

JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

FOR

Upper Canada.

VOL. III.

TORONTO, MARCH, 1850.

No. 3.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMON SCHOOLS.

It is manifest that the calm independence, the stern integrity, the enlightened patriotism, on which the stability of our civil institutions depends, are excellences which can be the product only of a wise culture of the minds and hearts of the people, in the forming period of life. If the community would avail itself of the intellectual and moral power within its embrace, it must multiply, it must elevate, purify and quicken our common schools. If the community would show due respect to itself, it must show respect to the individuals who compose it. The whole body politic has a deep concern in the intellectual and moral development of every one of its members.

Did our fellow citizens but take this view of our civil condition, how would our common schools rise in their esteem! What necessary expenditure for their improvement, would be withheld, or grudgingly bestowed? How careful would the guardians of this great social concern be, in the selection of teachers; and how highly would those be honored, who faithfully and wisely discharged the duties of this most important office!

Whether we realize it or not, the most important trust we have to commit to others, is the care of our children,—the most momentous of all our social concerns is the education of our children. Who, that has any forecast, can look upon the rising generation, without heartfelt solicitude? Out of these infants and joyous youth are to arise the wise and good men and women, that shall bless,—and the ignorant and vicious men and women, that shall curse the coming age. Can any one be indifferent whether they shall turn out to be of the one class or of the other? Because a few years will intervene before their characters shall be unfolded—because the change from infancy to manhood will be gradual, let it never, for a moment, be forgotten, that a momentous change is coming to all children that live. In every infant there are the rudiments of a man or a woman.

When we look at a flower—see its calix filled with petals of exquisite form, of the most delicate texture, of diverse colors so rich and nicely blended, that no art can equal them,—and withal perpetually diffusing a delicious perfume, we can hardly believe that all this variety of charms was evolved from a little seed, not larger than the head of a pin.

When we contemplate a sturdy oak, that has for a hundred years defied the blasts of winter,—has spread wide around its sheltering limbs, and has seemed to grow only more hardy the more it has been pelted by the storm, we find it difficult to persuade ourselves that the essence, the elements of all this body and strength were once concealed in an acorn. Yet such are the facts of the vegetable world. Nor are they half so curious and wonderful as the facts which are disclosed in the history of the human mind and heart.

Here is a man, now master of twenty languages, who can converse in their own tongues with persons of as many different nations,—whose only utterance thirty years ago, was very much like, and not any more articulate than the bleating of a lamb. Or, it may be, that he, who could then send forth only a wailing cry, is now overwhelming the crowded forum, or swaying the Legislature of the nation by his eloquence, fraught with surpassing wisdom.

There is another, who can conceive the structure, and direct the

building of the mighty ship that shall bear an embattled host around the world; or the man, who can devise the plan of a magnificent temple, and guide the construction of every part, until it shall present to the eye of the beholder a perfect whole, glowing with the unspeakable beauty of a symmetrical form. And here is a third, who has comprehended the structure of the solar system. He has ascertained the sizes of the planets, and at what precise moments they shall severally complete their circuits. He has even weighed the sun,—measured the distances of some of the fixed stars,—and foretold the very hour, “when the dread comet,” after an absence of centuries, “shall to the forehead of our evening sky return.” These men are the same beings, who, thirty years ago, were puling infants, scarcely equal in their intelligence to kittens of a week old.

There, too, is a man who sways the destiny of nations. His empire embraces half the earth, and throughout his wide domains his will is law. At his command, hundreds of thousands rush to arms, the pliant subjects of his insatiable ambition, ready to pour out their blood like water at his bidding. He arranges them as he pleases, to execute his purpose. He directs their movements, as if they were the creatures of his hand. He plunges them into battle, and wades to conquest over their dead and mangled bodies. That man, the despotic power of whose mind overawes the world, was once a feeble babe, who had neither the disposition nor the strength to harm a fly.

On the other hand, there is one who now evinces unconquerable energy, and the spirit of willing self-sacrifice in works of benevolence. No toil seems to overbear his strength. No discouragement impairs his resolution. No dangers disarm his fortitude. He will penetrate into the most loathsome haunts of poverty or vice, that he may relieve the wretched, and reclaim the abandoned. He will traverse continents, and expose himself to the capricious cruelty of barbarous men, that he may bear to them the glad tidings of salvation. Or, he will calmly face the scorn or rage of the civilized world, in opposition to the wrong, however sanctioned by custom or hallowed by time; or march firmly to the stake, in maintenance of the true and the right. This man, a few years ago, might have been seen crying for a sugar-plum, or quarreling with his little sister for a two-penny toy.

And who are they that are infesting society with their daring crimes—scattering about them “firebrands, arrows, and death;” boldly setting at defiance the laws of man and of God? Are they not the same being that a few years ago were children, who, could they have conceived of such deeds of darkness as they now perpetrate without compunction, would have shrunk from them instinctively with horror?

These surely are prodigious changes, greater far than any exhibited in the vegetable world. And are they not changes of infinitely greater moment? The growth of a mighty tree from a small seed may be matter for wonder—for admiration; but the development of a being, capable of such tremendous agencies for good or for evil, should be with us all a matter of the deepest concern. Strange—passing strange; that it is not so! Go through the community and you shall find hundreds ready to adopt the best plans for the culture of vegetables, or fruit trees, where you will find one who is watching with due care over the growth of his immortal child.—*Rev. Mr. May's Lecture before the American Institute.*