

“Freedom—Individual and International” by Miss Helen Parkhurst, August Convocation 1928 (from October 1928 Alumni Monthly)

It is an honor to be asked to speak upon such an occasion as this, but I have not found it easy to select a subject upon which I would feel myself sufficiently competent to speak, and at the same time justify, in a measure at least, the distinction you have conferred upon me, in asking that I officiate at your commencement.

I have not deemed it appropriate to deal specifically with any of the questions which touch upon my own work, although these questions are the ones which are naturally foremost in my thoughts, and together constitute the great problem modern education has set itself to solve.

However, although I have not felt it appropriate to deal with any one phase of this important matter, I have deemed it suitable to such an occasion to say something regarding the matter of freedom—freedom as it applies to the individual and also freedom as it applies to nations.

Freedom is not only significant for the individual, but also for international relationships, for freedom is necessary for the peace and harmony of the world. Today, the entire world, politically, industrially and spiritually, is concerned with a condition which is both philosophical and educational; a condition which expresses as yet unrealized possibilities, economic as well as cultural, all summarized in the word “freedom.” The word is all too lightly used and seldom understood, and when viewed from different angles, it seems to assume new meanings.

We are aware of individuals who seem to expect the fruits of labor without the sacrifice of sublimated toil; but we are not sufficiently aware of the fact that the countries of the world, are demanding an unearned state of mind and conscience, a peace and harmony on a level just beyond reach, because they have not earned the freedom they desire through spiritual labor and sacrifice. Comparatively, we are, in a large measure, free for today, we are physically and intellectually freer, but man and his world will not enjoy true freedom, until he is as free spiritually in the same degree that he is physically and intellectually free.

Let us first consider the individual and this freedom and then turn to those larger aspects of freedom as they affect the world we live in.

Individual Freedom

When we express a desire to be free, we intimate that we are enslaved and that we wish to be liberated from something; from people, or from things, or conditions which impede our progress towards some cherished goal. Freedom is not an end, but rather a useful means by which we achieve something. If I do not analyze this condition, if I do not think it through to completeness, I may imagine that merely being free is sufficient for my happiness. However, once free, I must always say to myself, “Now what?”, meaning, “What can I do with my freedom?” Then I proceed, either to enslave myself again, or to use my freedom toward the attainment of something real within myself, something which perhaps even I may only half understand at the start but which clarifies of itself and later takes on true form as I proceed. The result may be crude to other eyes, but if I have been sincere in expressing something real within myself, the external result is unimportant. The inner experience will always prove a stepping-stone to a still higher level, where again I am bound to conceive of freedom anew. We must recognize that through freedom our personalities constantly go through levels of refinement, and for the very reason that we are always growing, our work is never complete.

Neither can an individual continue to enjoy a freedom just attained, because freedom is not permanent, it is transitory. That individual who does not strive to go on and be free on a new level does not remain on the level just attained, but slips to a lower one. We must choose whether we will go forward or back. Life is continuous activity and affords us an opportunity to exercise completely. We should constantly renew our efforts for the result will be ever the same, progression or retrogression.

When we desire individuals to be free, we should inquire into the conditions which enslave them and which impede their development and progress, towards a realization of their inner potentialities.

When we desire freedom for nations, we must inquire into the impositions from without which do not fit and which may rob a particular native or indigenous civilization of its natural rights.

It is not necessary here to go into conditions of institutional life more than to say that even here by freedom we mean, not only mental and physical freedom, but that complete liberation, which is mental, also physical, but above all spiritual. Freedom within the school for instance, whether it be a college or a school for children, can only come through a complete reorganization of all of those forces which affect the life and activities of the students. It is the understanding and control of these phenomena which constitute the problem of giving an education.

Individual Development

Each individual must develop, and if he is to do so, he must exercise and express what is within himself. Otherwise he will not realize his potential goal. Each individual is as unlike any other individual as a blade of grass is from another. We are confronted with as many similarities in people as we find in blades of grass. These very similarities have been the source of mischief for they have caused confusion. Each must develop in his own way. We have looked for an easy solution to the problem. There is none, and we must proceed simply and humbly so as not to increase the difficulties. The problem is how to free each individual from all those things which handicap him. In the freeing process, if we are alert, we will discover that any one individual's difficulties are just a shade removed from his neighbor's, but it is that very shade which makes him a separate problem, and within that shade lies his genius.

Only that individual can be considered liberated and free who has a proper attitude and respect for all mankind. This will mean faith, tolerance, and charity, and then will come understanding and a semblance at least, of spiritual brotherhood.

Principles for World Harmony

Let us apply these principles of freedom to the peace and harmony of the world. It is the more difficult for us because we live in a country where we are free from prevalent poverty which so burdens many other nations. We are not oppressed and we are at peace with our neighbors. We are generous, impulsively so, and pour our treasures into the lap of a suffering nation when a need is called to our attention. But are we tolerant, are we as a nation our brother's keeper, do we consider ourselves one of a family in the family of nations accepting our responsibility spiritually in the sense that we recognize another's need to enjoy our kind of right to be free in the sense of enjoying the right to be individual and different from others, with common although not identical needs. Today this is a grave concern because the world has shrunk in the sense that modern inventions have brought our neighbors to our door step with comparatively no effort on our part. Since the great War we have been forced to consider our national freedom in a new light because there is a grave danger that our increased material wealth which has freed us economically, may, if we are not watchful, enslave our spiritual life. This would make freedom synonymous with bondage and like ancient Rome we might fall at the height of material prosperity. Certain far-seeing individuals of my acquaintance, valuing highly their spiritual freedom have made many personal sacrifices and have become engaged in those interests and pursuits which would give them a development which would offset and safeguard them from material enslavement. Our Spiritual heritage is that of a simple, courageous, straight forward people who forged a new country to the end that freedom might be made possible for the generations to come. We must not sell our birth right for a mere mess of pottage!

We should be like the little boy who when his teacher deplored the loss of an extraordinarily creative composition, said, "Never mind, Miss . . . , that composition is right inside me and I can write it again for you."

Freedom Demands Respect

Freedom is something real to us—something which has in the past commanded the respect of the entire World! It is within our power to keep it always within ourselves as it is the soul and fibre of every true American. We are a people of a distinctive culture and civilization, characteristic of the Western World, but are we sufficiently concerned about other peoples whose culture is in many respects radically

different from our own. Are we sufficiently liberated and spiritually free to the extent that we recognize differences of culture do not necessarily connote a relationship of superiority and inferiority. Are we struggling with ourselves to understand the needs of others, or is our feeling of security so great that we take no thought of the need to others to enjoy the same freedom from outside domination which we enjoy?

Culture or civilization is not an entity or thing of so definite a character that its elements may be precisely stated, nor are its merits or demerits so absolute that they may be asserted to exist without regard for the material and spiritual conditions of the peoples to whom they are applied.

In the world as it exists, the merits of each culture or civilization, must depend upon the special characteristics and conditioning needs of the people possessing it. There is every possibility that for each separate people their native or indigenous civilization is, in general at least, a better one than would be an alien culture or civilization. This is so because a general manner of living, which includes social and political customs, and ethical, artistic and religious ideals, which in the aggregate constitute a civilization, is necessarily of slow growth, being the product of material and spiritual needs as they have made themselves manifest.

We can profitably study the different peoples of the world and profit by a study of culture other than our own in order to determine wherein we can improve, and also discover wherein lies the danger of attempting to substitute an alien culture for our own. Take for instance the case of China today. She is not permitted her true measure of freedom—she is seeking to free herself from limitations imposed from without which restrain the free and untrammelled exercise of her sovereign powers as befits her national right. She desires, that her territorial and administrative integrity be observed, and that she be liberated and free from foreign control which in any way limits her freedom of acting as a sovereign and nationally self conscious people. China can learn from the West, but China must be free to solve her own political problems; her economic life must not be Westernized at an advanced and forced rate for this would involve an acceptance of influences and forces which would disrupt the solidarity of the family life which is a characteristic feature of Chinese life. If we are tolerant and charitable, we will also recognize that China as well as other countries, have indigenous religions and ethical convictions which, however much they may differ from ours, exhibit certain excellencies which open minded and non-bigoted persons must recognize. Any attempts to substitute or impose alien culture for an indigenous one, whatever the outstanding merits of that culture be is bound to bring disaster to the people whose culture is displaced. In other words, if the nations of the world desire to be free, this freedom will only come through the understanding of those principles which govern and make for freedom, and if desirable results are to be attained it will only be if each country is permitted the right to retain its native or indigenous civilization as a basis to build upon and modifications introduced, only when they can be assimilated without disturbing the fundamental rights and ideals of a people. We see, therefore, that the same principles of freedom apply to nations as well as individuals and that growth is liberation. That individual or nation who is able to survey a line of former dead selves, each nobler than the last, because of efforts to seek a higher state of refinement, is in a state of being liberated, and is set free for fresh attempts and new fields, and will help to establish peace and harmony throughout the world.

Charge to Graduates

Your Alma Mater has not been concerned over merely extending your knowledge, but in furthering your development as individuals, and to the end that each one of you, might be liberated and set free to make the highest use of his own powers. She is not interested so much in what you have done, as in what you will do, because of an increased capacity and truer vision, and today as you are felicitated upon all sides, this felicitation does not go to you as a body of students, but to individuals, each full of promise, and the state sends you forth as her duly appointed ambassadors, charged with the responsibility of fulfilling a great trust.

Your education is in no sense completed as yet, that phenomena will come about by your interaction with your environment, natural and social as and to the extent that throughout your life, in your work, you set in motion all those ideas and principles which have been brought to your attention.

There is an ancient Japanese proverb that runs, "A day may be like a thousand years." That is, within the short span of even a single day, something so significant to one's life may transpire, that thereafter the course of that life may be changed completely. At times the forces of one's being seem to crystalize and take new form, in a single moment, a path suddenly seems clear, a poem is written, a friend is understood, a great truth is revealed, somehow, in that moment, a purpose is as realized, and one is forever dedicated to serve. Those are great and treasured moments in the life of any individual.

I recall one such moment while in China where I had been invited to give a series of lectures for the Society for the Advancement of Culture and Learning, the occasion being the meeting of their National Education Association. At the close of the meetings I was asked to appear and was presented with a large silk scroll on which was embroidered my name and some Chinese characters which interpreted read: "For the World, the Children's Guiding Blessing Star." It was a great moment! As I looked at the sea of several thousands of strange faces before me, the strangeness slipped away, they seemed like my own people, like people I had always known, for they had given new purpose to my existence in that moment. I realized that it was not an honor I had deserved no even could I consider it one received, but in that moment I was reborn and rededicated.

This day is particularly significant to each of you. Perhaps today will hold your great moment. Perhaps as you receive from your Alma Mater the symbol of trust and confidence which she has to confer, you will experience a rededication of you powers. If so, treasure that moment, find its inner meaning and go forth unafraid.