

DAVID WORTH DENNIS—AN APPRECIATION.

ALLEN D. HOLE

In attempting to find the way in which to express somewhat clearly and somewhat adequately the estimate which I am sure all of us have, who knew David Worth Dennis, it has seemed to be necessary to turn for help to many different sources; and so first of all, I ask leave to quote a few sentences from two men who stand among those who have the keen sight to see the unseen, and the souls sensitive to the calls of truth which come perhaps to us all, but are understood from a great distance by but the few. Such sentences as these have seemed to help more than anything else to make the kind of atmosphere in which alone men like Professor Dennis can be truly understood, truly estimated.

It is Walt Whitman who says: "Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow; as the water follows the moon, silently, with fluid steps, anywhere around the globe."

And again such words as these penned by Professor Hiram Corson: "Inspiring power must come from an author's or teacher's *being*, and not from his brain.

"Being is teaching; the highest, the only quickening mode of teaching; the only mode which secures that unconscious following of a superior spirit by an inferior spirit, of a kindled soul by an unkindled soul."

And again Professor Corson, in speaking of the value in the teaching of literature of one who unites a fullness of intellectual and spiritual vitality, says:

"The inspiring power of personality is quite as much needed in scientific training. Many are the men still living in whom the great naturalist, Professor Louis Agassiz continues to live, in this world, and they are far superior as naturalists by reason of what he elicited from them of the 'What Is.' He thus brought them into a deeply sympathetic relationship with the animal kingdom—a relationship which is the condition of sagacious insight."

A number of those present here today were in attendance at the banquet in this building a little more than seven years ago. It was, you remember, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the organization of the Indiana Academy of Science. You will also remember that Professor Dennis was on that evening at his best as he discharged with gracefulness and exceptional ability the duties of toastmaster. Dr. Foley, the President of the Academy for that year, used words in introducing Professor Dennis as presiding officer at the banquet, which deserve repetition here today, for they sum up with remarkable accuracy the character of the man to whom we today do honor. Dr. Foley said:

“There is no man in Indiana who has had more influence upon the teachers of the state, upon the schools of the state; there is no man who has been closer to the hearts of his pupils. There is no man who has had more to do with the development of science in Indiana than has Professor David W. Dennis.”

It will be difficult for us here today to pay a higher tribute than is contained in these words which we rejoice to know were said in the presence of him who so well deserved the praise they express. Professor Dennis had the qualities which might have made of him a leader in scientific research; he enjoys, indeed, a reputation as a scientist of which anyone might well be proud; but the main part of the extraordinary energy with which he was endowed went into the work of inspiring young men and women; in speaking “in the right voice” to those whom he met, and so securing “that unconscious following” from among his students, because, like Agassiz he “elicited from them of the ‘What Is.’ ”

Great is he who discovers a new truth and gives it to the world; but greater is he who discovers a young man to himself and sends this enkindled soul into the world of personalities which are groping almost blindly for, they know not what.

At a time like this, when we are facing a future bristling with problems which cause us to feel that we must summon to our aid all the best minds of the world, and yet in the face of so great needs we are reminded afresh that we must go forward without the leadership and the inspiration of one and another upon whom we have learned to look as being able to show the way to victory against even the most desperate odds, the sense of loss sustained may perhaps unfit us for making a true estimate of the character and abilities of those who have left us. As a corrective to our vision it may therefore be well to apply some principles of judgment which have been thought through in times of less emotional stress; if with such guidance we find out instinctive feelings supported we may be assured that we can both freely express what we feel and also mark out a true path of life for those who are seeking for guidance in the experiences of the past.

Such well considered principles are, fortunately for us in this instance, ready in the work of another distinguished member of the Indiana Academy of Science who responded to a toast at the banquet to which reference has already been made. Dr. David Starr Jordan, introduced by Professor Dennis and with Darwin as a text, developed for his hearers in his own clear and forcible way the following outline of the conditions necessary to the making of a great man of science; briefly stated the conditions are these:

1. Heredity.
2. Being “brought right up against nature.”
3. “Walking with a Henslow”; that is, with “a man with enthusiasm.”

I suppose that if a corrective is to be applied to our judgment of our friends, no better standard can be found than this suggested by Dr. Jordan.

And I suppose also that to a man such as Professor Dennis was, the use of such a standard, suggested by such a man as Dr. Jordan, would give the highest possible satisfaction and meet with the very fullest possible approval.

As to heredity, David Worth Dennis could trace his ancestry to representatives of English families who formed part of the company that reached New England on the Mayflower; ancestors from whom also are descended the Greenleafs and farther down the line, the poet John Greenleaf Whittier, himself; by another line the Bachilers to Daniel Webster; and by still another through the Gardners to David Worth, the maternal grandfather of David Worth Dennis. Generations of Puritan and Quaker ancestors, men and women from whom have come statesmen and literary and professional men, this is the kind of stock from which men of strength of character and of insight come.

The scientist, the enthusiastic apostle of disease prevention, and the determined seeker for the best ways to accomplish desired ends, are foreshadowed in the following incidents in the lives of his ancestors, taken from many similar ones which might be chosen:

1. His maternal grandfather, living in North Carolina, being much grieved over the death in infancy of two of his children on account, as he believed, of lack of proper medical attention, determined that he would prepare himself to be a physician. He accordingly supplied himself with the best medical books he could secure, and after having studied them carefully, drove to Philadelphia, attended lectures, received instruction from leading physicians of the city, and then returned to North Carolina where he practiced medicine for the remainder of his life with great success.

2. His mother mystified him as a little child by going at times in the morning to a certain building which stood in the yard, remaining for a short time inside, then reappearing in different dress to go away for awhile, at times for a few hours, at times for all day. Returning, she would first go to the building in the yard, and finally would come to the house in which they lived wearing her customary clothing. As a child he was warned never to go into this building in the yard, and it was not until years afterward that he learned that his mother in that way was giving assistance in cases of contagious diseases in the neighborhood, protecting her own family meantime by the best means known to her.

It is little wonder that in the fight against small-pox, typhoid fever and tuberculosis, Professor Dennis was to be found enlisted as an enthusiastic leader, always urging fearlessly the adoption of the methods approved by the latest results of scientific investigation.

And he was from his boyhood "brought right up against nature." The earlier contact with nature was incidental to the life on the farm in Wayne County, Indiana, where he was born. The later contact with nature was a continuous experience of his own choosing. He has himself said that Whittier's "Snowbound" is almost a literal description of his own boyhood experiences

in winter time. The program for one day with snows less deep than in New England was about as follows: Up at 4:30 a. m. in a room without fire; faces washed out of doors; breakfast by candle-light or lamp light; milking or preparing wood for fires, then to district school a mile away. In the evening, after supper, study for an hour; apples, cider, nuts; "speaking pieces" from the lower steps of the stairway; game of blind man's buff; prayers; to bed at nine o'clock. Such experiences have the making of sterling character in them provided they come to such as have the heredity, the oversight, and the companionship to make use of them. Professor Dennis had all these three, and his close contact with nature begun thus with the beginning of his life, was never broken. On the contrary, though in later life he of necessity spent much time in the cities, and in the school-room, he found companionship with nature wherever he might be. His class rooms were with him laboratories, his city home was surrounded with trees and birds; a visit to Panama, to Europe or to Arizona, meant out door life in large measure, and mountain climbing wherever mountains could be found.

And he, too, "walked with Henslow." No one, probably, can tell how many different names would, all told, have to be used in place of "Henslow" if the names of all the men of enthusiasm were to be recounted with whom Professor Dennis walked as a companion. Wherever he went he was drawn to men of insight, of initiative, of great ideas. One can hardly make a mistake, however, if one should name an early college teacher as among the first and greatest to kindle this easily kindled soul. He has, I am sure, in the presence of many here paid tribute to Joseph Moore and borne testimony to the inspiring, stimulating influence which came to him as he took up at Earlham College the studies which opened for him the way to his life work as a teacher. Through Joseph Moore, David Worth Dennis became an intellectual and a spiritual descendant of the great Louis Agassiz. Professor Moore had received from Agassiz that quickening of which Professor Corson spoke in the quotation already given; he had been introduced to that sympathetic relationship with not only the animal kingdom but with all created things, inanimate as well as animate, until he felt that even the specimens of rock by the roadside are sacred because they are so really the work of God. Professor Dennis could and did receive from Professor Moore in large measure this prophetic spirit, this reverence for truth which came from the great personality of Agassiz. And this touch of enthusiasm and inspiration and revelation came to add its perfecting, vivifying influence to the power of heredity and to the effect of a life which was open to the voices of nature, making thus complete the conditions for the production of the truly great man who lived among us so long, giving to us all so freely of the richness which he was constantly able to draw from the daily experiences of life.

As in the case of all men whose greatest power is found in their ability to stimulate, to quicken, and to inspire, great difficulty is encountered when an attempt is made to interpret Professor Dennis to those who never knew him.

His power came from his whole personality, therefore his words when reported by another lose a part—rather lack a part of the whole message which they originally carried. And yet it is worth while for ourselves and worth while for others to recall some of his characteristic sayings.

In recalling the different modes of travel now as compared with those generally used in his boyhood, and noting especially the wonderful reduction in the amount of time now required to travel from one place to another, he once said:

“The real question is not how soon we can arrive, but what we are worth when we do arrive.”

From his recollections of his childhood, two incidents show how the child was in his case “father to the man” in at least two particulars, that is, in his love for the study of nature, and in the necessity he felt of thinking for himself. Speaking of his winter experiences as a boy, he says, “I have passed many a happy hour tracing Jack Frost’s steps on the window panes and studying out his landscape designs.” And as having a double bearing on the great questions of human destiny, on the one hand, and on insight into human nature on the other, note this record of impressions made upon him as a child; he says:

“Many sermons (of that day) landed most of the human race in a lake of fire; but I did not believe it; for they (the speakers and others), talked and laughed at the close of the service.”

Another incident in his childhood greatly impressed him, a time when his sister wanted a feather for her hat, and being refused, wept for two days and nights about it. Professor Dennis, looking back as a mature man upon the incident, with fine loyalty for his home, and with discriminating judgment concerning the issues which were at stake, commends his father and mother for their refusal to change their decision which had been announced; but with equally fine judgment and insight into the great problems which children have to meet without at the time knowing that they are problems at all, he says on behalf of his sister:

“She ought to have had the feather. A normal racial desire ought not to be suppressed any more than a tadpole’s tail. The bigger the tail, the better it can swim; it will be absorbed later, and turned into legs; the bigger the tail, the bigger the legs.”

The secret of his power over his pupils cannot be stated in a single word, or a single phrase, but the following sentence, which he penned throws interesting light on the question. He says:

“My boys and girls hang like a magnet over every page I read. I cannot conceive of a pleasure unshared or unsharable.”

As indicating how his logical faculty and his ambition worked together to make him an efficient instrument in service, note this:

“Soon after bicycles came into general use I heard a certain make recommended as being ‘as good as a Columbia;’ I did not rest satisfied until I had

a Columbia. The same method of making choices had guided me earlier in my life. I had been in attendance at Spiceland Academy for one term. I heard that Spiceland Academy was 'as good as Earlham College;' as soon thereafter as possible I entered Earlham College. When there I chose largely the classics; they were difficult, but I noticed that the best students were in those classes. That was enough for me."

As to other work and experiences while at college he says: "I took all the sciences that were offered. I found that science awakened interest; classics awakened my mind."

His faith in the conclusions reached by scientific research is indicated by the following prediction which he records, after having spoken of Mendel's discoveries embodied in the well-known Mendel's law. This is his prediction:

"By 1950 we shall be on the way to health, sanity and happiness because his law, (Mendel's) will have taught us how to breed these things into the human race."

If the task I have were primarily biographical in its nature I should be under obligation to report many facts which under the circumstances, need not be recorded. It is, to be sure, of interest to us to know that he was born just as the last century was being half completed; and it would be of even greater interests to us here to know the different stages by which he secured his education, the positions of trust and honor which he held, the number and titles of his published works, and such like data which make up a record from one standpoint of his life's achievements. These matters, however, important though they are, I must leave for some one else to care for, to be presented in another way. I have merely attempted to say that we loved him, that we now do honor to his memory, and to show some of the reasons for his being a man whose influence has gone out so widely in such a beneficent way.

One other phase of his life's work should be mentioned, his distinctly religious work. He was throughout his life a member of the Friends Church, and for years a minister in that denomination. His religious work was not, however, so far as he was concerned, separated from the other activities of his life. He was accustomed to say that he could never draw the line between teaching and preaching. "Those who hear my lectures," he once said, "tell me that I am preaching; and some of those who listen to my sermons say that I have been lecturing; and I suppose they are both right." One of his associates in the work of teaching and preaching has said this of him and his work:

"Many who were anxious and fearful concerning the innovation of scientific truth and theory upon the old established order of things, have been comforted and reassured by his interpretation of modern thought and ancient beliefs. He had been all his life a diligent reader of the Bible and at the same time an enthusiastic student and observer of nature. That he could solve all difficulties that arose between the old and the new, he did not imagine or claim; but he did one thing of inestimable worth—he maintained with

earnestness and reverence his full faith and confidence in spiritual reality while giving himself with tremendous enthusiasm to scientific pursuits; and he demonstrated in his own life the possibility of being a devout follower of Christ and at the same time accepting without any fears or reservation the best results of modern scientific investigation and thought."

The Indiana Academy of Science today honors the memory and recalls the helpful associations of him who was a charter member of the organization, a fellow once its president, and to the end of his life a devoted and inspiring comrade in scientific pursuits.

A much larger group made up of his students and associates in many different fields of endeavor, also acknowledge with gratitude the debt they owe to David Worth Dennis, the scholar, the fearless investigator, the genial companion, the stimulating teacher, the inspiring leader, a servant of God and a helper to his brother man.