

[From The Nature-Study Review, vol. 14, no. 2, February 1918, pp. 43-47.]

THE HUMANISTIC ELEMENT IN EDUCATION

L. H. BAILEY
President's Address at Annual Meeting

[The speaker explained that he had discussed "The Science Element in Education" before the Central Association of Science and Mathematics Teachers at Columbus, Ohio, November 30. He stated his point of view in that address: We are born to Things and to Phenomena. The regulated knowledge of Things and Phenomena is Science. As we depend on Things and Phenomena, so is the science of them essential; and what is essential is necessarily educational, if we are to live rationally. We are in error in supposing that there is a necessary educational line between "humanities" and "science," and we perpetuate error and hinder progress by the liberal use of these and other catch-words. We are misled by our phrases. In the present address the speaker sought still further to break down the prejudices between what may be called the old-line and the new-line subjects. A full abstract will be found in *School Science and Mathematics*, and an extract in *School and Society*, for December 29.]

We are born to People. Probably our first acquired knowledge is of father and mother. Human forms impress us so early that we never know

that we never knew them. Brother, sister, family, the gradually enlarging circle of those of whom the child is "not afraid," make up the early experience. Soon the child begins to have consciousness of the many people, the strange people, those who quickly come and go, those on the street, in wagons, standing on the corners, waiting at the big places. The world is full of folks.

Soon the individuals begin to separate from the crowd. Faces become so familiar that the child names them and identifies them. Each one is unlike every other one. The child says that some persons are "funny."

Yet the moving crowd of human beings is the great fact of life. It is the great fact of the earth. These beings are gregarious. They move in long lines. They swarm in great masses. They colonize themselves in tense confusions that we call cities. Now and then one being separates itself and lives apart. That one is queer, clearly an aberrance. Most of us come back to the crowd as the meteor seeks the earth. Even when we are separate we talk in terms of the crowd. To go alone is unusual. When we go by ourselves we write a book about it.

What I mean to say is that human beings express habit and habitat, as do other animals. We are so accustomed to the habits that we think of them only to approve or to criticize. Yet essentially the habits of John Smith the Man are as interesting in themselves as are those of Lobo the Wolf, Black Beauty the Horse, or the Cat that Walked by its Wild Lone.¹⁰ But we fail to observe John Smith objectively.

As there are laws of the Pack and laws of the Jungle, so are there laws of the Camp of Homo. At first the laws of the Pack and the Jungle and the Camp were probably much the same; but the Camp became crafty, self-willed, and it made weapons against the others. These weapons it turned also against the Other Camp. The Camp has come a long journey since then, but it has carried its weapons all the way.

The Camp found Speech and Handicraft. It found Importance, and set down its thoughts on stone and ivory and bones. It found Paper. Then it kept Records. Then did Literature begin. And in due time Men knew that they were Men, and wrote down the joy they had in thinking.

They thought about themselves and about Beings of another world; and so great and important were these Beings that man fashioned them in his own image and endowed them with his own qualities. So Man began to speculate, and to weave a vast web of fancy about himself and the Stars

and the Things He Does Not Know. This web we call Literature, Philosophy, Art, Religion,—what you will.

And in due time Man came to be curious about the Things-Around-Him. He pried into them. He looked into crevices in rocks, ran his fingers along the seams of wood, found new metals, counted the eggs in a thousand nests, unravelled the flowers, searched for the alchemy, explored every wonder, enciphered the universe in formula and symbol. At some point in this long process he wrote down what he saw on papyrus or pieces of paper; then was Science born.

Very exact is Observation and very direct and true are Results. But these are first observations and first results. When we look again we begin to doubt. When we make a Conclusion we immediately set about to show that it is not true. They still say that there are “exact sciences;” if there are such, they must be those not founded on observation and experiment. I heard a man expound for an hour, with floods of numerals. He said that he had “proved” something. I do not know what it was.

So the deeper we settle into Science the more do we discuss and explain, which means only that we are trying dimly to understand. And the scientist becomes an hypothecist. To-day the plant-breeder is a mathematician, the zoologist is a speculator, and the geologist is a seer. And it endeth in Literature, Philosophy, Art, Religion,—what you will.

And it came to pass that men said one way was the best way and other men said their way was the best. And one man called his way Humanistic and the other called his way Scientific; and straightway they made much trouble for themselves.

One day we may forget distinctions that do not distinguish, and we may devote most of our energy to doing our piece of work well and to making ourselves to be as little children that we may teach simply and easily and directly.

Perhaps it would be impertinent, but I do not see how we can ever understand human beings or know what their habits mean or judge them fairly unless we observe them impartially and objectively. Now we judge them by ourselves. We think of them mostly as bearing “conduct” rather than as exhibiting characteristics. Never can we realize the brotherhood of man till we divest ourselves of prejudgment (which is prejudice), of assumed standards of ethics, and study human beings

impersonally. Medicine could make no progress till it passed the idea of demons, of control by extra-terrestrial agencies, special providencies, and judgments for sin. Our actions and habits issue from causes and they follow courses which may be understood. We do not understand them by sitting in judgment, although by that means we may protect society. The new penology has its root here. We begin to see that conduct has a rational basis.

All the "humanities" in education are worth as much as the "sciences" in the training of the young, if there are as good teachers, with as good facilities, to teach the one as the other. All these subjects are organized out of the human mind; the same quest of truth is in them all; the same integrity of thought may characterize them all. It is not true that a subject is useful in education in proportion as it can be applied in the affairs of life. It is not true that any subject is even relatively useless because it cannot be "applied."

Man is as much a part of nature as is a pigeon or a trillium. Did not Huxley write on man's place in nature?¹¹ It is an incomplete nature-study that eliminates man from its range. What we now need above all else in nature-study is a good procedure on the observation of human beings.

If man is part in nature, if he has had a progressive evolution, then his habits and also his institutions are but parts of his natural history. Tradition itself is a phase of the natural history of the race, and becomes an essential part in any worth-while study of the race. These traditions express themselves as well in what we call science as in what we call classics. They are expressions of our development within our environment and in contact with our fellows. Against all this background, the discussion of the relative importance of the humanities and the sciences seems trivial and empty. These historic separations should now be forgotten, as against the common interests of mankind.

Always have I tried to present to you the wholeness of nature-study. From the first I have stood against the exclusive observation and study of the objects counted as "practical." This is not because I am opposed to the practical and the applied in education, but because such narrowing of the subject presents a wrong and restricted view of nature. In whatever the child takes up, I have wanted it to see the animal or the plant or the situation as a whole, and as part of its environment, and not merely as yielding certain products or benefits.

The interest in itself and its right to live,—this is the reason for the study of any living object, whether a frog, a cabbage, a horse, or a human being.

So should I be careful that nature-study does not degenerate into a study of attributes. In at least one State a law compels instruction in the elementary grades “in the humane treatment of animals and birds.” The humane interest in “animals and birds” results naturally from a knowledge of them. The teaching of humane natural-history subjects as a detached and literary exercise is both weak education and insufficient morals. It is like teaching the odor of the rose.

It is the unfortunate impediment against nature-study, in the estimation of many persons, that it fits only partially into the regulated schemes of education so much prized at the present. Pressed into these patterns it loses much of its freedom. Situations in nature are unfortunately disregarding of a syllabus and unconcerned of “credits.” Even our nature-study writers are likely to take the attitude that nature-study must be so regularized as to allow it to be handled uniformly in all schools by all teachers. We are verily obsessed of uniformity, as if it had merit in itself. By this dominated uniformity we withhold the best teachers, discourage the mutations that make for progress, and stand in the way of leadership. I think we should encourage departures.

It is possible, I am convinced, to apply enacted law to education for the purpose of safeguarding public funds and establishing an institution for the advancement of all the people at the same time that we allow the development of the full personality and initiative of strong teachers. Good system and method are much to be encouraged if they are in the nature of tested educational programs, founded on what we hope will some day be the science of education. This is very different from implanted governmental orders and insistence on the mere machinery of operation. Our law-made education, paper projects, and office regulation force our work into the plane of uniform mediocrity. All uniformity is mediocre.

I do not care to have nature-study similarly or equally taught in all schools. I hope something better for it than this. We are now in the grip of an artificial standardized system, matching well with the present theory of civilization. In due time, however, we shall return to the old conception of teaching, which is the principle of discipleship.

What, then, is my plea this morning? This only: that human beings are prime subjects for nature-study; that the old distinctions between the humanities and the sciences, represented in many catch-words, are essentially false; that nature-study stands for the spirit rather than for the form, and is to that extent a saving grace in the dominated systems of the day. I would make nature-study contribute to brotherhood. Nature is not an organized and classified procedure, as are the institutions of human affairs: the ultimate truth in nature is not yet discovered in statutory educational systems.

