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THE SOCIAL CENTER

A MEANS OF COMMON UNDERSTANDING

An address delivered by Hon. Woodrow Wilson, Governor of New Jersey, before the First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development, at Madison, Wis., October 25, 1911.

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UNIVERSITY EXTENSION DIVISION

Department of General Information and Welfare

MADISON, WIS.

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THE SOCIAL CENTER

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An address delivered by Hon. Woodrow Wilson, Governor of New Jersey, before the First National Conference on Civic and Social Center Development, at Madison, Wis., October 25, 1911.

I do not feel that I have deserved the honor of standing here upon this occasion to make what has been courteously called the principal address, because five months ago I did not know anything about this movement. I have taken no active part in it, and I am not going to assume, as those who have preceded me have assumed, that you know what the movement is. I want, if for no other purpose than to clarify my own thinking, to state as briefly as possible, what the movement is.

The object of the movement is to make the school-house the civic center of the community, at any rate in

such communities as are supplied with no other place of common resort.

Ready for Use—The Means of Concerting Common Life

It is obvious that the schoolhouse is in most communities used only during certain hours of the day, those hours when the rest of the community is busily engaged in bread-winning work. It occurred to the gentlemen who started this movement that inasmuch as the schoolhouses belonged to the community it was perfectly legitimate that the community should use them for its own entertainment and schooling when the young people were not occupying them. And that, therefore, it would be a good idea to have there all sorts of gatherings, for social purposes, for purposes of entertainment, for purposes of conference, for any legitimate thing that might bring neighbors and friends together in the schoolhouses. That, I understand it, in its simplest terms is the civic center movement—that the schoolhouses might be made a place of meeting—in short, where by meeting each other the people of a community might know each other, and by knowing each other might concert a common life, a common action.

Spontaneous Development

The study of the civic center is the study of the spontaneous life of communities. What you do is to open the schoolhouse and light it in the evening and say: "Here is a place where you are welcome to come and do anything that it occurs to you to do."

And the interesting thing about this movement is that a great many things have occurred to people to do in the schoolhouse, things social, things educational, things political,—for one of the reasons why politics took on a new

complexion in the city in which this movement originated was that the people who could go into the schoolhouses at night knew what was going on in that city and insisted upon talking about it, and the minute they began talking about it, many things became impossible, for there are scores of things that must be put a stop to in our politics that will stop the moment they are talked of where men will listen. The treatment for bad politics is exactly the modern treatment for tuberculosis—it is exposure to the open air.

Now you have to begin at the root of the matter in order to understand what it is you intend to serve by this movement. You intend to serve the life of communities, the life that is there, the life that you cannot create, the life to which you can only give release and opportunity; and wherein does that life consist? That is the question that interests me. There can be no life in a community so long as its parts are segregated and separated. It is just as if you separated the organs of the human body and then expected them to produce life. You must open wide the channels of sympathy and communication between them, you must make channels for the tides of life; if you clog them anywhere, if you stop them anywhere, why then the processes of disease set in, which are the processes of misunderstanding, which are the disconnections between the spiritual impulses of different sections of men.

Common Center Essential to Community Life

The very definition of community is a body of men who have things in common, who are conscious that they have things in common, who judge those common things from a single point of view, namely, the point of view of general interest. Such a thing as a community is unthinkable, therefore, unless you have close communication; there must be a vital inter-relationship of parts, there

must be a fusion, there must be a coördination, there must be a free intercourse, there must be such a contact as will constitute union itself before you will have the true course of the wholesome blood throughout the body.

Therefore, when you analyze some of our communities you will see just how necessary it is to get their parts together. Take some of our great cities for example. Do you not realize by common gossip even, the absolute disconnection of what we call their residential sections from the rest of the city? Isn't it singular that while human beings live all over a city, we pick out a part, a place where there are luxurious and well-appointed houses and call that the residential section? As if nobody else lived anywhere in that city. That is the place where the most disconnected part and in some instances the most useless part of the community lives. There men do not know their next-door neighbors; there men do not want to know their next-door neighbors; there is no bond of sympathy; there is no bond of knowledge or common acquaintance-ship.

I am not speaking of these things to impeach a class, for I know of no just way in which to impeach a class.

It is necessary that such portions of the community should be linked with the other portions; it is necessary that simple means should be found by which by an interchange of points of view we may get together, for the whole process of modern life, the whole process of modern politics, is a process by which we must exclude misunderstandings, exclude hostilities, exclude deadly rivalries, make men understand other men's interests, bring all men into common counsel, and so discover what is the common interest.

That is the problem of modern life which is so specialized that it is almost devitalized, so disconnected that the tides of life will not flow.

Means to the Unity of Communities

My interest in this movement, as it has been described to me, has been touched with enthusiasm because I see in it a channel for the restoration of the unity of communities. Because I am told that things have already happened which bear promise of this very thing.

I was told what is said to be a typical story of a very fine lady, a woman of very fine natural parts, but very fastidious, whose automobile happened to be stalled one night in front of an open schoolhouse where a meeting was going on over which her seamstress was presiding. She was induced by some acquaintances of hers whom she saw going into the building, to go in, and was at first filled with disdain; she didn't like the looks of some of the people, there was too much mixture of the sort she didn't care to associate with—an employe of her own was presiding—but she was obliged to stay a little while, it was the most comfortable place to stay while her automobile was repaired, and before she could get away she had been touched with the generous contagion of the place. Here were people of all sorts talking about things that were interesting, that revealed to her things that she had never dreamed of before with regard to the vital common interests of persons whom she had always thought unlike herself, so that the community of the human heart was revealed to her, the singleness of human life.

Worth Any Effort to Promote

Now if this thing does that, it is worth any effort to promote it. If it will do that, it is the means by which we shall create communities. And nothing else will produce liberty—you cannot have liberty where men do not want the same liberty, you cannot have it where they are not in sympathy with one another, you cannot have it where they do not understand one another, you cannot

have it when they are not seeking common things by common means, you simply cannot have it; we must study the means by which these things are produced.

In the first place, don't you see that you produce communities by creating common feeling? I know that a great emphasis is put upon the mind, in our day, and as a university man I should perhaps not challenge the supremacy of the intellect, but I have never been convinced that mind was really monarch in our day, or in any day that I have yet read of, or, if it is monarch, it is one of the modern monarchs that rules and reigns but does not govern.

Common Feeling Essential to Free Government

What really controls our action is feeling. We are governed by the passions and the most that we can manage by all our social and political endeavors is that the handsome passions shall be in the majority—the passion of sympathy, the passion of justice, the passion of fair dealing, the passion of unselfishness, (if it may be elevated into a passion). If you can once see that a working majority is obtained for the handsome passions, for the feelings that draw us together, rather than for the feelings that separate us, then you have laid the foundation of a community and a free government and, therefore, if you can do nothing else in the community center than draw men together so that they will have common feeling, you will have set forward the cause of civilization and the cause of human freedom.

As a basis of the common feeling you must have a mutual comprehension. The fundamental truth in modern life, as I analyze it, is a profound ignorance. I am not one of those who challenge the promoters of special interests on the ground that they are malevolent, that they are bad men; I challenge their leadership on the ground

that they are ignorant men, that when you have absorbed yourself in a particular business through half your life, you have no other point of view than the point of view of that business and that, therefore, you are disqualified by ignorance from giving counsel as to the common interests.

A witty English writer once said: "If you chain a man's head to a ledger and knock off something from his wages every time he stops adding up, you can't expect him to have enlightened views about the antipodes." Simply, if you immerse a man in a given undertaking, no matter how big that undertaking is, and keep him immersed for half a life time, you can't expect him to see any horizon, you can't expect him to see human life steadily or see it whole.

Means to Liberal Education

I once made this statement that a university was intended to make young people just as unlike their fathers as possible. By which I do not mean anything disrespectful to their fathers, but merely this, by the time a man is old enough to have children in college, his point of view is apt to have become so specialized that they would better be taken away from him and put in a place where their views of life will be regeneralized and they will be disconnected from the family and connected with the world. That, I understand to be the function of education, of the liberal education.

Now a kind of liberal education must underlie every wholesome political and social process, the kind of liberal education which connects a man's feeling and his comprehension with the general run of mankind, which disconnects him from the special interests and marries his thought to the common interests of great communities and of great cities and of great states and of great nations, and, if possible, with that brotherhood of man that transcends the boundaries of nations themselves.

Those are the horizons to my mind of this social center movement, that they are going to unite the feelings and clarify the comprehension of communities, of bodies of men who draw together in conference.

Conference Always Modifies and Improves Thought

I would like to ask if this is not the experience of every person here who has ever acted in any conference of any kind. Did you ever go out of a conference with exactly the same views with which you went in? If you did, I am sorry for you, you must be thought-tight. For my part I can testify that I never carried a scheme into a conference without having it profoundly modified by the criticism of the other men in the conference and without recognizing when I came out that the product of the common council bestowed upon it was very much superior to any private thought that might have been used for its development. The processes of attrition, the contributions to consensus of minds, the compromises of thought create those general movements which are the streams of tendency and the streams of development.

Will Make Easier Solution of Great Problems

And so it seems to me that what is going to be produced by this movement,—not all at once, by slow and tedious stages, no doubt, but nevertheless very certainly in the end,—is in the first place a release of common forces now undiscovered, now somewhere banked up, and now somewhere unavailable, the removal of barriers to the common understanding, the opening of mind to mind, the clarification of the air and the release in that clarified air of forces that can live in it, and just so certainly as you release those forces you make easier the fundamental problem of modern society, which is the problem of accommodating the various interests in modern society to one another.”

Adjustment Necessary to Liberty

I used to teach my classes in the university that liberty was a matter of adjustment and I was accustomed to illustrate it in this way; when you have perfectly assembled the parts of a great steam engine, for example, then when it runs, you say that it runs free; that means that the adjustment is so perfect that the friction is reduced to a minimum, doesn't it, and the minute you twist any part out of alignment, the minute you lose adjustment, then there is a buckling up and the whole thing is rigid and useless. Now to my mind, that is the image of human liberty; the individual is free in proportion to his perfect accommodation to the whole, or to put it the other way, in proportion to the perfect adjustment of the whole to his life and interests.

Take another illustration; you are sailing a boat, when do you say that she is running free, when you have thrown her up into the wind? No, not at all. Every stick and stitch in her shivers and you say she is in irons; nature has grasped her and says: "You cannot go that way;" but let her fall off, let the sheet fill and see her run like a bird skimming the waters. Why is she free? Because she has adjusted herself to the great force of nature that is brewed with the breath of the wind. She is free in proportion as she is adjusted, as she is obedient, and so men are free in society in proportion as their interests are accommodated to one another, and that is the problem of liberty.

Analysis Accomplished—Now Assembled

Liberty as now expressed is unsatisfactory in this country and in other countries because there has not been a satisfactory adjustment and you cannot readjust the parts until you analyze them. Very well, we have analyzed them. Now this movement is intended to contrib-

ute to an effort to assemble them, bring them together, let them look one another in the face, let them reckon with one another and then they will coöperate and not before.

You cannot bring adjustment into play until you have got the consent of the parts to act together, and then when you have got the adjustment, when you have discovered and released those forces and they have accommodated themselves to each other, you have that control which is the sovereignty of the people.

There is no sovereignty of the people if the several sections of the people be at loggerheads with one another; sovereignty comes with coöperation, sovereignty comes with mutual protection, sovereignty comes with the quick pulses of sympathy, sovereignty comes by a common impulse.

You say and all men say that great political changes are impending in this country. Why do you say so? Because everywhere you go you find men expressing the same judgment, alive to the same circumstances, determined to solve the problems by acting together no matter what older bonds they may break, no matter what former prepossessions they may throw off, determined to get together and do the thing.

Enlightened Control in Place of Management

And so you know that changes are impending because what was a body of scattered sentiment is now becoming a concentrated force, and so with sympathy and understanding comes control, for, in place of this control of enlightened and sovereign opinions, we have had in the field of politics as elsewhere, the reign of management, and management is compounded of these two things, secrecy plus concentration.

You cannot manage a nation, you cannot manage the people of a state, you cannot manage a great population, you can manage only some central force; what you do, therefore, if you want to manage in politics or anywhere else is to choose a great single force or single group of forces, and then find some man or men sagacious and secretive enough to manage the business without being discovered. And that has been done for a generation in the United States.

Now, the schoolhouse among other things is going to break that up. Is it not significant that this thing is being erected upon the foundation originally laid in America, where we saw from the first that the schoolhouse and the church were to be the pillars of the Republic? Is it not significant that as if by instinct we return to those sources of liberty undefiled which we find in the common meeting place, in the place owned by everybody, in the place where nobody can be excluded, in the place to which everybody comes as by right?

And so what we are doing is simply to open what was shut, to let the light come in upon places that were dark, to substitute for locked doors, open doors, for it does not make any difference how many or how few come in provided anybody who chooses may come in. So as soon as you have established that principle, you have openings, and these doors are open as if they were the flood gates of life.

Faith In People Justified

I do not wonder that men are exhibiting an increased confidence in the judgments of the people, because wherever you give the people a chance such as this movement has given them in the schoolhouse, they avail themselves of it. This is not a false people, this is not a people guided by blind impulses, this is a people who want to think, who want to think right, whose feelings are based.

upon justice, whose instincts are for fairness and for the light.

So what I see in this movement is a recovery of the constructive and creative genius of the American people, because the American people as a people are so far different from others in being able to produce new things, to create new things out of old.

This Movement Fundamentally American

I have often thought that we overlook the fact that the real sources of strength in the community come from the bottom. Do you find society renewing itself from the top? Don't you find society renewing itself from the ranks of unknown men? Do you look to the leading families to go on leading you? Do you look to the ranks of the men already established in authority to contribute sons to lead the next generation? They may, sometimes they do, but you can't count on them; and what you are constantly depending on is the rise out of the ranks of unknown men, the discovery of men whom you had passed by, the sudden disclosure of capacity you had not dreamed of, the emergence of somebody from some place of which you had thought the least, of some man unanointed from on high, to do the thing that the generation calls for. Who would have looked to see Lincoln save a nation? Who that knew Lincoln when he was a lad and a youth and a young man—but all the while there was springing up in him as if he were connected with the very soil itself, the sap of a nation, the vision of a great people, a sympathy so ingrained and intimate with the common run of men that he was like the People impersonated, sublimated, touched with genius. And it is to such sources that we must always look.

No man can calculate the courses of genius, no man can foretell the leadership of nations. And so we must see to

it that the bottom is left open, we must see to it that the soil of the common feeling of the common consciousness is always fertile and unclogged, for there can be no fruit unless the roots touch the rich sources of life.

And it seems to me that the schoolhouses dotted here, there, and everywhere, over the great expanse of this nation, will some day prove to be the roots of that great tree of liberty which shall spread for the sustenance and protection of all mankind.

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