

Character Building



Booker T. Washington

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PUBLISHER NOTES:

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PUBLISHERS' EXPLANATION

Mr. Washington's habit has for many years been to deliver a practical, straightforward address to the students of Tuskegee Institute on Sunday evening. These addresses have had much to do with the building up of the character of his race, for they are very forcible explanations of character building. The speaker has put into them his whole moral earnestness, his broad common-sense and, in many places, his eloquence. Many of Mr. Washington's friends have said that some of these addresses are the best of his utterances.

They have an additional interest because they show him at his work and give an inside view of the school.

This volume is made up of selections from these addresses chosen by Mr. Washington himself. _____

PREFACE

A number of years ago, when the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was quite small, with only a few dozen students and two or three teachers, I began the practice of giving what were called Sunday Evening Talks to the students and teachers. These addresses were always delivered in a conversational tone and much in the same manner that I would speak to my own children around my fireside. As the institution gradually grew from year to year, friends suggested that these addresses ought to be preserved, and for that reason during the past few years they have been stenographically reported. For the purpose of this book they have been somewhat revised; and I am greatly indebted to my secretary, Mr. Emmett J. Scott, and to Mr. Max Bennett Thrasher, for assisting me in the revision and in putting them into proper shape for publication; and to Mr. T. Thomas Fortune for suggesting that these addresses be published in book form.

In these addresses I have attempted from week to week to speak straight to the hearts of our students and teachers and visitors concerning the problems and questions that confront them in their daily life here in the South. The most encouraging thing in connection with the making of these addresses has been the close attention which the students and teachers and visitors have always paid, and the hearty way in which they have spoken to me of the help that they have received from them.

During the past four years these addresses have been published in the school paper each week. This paper, *The Tuskegee Student*, has a wide circulation among our graduates and others in the South, so that in talking to our students on Sunday evening I have felt in a degree that I was speaking to a large proportion of the coloured people in the South. If there is anything in these addresses which will be of interest or service to a still wider audience, I shall feel I have been more than repaid for any effort that I have put forth in connection with them.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON.

Tuskegee, Alabama.

TWO SIDES OF LIFE

There are quite a number of divisions into which life can be divided, but for the purposes of this evening I am going to speak of two; the bright side of life and the dark side.

In thought, in talk, in action, I think you will find that you can separate life into these two divisions—the dark side and the bright side, the discouraging side and the encouraging side. You will find, too, that there are two classes of people, just as there are two divisions of the subject. There is one class that is schooling itself, and constantly training itself, to look upon the dark side of life; and there is another class, made up of people who are, consciously or unconsciously, constantly training themselves to look upon the bright side of life.

Now it is not wise to go too far in either direction. The person who schools himself to see the dark side of life is likely to make a mistake, and the person who schools himself to look only upon the bright side of life, forgetting all else, also is apt to make a mistake.

Notwithstanding this, I think I am right in saying that the persons who accomplish most in this world, those to whom on account of their helpfulness the world looks most for service—those who are most useful in every way—are those who are constantly seeing and appreciating the bright side as well as the dark side of life.

You will sometimes find two persons who get up in the morning, perhaps a morning that is overcast with shadows—a damp, wet, rainy, uninviting morning—and one of these persons will speak of the morning as being gloomy, will speak of the mud-puddles about the house, of the rain, and of all of the disagreeable features. The second person, the one who has schooled himself to see the brighter side of life, the beautiful things in life, will speak of the beauties that are in the rain drops, and the freshness of the newly bathed flowers, shrubs and trees. Notwithstanding the gloomy and generally disconsolate appearance of things, he will find something attractive in the scene out of doors, and will discover something in the gloomy morning that will cheer him.

Suppose that you see these same two persons eat their breakfast. Perhaps they will find out that the rolls are bad, but that the coffee is excellent. If the rolls are poor, it is a great deal better in such a case to get into the habit—a habit that you will find pays from every standpoint—of being able to forget how unpalatable they are, and to let your thoughts dwell upon the good and satisfactory coffee. Call the attention

of your near neighbour at the table to the excellence of the coffee. What is the result of that kind of schooling? You will grow up to be an individual whom people will like to see coming near them—an individual to whom people will go for encouragement when the hours are dark, and when everything seems to be discouraging.

In just the same way, when you go into the class-rooms to recite your lessons, do not dwell upon any mistakes that you may think you see the teacher make, or upon any weakness in the presentation of the lesson. All teachers make mistakes sometimes, and you may depend upon it that it is an excellent teacher and a person of fine character who, when he or she has made a mistake, says frankly and plainly, "I have made a mistake," or "I don't know." It takes a very good and a very bright teacher to say, "I don't know." No teacher knows everything about every subject. A good teacher will say frankly and clearly, "I don't know. I cannot answer that question."

Let me tell you, right here, too, that when you go out from here to become teachers yourselves—as a large proportion of you will go—whenever you get to a point where a student asks you a question which you are not able to answer, or asks you something about a subject on which you are not well informed, you will find it better to say frankly and honestly, "I am unable to answer your question." Your students will respect you a great deal more for your frankness and honesty. Education is not what a person is able to hold in his head, so much as it is what a person is able to find. I believe it was Daniel Webster who said that the truly educated man was not the one who had all knowledge in his head, but the one who knew where to look for information upon any subject upon which at any time he might want information. Each individual who wishes to succeed must get that kind of discipline. He must get such training that he will know where to go and get facts, rather than try to train himself to hold all facts in his head.

I want you to go out from this institution so trained and so developed that you will be constantly looking for the bright, encouraging and beautiful things in life. It is the weak individual, as a rule, who is constantly calling attention to the other side—to the dark and discouraging things of life. When you go into your classrooms, I repeat, try to forget and overlook any weak points that you may think you see. Remember, and dwell upon, the consideration that has been given to the lesson, the faithfulness with which it was prepared, and the earnestness with which it is presented. Try to recall and to remember every good

thing and every encouraging thing which has come under your observation, whether it has been in the class-room, or in the shop, or in the field. No matter where you are, seize hold on the encouraging things with which you come in contact.

In connection with the personality of their teachers, it is very unfortunate for students to form a habit of continually finding fault, of criticising, of seeing nothing but what the student may think are weak points. Try to get into a frame of mind where you will be constantly seeing and calling attention to the strong and beautiful things which you observe in the life and work of your teachers. Grow into the habit of talking about the bright side of life. When you meet a fellow student, a teacher, or anybody, or when you write letters home, get into the habit of calling attention to the bright things of life that you have seen, the things that are beautiful, the things that are charming. Just in proportion as you do this, you will find that you will not only influence yourself in the right direction, but that you will also influence others that way. It is a very bad habit to get into, that of being continually moody and discouraged, and of making the atmosphere uncomfortable for everybody who comes within ten feet of you. There are some people who are so constantly looking on the dark side of life that they cannot see anything but that side. Everything that comes from their mouths is unpleasant, about this thing and that thing, and they make the whole atmosphere around them unpleasant for themselves and for everybody with whom they come in contact. Such persons are surely undesirable. Why, I have seen people coming up the road who caused me to feel like wanting to cross over on to the other side of the way so as not to meet them. I didn't want to hear their tales of misery and woe. I had heard those tales so many times that I didn't want to get into the atmosphere of the people who told them.

It is often very easy to influence others in the wrong direction, and to grow into such a moody fault-finding disposition that one not only is miserable and unhappy himself, but makes every one with whom he comes in contact miserable and unhappy. The persons who live

constantly in a fault-finding atmosphere, who see only the dark side of life, become negative characters. They are the people who never go forward. They never suggest a line of activity. They live simply on the negative side of life. Now, as students, you cannot afford to grow in that way. We want to send each one of you out from here, not as a negative force, but as a strong, positive, helpful force in the world. You will not accomplish the task which we expect of you if you go with a moody, discouraged, fault-finding disposition. To do the most that lies in you, you must go with a heart and head full of hope and faith in the world, believing that there is work for you to do, believing that you are the person to accomplish that work, and the one who is going to accomplish it.

In nine cases out of ten, the person who cultivates the habit of looking on the dark side of life is the little person, the miserable person, the one who is weak in mind, heart and purpose. On the other hand, the person who cultivates the habit of looking on the bright side of life, and who calls attention to the beautiful and encouraging things in life is, in nine cases out of ten, the strong individual, the one to whom the world goes for intelligent advice and support. I am trying to get you to see, as students, the best things in life. Do not be satisfied with second-hand or third-hand things in life. Do not be satisfied until you have put yourselves into that atmosphere where you can seize and hold on to the very highest and most beautiful things that can be got out of life.

HELPING OTHERS

There are a few essential things in an institution of this kind that I think it is well for you to keep ever before you.

This institution does not exist for your education alone; it does not exist for your comfort and happiness altogether, although those things are important, and we keep them in mind; it exists that we may give you intelligence, skill of hand, and strength of mind and heart; and we help you in these ways that you, in turn, may help others. We help you that you may help somebody else, and if you do not do this, when you go out from here, then our work here has been in vain.

You would be surprised to know how small a part of your own expenses you pay here. You pay but little; and by reason of that fact it follows that as trustees of the funds which are given to this institution, we have no right to keep an individual here who we do not think is going to be able to go out and help somebody else. We have no right to keep a student here who we do not think is strong enough to go out and be of assistance to somebody else. We are here for the purpose of educating you, that you may become strong, intelligent and helpful.

If you were paying the cost of your board here, and for your tuition, and fuel and lights, then we should have a different problem. But so long as it is true that you pay so small a proportion of your expenses as you do, we must keep in view the fact that we have no right to keep a student here, no matter how much we may sympathize with him or her, unless that student is going to be able to do somebody else some good. Every young man and every young woman should feel that he or she is here on trust, that every day here is a sacred day, that it is a day that belongs to the race. Our graduates, and the majority of the students that have gone out from here, have ever had an unselfish spirit, and have been willing to go out and work at first for small salaries, and in uncomfortable places, where in a large degree conditions have been discouraging and desolate. We believe that kind of spirit will continue to exist in this institution, and that we shall continue to have students who will go out from here to make other persons strong and useful.

Now no individual can help another individual unless he himself is strong. You notice that the curriculum here goes along in three directions—along the line of labour, of academic training, and of moral and religious training. We expect those who are here to keep strong, and to make themselves efficient in these three directions, in each of which you are to learn to be leaders.

Some people are able to do a thing when they are directed to do it, but people of that kind are not worth very much. There are people in the world who never think, who never map out anything for themselves, who have to wait to be told what to do. People of that kind are not worth anything. They really ought to pay rent for the air they breathe, for they only vitiate it. Now we do not want such people as those here. We want people who are going to think, people who are going to prepare themselves. I noticed an incident this morning. Did you ever hear that side door creak on its hinges before this morning? The janitor ought to have noticed that creaking and put some oil on the hinges without waiting to be told to do it. Then, again, this morning I noticed that after it had been raining hard for twenty-four hours, when it was wet and muddy, no provision had been made to protect the hogs at the sty, and they were completely covered with mud. Now the person who had charge of the sty should not have waited for some one to tell him to go down there and put some straw in for bedding and put boards over the sty to keep the animals dry. No one in charge of the hogs ought to have waited to be told to do a thing like that. The kind of persons we want here are those who are not going to wait for you to tell them to do such things, but who will think of them for themselves and do them. If we cannot turn out a man here who is capable of taking care of a pig sty, how can we expect him to take care of affairs of State?

Then, again, some of you are expected to take care of the roads. I should have liked to have seen boys this morning so much interested in working on the roads that they would have put sawdust from this building to the gate. I should have liked to see them put down some boards, and arrange for the water to drain off. We want such fellows as those here. The ones we want are the ones who are going to think of such things as these without being told. That is the only kind of people worth having. Those who have to wait to have somebody else put ideas into their minds are not worth much of anything. And, to be plain with you, we cannot have such people here. We want you to be thinkers, to be leaders.

Yesterday, and the night before, I travelled on the Mobile and Ohio railroad from St. Louis to Montgomery, and there was a young man on the same train who was not more than twenty years old, I believe, who recently had been appointed a special freight agent of the road. All his

conversation was about freight. He talked freight to me and to everybody else. He would ask this man and that man if they had any freight, and if so he would tell them that they must have it shipped over the Mobile and Ohio railroad. Now that man will be general freight agent of that road some day: he may be president of the road. But suppose he had sat down and gone to sleep, and had waited for some one to come to him to inquire the best way to ship freight. Do you suppose he would ever have secured any freight to ship?

Begin to think. If you cannot learn to think, why, you will be of no use to yourself or anybody else. Every once in a while—about every three months—we have to go through the process of "weeding out" among the students. We are going to make that "weeding out" process more strict this year than ever before. We are compelled to get rid of every student here who is weak in mind, weak in morals, or weak in industry. We cannot keep a student here unless he counts for one. You must count one yourself. You eat for one, you drink for one, and you sleep for one; and so you will have to count for one if you are going to stay here.

I want you to go out into the world, not to have an easy time, but to make sacrifices, and to help somebody else. There are those who need your help and your sacrifice. You may be called upon to sacrifice a great deal; you may have to work for small salaries; you may have to teach school in uncomfortable buildings; you may have to work in desolate places, and the surroundings may be in every way discouraging. And when I speak of your going out into life, I do not confine you to the schoolroom. I believe that those who go out and become farmers, and leaders in other directions, as well as teachers, are to succeed.

The most interesting thing connected with this institution is the magnificent record that our graduates are making. As the institution grows larger, we do not want to lose the spirit of self-sacrifice, the spirit of usefulness which the graduates and the students who have gone out from here have shown. We want you to help somebody else. We want you not to think of yourselves alone. The more you do to make somebody else happy, the more happiness will you receive in turn. If you want to be happy, if you want to live a contented life, if you want to live a life of genuine pleasure, do something for somebody else. When

you feel unhappy, disagreeable and miserable, go to some one else who is miserable and do that person an act of kindness, and you will find that you will be made happy. The miserable persons in this world are the ones whose hearts are narrow and hard; the happy ones are those who have great big hearts. Such persons are always happy.

SOME OF THE ROCKS AHEAD

I feel sure that I can be of some degree of service to you to-night, in helping you to anticipate some of the troubles that you are going to meet during the coming year. "Do not look for trouble," is a safe maxim to follow, but it is equally safe to prepare for trouble.

All of you realize, of course, that where we have so large a machine as we happen to have here—when I speak of machine in this way you will understand that I refer to the school—it takes some time to get it into perfect order, or anything bordering upon perfect running order. Now, I repeat, it is the wise individual who prepares himself beforehand for the day of difficulties, for the day of discouragements, for the rainy day. It is the wise individual who makes up his mind that life is not going to be all sunshine, that all is not going to be perpetual pleasure. What is true of everyday life is true of school life; there are a number of difficulties which it is probable you are going to meet or which are going to meet you during the coming school year, and which, if possible, I want you to prepare yourselves against as wisely as you can.

In the first place, a great many of you are going to be disappointed—if this has not already been the case—in the classes to which you will be assigned. The average individual thinks he knows a great deal more than he does know. The individual who really knows more than he thinks he knows is very rare indeed. When a student gets to the point where he knows more than he thinks he knows, that student is about ready to leave school. I wish a very large number of you had reached that point. I repeat, numbers of you are going to be disappointed during the year as to the classes to which you are going to be assigned.

Now, I want to give you this advice. Before you go to an institution examine the catalogue of that school. The catalogue will give you all the information about the school. Then make up your mind whether or not you have faith in that institution. Find out if it is the school you wish to attend, and then decide if you have faith enough in it to become its pupil. Then, if you have once done this, make up your mind that those who are placed over you as your teachers have had more experience than you can have had, and that they are therefore able to advise you as to your classes. Make up your mind that if you are asked to go into a lower class than you think your ability entitles you to go into, you are

going to follow the advice and instruction of the people who are older than you and who have more education than you have.

Another way in which you are going to be disappointed, and be made homesick, perhaps, if you have not already been made so, is in the rooms to which you are going to be assigned. You are going to get rooms that you do not like. They will not be, perhaps, as attractive as you desire, or they will be too crowded. You are going to be given persons for room mates with whom you think it is going to be impossible to get along pleasantly, people who are not congenial to you. During the hot months your rooms are going to be too hot, and during the cold months they are going to be too cold. You are going to meet with all these difficulties in your rooms. Make up your mind that you are going to conquer them. I have often said that the students who in the early years of this school had such hard times with their rooms have succeeded grandly. Many of you now live in palaces, compared to the rooms which those students had. I am sure that the students who attend this school find that the institution is better fitted every year to take care of them than it was the year previous. From year to year there has been a steady growth in the accommodations, and that is all that we can wish or expect. From year to year we do not forget that it is our duty to make students more comfortable than in previous years, and we are steadily growing, in that direction. But notwithstanding all this we cannot do all that we want to do.

Make up your minds, then, that you are going to find difficulties in your room, in reference to your room mates, the heat, the cold, and any number of things that concern your stay in the buildings. But in all these matters keep in mind the high purpose for which you came here—to get an education. Get that thought into your heart and body, and it will enable you to be the master of all these little things, all these minor and temporary obstacles.

Many of you are going to be disappointed in regard to your food. Notwithstanding all the care we may try to take, and want to take, many of you are going to be disappointed in this respect. But how little is the meaning of one meal, how little a thing is being inconvenienced by one meal, as compared with something that is going to be a part of you all