

The Ethical Significance of the Changing Social Order in its  
Bearing on the Institution of Education

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Last Sunday morning I called your attention to a fundamental evil of our times, as it appears in the economic injustice. Doubtless many of you felt, as I finished, like saying, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" In speaking this morning on the function of education, I hope to point out a constructive principle.

Education is the process of finding out how to live. It is in part individual and in part social in its nature. It involves the recognition of experience in ourselves, the observation of experience in other people and things, and the due reflection upon these observations, resulting in the appreciation of certain general principles demanded the Universe or, if you please, by God. In the following of these principles there is life. In the disregard of them there is death.

One thing must always be born in mind, and that thing is that the Universe or God never hands out any ready-made, prepared truth. Whatever knowledge we may have of the great principles of life, it is a knowledge that has been wormed out of nature and God through infinite toil, and experience. We sometimes speak of the revelation of truth as if truth were disclosed to us in some spectacular fashion such as described in the beautiful folk story of Moses and the ten-commandments. That is a beautiful story, but it, is a story never-the-less. The truth is that it cost humanity hundreds of thousands of years, and millions of human lives to discover and state the principles of life expressed in the ten commandments. The ten commandments are the product of the educational process of humanity. Even now comparatively few people are sufficiently educated to know what

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<sup>1</sup> There is no date on this manuscript. However, the paper-size and type-are identical to sermons that can be dated to Earl Davis' time at the Unity Church in Pittsfield (1905-1919). His early sermons (1905-07) there were hand-written. So this typed manuscript is later than 1907.

the ten commandments mean. The institutions of education, including the University of Life exist for the sole purpose of finding out how to live, and, so far as we have yet learned, the sole purpose of finding out how to live in this life.

We still permit the atmosphere of feudalism to cloud our interpretations of God. Some people seem to imagine that God is some kind of an expert head accountant, who spends all his time pouring over balance sheets of individuals and nations. That he is interested to know how many times we go to church, whether or not we are thrifty, that he smiles especially on commercial prosperity; that he has his favorites among individuals, and will say to himself, "There is my friend, Smith, I like him especially because he calls upon my name so often, I will just send a rain storm to water his crops. There is devoted Deacon Jones. I will just stick my finger into the stock market, and give him a boost." Or we imagine him as saying, "The American people are my special delight. They are smart, prosperous, and they give millions to charity. I will just give them a boost by opening up the markets of the world so that they can make money out of lost heathen." We talk and act as if we really imagined God were such a creature as that, but the rain falls upon the just and the unjust alike. God is no respecter of persons. That man lives who knows how to live, and that nation lives that knows how to live. That man and that nation that knows not the principles of living fades away. The capacity of life, rich and free, is the measuring rod of individuals and social orders. God, after all, is a symbolic word symbolizing our passion for life and our faith in the substantial integrity of the Universe. God is life, and those that worship him, must worship him in life and in reality.

The validity of all education then is determined by its contribution to life capacity of the individual and society. Whether it is helps prosperity, or not, whether it is efficient or not, whether it is vocational or avocational or not, whether it leads to patriotism or not, whether it makes for culture or not, does not in the least matter, except insofar as these things make for the fullness of the life of humanity. The unfoldment of the individual, and the unfoldment of humanity in life are the ends.

Our educational institutions are at best but artificial attempts to assist in the real processes of life. They are successful in proportion as they are related to the real problems of common life, and they are failures in so far as they are unrelated to the teaming life of today. We have great public

school systems, great universities. It is a great achievement to have conceived of the idea of social education, and to have developed even the possibilities of a socialized equipment of education. But these institutions are vital and real just in proportion as they are tied into the real vital problems of everyday life as they exist for the individual and for society. They must be tied. They must show the individual the experience of humanity in science, in government, in ethics, in economics, in religion, literature, and stimulate in him the capacity of thought, and action resulting from thought. One of the most striking illustrations of education of man is seen in the great strike going on in Belgium today. Experience has taught us that every step in the struggle for freedom must be purchased by a conflict with established institutions. We have observed that the institutions of modern society are so delicately adjusted and that we are so interdependent that the stoppage of the machinery of industry ties up the whole of society. So instead of fighting for the ballot, the workingmen of Belgium are simply taking a little vacation together. It is one of the most remarkable illustrations of the relation of education to the real fundamental problems of life. In saying what I am going to say, I do not mean that the general strike is the end of education, but the capacity to profit by experience, and to meet a new situation in light of past achievements and failures is education. The education is vital if it contributes to the fullness of life.