

## George Hosmer Address to the Erie County Common School Education Society, February 3, 1840

*Gentlemen of this Society, and Fellow Citizens:*

We are assembled to promote Common School Education; to wake up our own minds, and if possible, to rouse the attention of the public to its importance. The object is worthy of all that we can do. It is a noble object; and it is pleasant to see so many drawn together by motives so honorable to them. It is an omen of promise, that you have broken away from ordinary engagements, and come to consult together for what is not immediately connected with the material results of life. We are here not to devise means of affluence, not to build up the partition walls of a sect, not to be drilled in the tactics of political partisanship; we have come for the good of our children, and of the rising generation; for the prosperity of our country and the elevation of humanity.

Yes, for humanity have you come. The friend of Common Schools, is the benefactor of his race; he occupies a high and commanding position; every thing (sic) that he does, tells upon unborn generations. Philanthropy has many fields into which she sends her laborers, but in none is the harvest more sure than in that of the Common Schools. A transforming power resides in these humble institutions. By these the rude masses of mental ore are refined, wrought into form, and prepared for circulation. By these, the lime stone is cut out from the quarry, the hidden beauties of its marble veins are disclosed, and it is placed in the front of architectural grandeur or,—to seek a closer analogy in things of life, by our Common Schools, the tender vine of immortal growth is lifted from the ground, and trained up so that it may enrobe itself, and every thing to which it clings, with leaves and flowers, and bear on its branches clusters of grateful fruit.

By legislation, the environment of a man only is affected, but education affects the man himself. Laws and civil institutions clothe the body of society, and protect it from harm, and open ways for its free passage; but education changes the character of that body's soul, and prepares it for the reception of liberty and law. The school then stands paramount to the halls of legislation; the district school-house has a vast significance; it is a main prop to the republic, and even our holy religion, finds but a scanty admission to minds which have not been opened and disciplined by education. The schoolmaster must go before the missionary, or, at least they must go together, in order that the heathen kingdoms of the earth may become the kingdoms of our Lord. And here at home, the school-house and the church must stand side by side, or the friends of our Zion will be left to mourn over her desolation.

The New England fathers, and I love to hold them in remembrance, understood these things; as soon as they had made a shelter for themselves, they provided means to educate their children. The infant spirit of our nation's freedom was nursed in those rude schoolhouses, which our fathers reared; and therefore it was that Berkeley, the Colonial Governor of Virginia, writing to his Royal Master, just upon the eve of our revolution, could find it in his heart to declare, "I thank God, we have no free schools in this Province, for they are the nurseries of heresy and insubordination."

It is said of John Milton, that, when the dark days of calamity came upon Old England in the reign of the first Charles, he was travelling on the Continent. He was a faithful son, and when he knew that his father-land had need of him, he hasted home, and what should he do think you; harangue the disaffected multitudes that thronged the streets, and hung around the parliament-house? No, this would have been but stirring the froth of troubled waters: Milton took deep views, he opened a school, in which, together with his masterly writings, he labored to prepare minds for the coming struggles for right and liberty.

What has been done by popular education, may help us to catch a glimpse of what may be done — what must be done, if we would not have the experiment of free institutions fail in our hands. The Common School, is a lever by which the world can be moved; all it wants is a sure prop — a faithful support from the body of the people. And is it not strange that people are not more awake upon this subject, and especially in these young communities, that are daily rising into strength, and taking their enduring form and character? Each man, says a writer, whose words are not wide and deep enough to hold his thoughts— "Each man builds his house, and beyond that creates his world, and above and beyond all, makes the heaven or hell of his future being." And fellow citizens, we, the early settlers of these fertile and beautiful regions, are making a world. — Our children, and those of our neighbors, are the materials from which it is to be made; and what kind of a world are we making? What would we have it? Shall it be darkened by ignorance, shall it be distracted by demagogues and dogmatical sectaries, shall it worship mammon, shall it be polluted with crime, and become the dwelling-place of disorder and misery? or—all opposite to this; would you have it distinguished by knowledge and quickening intelligence, and by sound and generous views of truth and duty? What would we have our country and our city, fifty years from now? I know how frail we are, and would live and speak in meekness and humility; but how can a conscientious man but tremble with mingled fear and joy, when he thinks how much we may do for the weal or wo of the generations that will come after us?

Think of these elements, the children of present society, out of which we are to form the society of the next age. What mines of unwrought intellect, what magazines of sleeping energies, what capacities for high purpose and sterling worth, what germs of promise! It was upon children such as these that are around us today, that Jesus pronounces the memorable words "of such is the kingdom of Heaven." Oh, it is fearful to think how the youthful spirit may be perverted. May God forbid that the light of hope and promise on our children, should become the darkness of despair!

Our homes and our schools are the nurseries in which these hopeful germs of humanity are to be cherished into life, and bent upward to their destinies. I would not compare home and the school, as places for the exertion of influence upon a child's mind. — Home should be the birth-place of the best qualities which enter into the forming character; but since the homes of society, such as they be, some good and some bad, are in a great measure beyond the reach of our influence; our hopes must lean the more upon our Common Schools—into these we must gather all the little ones, who are to be the men and women, the fathers and mothers of future society, and make truth and virtue as common, and as free to them, as the air they breathe. The common school—and I think it should be free to all—is the grand instrument to elevate the mass of society. It is the people's college; its doors should be open to every child, and care should be taken that every one goes through and obtains his degree; not perhaps of bachelor, or master of arts, but his qualification for citizenship. There is no country upon earth, that so much needs the common free school as ours, and especially this portion of it. Ignorance is always dangerous to a people, just in proportion to their liberty and opportunities. One of the perils that besets us, comes out of a grasping spirit of accumulation. The vast regions of fertile country which have been opened around us, and the trade and commerce that have arisen in consequence, have inflamed our acquisitive desires. Men have turned from the consideration of their higher destinies; they have sunk down into the coarse interests of money-getters, and bond and mortgage-holders. Shall avarice be the grave of our nation's virtue and glory? God forbid. Keep open then, the common free schools, and in them let our children acquire a taste for knowledge, let their intelligence and moral sense be awakened, let them learn by precept and experience, that a well informed mind and a conscience void of offence towards God and man, are the best treasures in the universe.

Another peril that besets us, come out of the abuse of our free institutions. The paths to the honors and emoluments of office, are wide open. It is the glory of our country, that they child who was born and nursed in the humblest dwelling, the poor man's boy, may rise to the highest official station, and stand among the honorable in the land. But such opportunity inflames lawless desire; crowds of demagogues, bearing any party name, that will best serve their purpose, throng every avenue of public life. Would we have these children in our homes and in the streets, the dupes of such men, and the successors to their meanness and disgrace? No! Keep open then the common free schools, in which they may acquire intelligence and virtue enough to perceive and abhor the fawning, hypocritical arts of corrupt ambition.

Another peril that besets us, comes with our religious liberty. Thanks be to God, we were "free born," --- "freedom to worship God," was the boon for which our fathers made their homes in the wilderness, and they have given it unto us. Would that it never had been violated! But no sky is without clouds; perils come with religious liberty; sects arise; the body of Christ is rent asunder; the unalloyed beam of heavenly truth is broken and scattered; and who shall be allowed to dictate to the coming generations, what they must believe, and to what sect they must belong? No man openly dare do this; no truth-loving man would desire to do it, for we all are fallible. Keep open then your Common Free Schools, not to indoctrinate children in controverted theology, by no means, but to awaken their intelligence and moral sense, so that they may be capable, each for himself, of determining what is religious truth, and of applying it

to their spiritual wants. Make the people intelligent, quicken their moral natures, let them be free, and they will find the truth. They may wander long in error, whole generations may grope in its darkness, but let man be thoroughly educated and he will find the light of truth at last, as surely as a bee will find the honey of the flowers, or, the bird in autumn, the warmer clime. Man and truth were made for each other—true education reconciles them.

But I must restrain further expression upon these topics; perhaps some are already inquiring why so much discussion about the importance of popular education and common schools? I know the subject is hackneyed, but it is not every hackneyed subject, that is duly appreciated by the mass of society. — Our common schools have been much talked of— in some fashion they have been maintained—individuals have discovered their importance; but how few, comparatively, have a just conception of what these institutions may do for society! Thousands among us have not dreamed of the effects of popular education; they have complained of its expensiveness, not foreseeing [sic] that it will diminish vagrancy and pauperism and crime; that it will be an antidote to mobs, and prevent the necessity of a standing army to keep our own people in order; every people may make their choice “To pay teachers, or recruiting sergeants,” to support schools, or constables and watchmen.

But this is the lowest view of popular education; and while, in a single paragraph, I would show how it may keep the rising generation from the poorhouse and the State’s prison, I would, if there were opportunity, spend whole days to show how it may prepare our children to be useful citizens, and good men. The fear of evil, should make us prize our common schools, but the hope of good, should make us prize them much more. It is well, undoubtedly, to consider the darkness from which they may keep society ; but still better is it, to look to the glorious light into which they may help to guide the coming generations—the light of true liberty, general intelligence, and public and private virtue. Hope is better than fear; and in our minds, we should not associate the school-house with ignorance and penitentiaries, but with whatever is patriotic and humane—with the halls of legislation and justice, and with the churches of Christ.

I repeat, the effects of popular education are not appreciated. Indeed, there are many parents who do not consider the value of education to their own children. They would have them dress fashionably, and go into the genteel society, and they are ready to do almost any thing to become rich and leave wealth to their families; but a good education they do not hold to be a requisite of life. How short sighted, to clothe the body fashionably, and let the mind go naked! to be absorbed by an ambition to be in genteel society, and suffer vulgar ignorance to brood over the soul! to scheme and delve to make one’s family rich, when the members of it, for want of education, are utterly incompetent to use and enjoy affluence! What is the use to build fine houses and fill them with elegance, and leave them to be occupied by ignorant and vulgar children? “Cast not pearls before swine.”

When shall we give heed to the incontrovertible fact, that, in general, a large amount of wealth corrupts a family? The second or third generation from those who acquire fortunes, almost invariably sink into pitiable imbecility or abandoned vice. Some attention to the history of affluent families in different parts our country, leads me the more confidently to make this

assertion; but education strengthens and elevates those who are blest by it. Let us cease to be anxious to lay up money for our children and turn our interest to their education. All requisite means should be liberally provided,---good school-houses decently furnished and eligibly situated, such as we ourselves should be willing to spend our time in,---suitable books, and above all, competent teachers. It is in vain to build school-houses, and buy books, and be at the trouble of sending children to school, unless we provide teachers who are competent to their instruction---as are the teachers, such will be the schools, and such will be the scholars. Unworthy ideas have been very generally entertained concerning the instruction of youth...

**p. 13**

In years past, the whole subject of instruction has received increasing attention from the thinking men of every civilized country; and it is interesting to look back thirty years and note the changes that have been made in the modes of education. The whole process has been remodelled; the most of its branches have been completely reversed—analysis has taken the place of synthesis. Twenty-five years ago the child was made to begin with generals and end with particulars. The first question in Geography was “How far is the equator from each pole?” now he begins by bounding his father’s garden, and ends where he once began. In Arithmetic the child now begins by counting his own fingers; so he goes on, till, from examples, he deduces the rule; —he used to begin—if I remember rightly—with a hard lesson about enumeration, and then came the abstract rules of addition to be committed to memory before the child had the least idea of their meaning; and so in Grammar,---who will ever forget those dull lessons about such hard words as syntax, etymology, prosody, and the conjugation of verbs? I am glad that our children have escaped that old dispensation under which the name must be learned and fixed in the mind, before the object was presented to the eye; and the rule fully drilled into the indifferent intellect before a case was presented to be solved by it. —And there is room enough still for improvement in the modes of education, and teachers should be familiar with the principles of science and the laws of mind, so that they may carry on the reform, and bring mind and truth into actual contact...

**p. 17**

In this country, in which there are so many paths open to honor and usefulness, it is in vain to expect the services of faithful and competent teachers, so long as their average compensation is but little more than we pay to the common day-laborer, who tends masons or mends the highway. Even in our cities, the salaries of teachers are but little if any larger than those which are paid to many intelligent merchant-clerks, who are still in their teens...

**p. 22**

Such is the auspicious commencement of free schools in Western New York. It is true there have been expenses in the outfit, especially for building school-houses, which in these times have fallen heavily upon some districts; but it is to be hoped that our citizens will cheerfully bear the present burden, in view of the immense advantages that will accrue to our children and coming generations. Free Schools are a noble monument to the patriotism and philanthropy of those who establish and maintain them. Let them rise every where in the midst of our new homes,

and stand to tell our children and the generations yet unborn, how earnestly we sought their welfare.

But more than this,—I regard this subject in religion's light. Solemn responsibilities have been laid upon us. God has bound all his children together by the ties of humanity. His Son enjoined upon us the command of active love. We must do what we can for the good of each other. The strong must help the weak; -the wise the ignorant;,-the affluent the needy. It is the order of nature. It is the command of God. Oh! how can he appear before that judgment-seat where Omniscience presides, who has withheld his means or personal influence, and suffered the child of his poor neighbor to grow up in ignorance, and thus become prepared for sin and misery!