upon undergraduates, if you treat them like men. You can only create the conditions, set up the organization, which will make them natural. The scholar should not need a statute behind him. The spirit of learning should not covet the support of the spirit and organization of the nursery. It will prevail of its own grace and power if you will but give it a chance, a conducting medium, an air in which it can move and breathe freely without effort of self-consciousness. If it cannot, I, for one, am willing to lend it artificial assistance. It must take its chances in the competition and win on its merits, under the ordinary rules of the game of life, where the most interesting man attracts attention, the strongest personality rules, the best organized force predominates, the most admirable thing wins allegiance. We are not seeking to force a marriage between knowledge and pleasure; we are simply trying to throw them a great deal together in the confidence that they will fall in love with one another. We are seeking to expose the undergraduate when he is most susceptible to the best and most stimulating influences of the university in the hope and belief that no sensible fellow fit for a career can resist the infection.

My plea, then, is this: that we now deliberately set ourselves to make a home for the spirit of learning: that we reorganize our colleges on the lines of this simple conception, that a college is not only a body of studies but a mode of association; that its courses are only its formal side, its contacts and contagions its realities. It must become a community of scholars and

pupils, – a free community but a very real one, in which democracy may work its reasonable triumphs of accommodation, its vital processes of union. I am not suggesting that young men be dragooned into becoming scholars or tempted to become pedants, or have any artificial compulsion whatever put upon them, but only that they be introduced into the high society of university ideals, be exposed to the hazards of stimulating friendships, be introduced into the easy comradeships of the republic of letters. By this means the class-room itself might some day come to seem a part of life.