

FRANK ANDERSON

MORALS IN
TRADE AND
COMMERCE

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«Public Domain»

Anderson F.

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The most beautiful thing about youth is its power and eagerness to make ideals, and he is unfortunate who goes out into the world without some picture of services to be rendered, or of a goal to be attained. There are very few of us who, at some time or another, have not cherished these ideals, perhaps secretly and half ashamed as though to us alone had come an inspiration of a career that should touch the pulses of the world and leave it better than we found it. And in the making of youthful ideals we have changed very little with the passage of the centuries. The character of the ideals has changed with changing needs, but not we ourselves. Our young men still see visions; they still fill the future with conflict and with struggle and prospectively live out their lives with the crown of achievement in the distance. It is well that it should be so. The ideals of our youth are the motive-power of our lives, and even those of us who have lived far into the eras of disappointment would not willingly wipe from our memories even the most extravagant day dreams from which we drew energy and hope and fortitude and self-reliance.

If ideals have such a power over our lives, if they energize and direct our first entry into the world of affairs – as unquestionably they do – they must be counted among the real forces of the day and as such they are as much a matter for our scrutiny and control as educational development or physical perfection. Not, perhaps, in the same way, for our ideals belong to that private domain wherein we rightly resent either dictation or authority from the outside. But we can apply both dictation and authority for ourselves. With a firm determination to be upon the right side of the great issues of the day, to uphold honor and justice in public affairs, to uproot the tares and to sow the wheat in the domain of national business, we can apply our whole mental strength to a proper determination of those issues, to a correct distribution of praise and blame, to a careful adjustment of the means to the end and to a precise appreciation of the facts. We can satisfy ourselves that we have heard both sides and that enthusiasm has not deadened our ears to all appeals but the most noisy. We can see to it that our attitude is the judicial one and that our minds are so fixed upon the truth and upon the whole truth that there is no room for prejudice or for passion. All these things can be reared as a superstructure upon the groundwork of lofty ideals, for just as there can be no progress without ideals so there can come nothing but calamity from ideals that are not guided by reflection and by knowledge.

Never before has it been so hard to know the facts as it is to-day. If we must give credit to the press for the diffusion of knowledge so also must we recognize its equal power to diffuse prejudice and bias. The newspaper and the magazine of to-day are vast and intricate machines that supply the great majority of us with practically all the data upon which we base our judgments. The public mind and the popular press act and react upon one another, the press setting its sails to catch every wind of public interest and the public upon its part demanding to be supplied with all those departments of news to which at the moment it is specially attracted. Commercialism and competition have barred a large part of the press from its rightful office as leader and mold of opinion and have reduced it to the position of a clamorous applicant for public favor. The press, like everything else, is ruled by majorities, and in order to live it must cater to the weaknesses of popular majorities, it must reflect their prejudices, it must sustain their ill-formed judgments, and it must so sift and winnow the news of the day that the whims and the passions of the day shall be sustained. There are some newspapers and magazines that are honorably willing to represent only ripe thought and unbiased judgments, but they are not in the majority.

What verdict would the historian of the future pass upon the civilization of to-day if he were restricted to the files of our newspapers for his material. It must be confessed that we of to-day, in the hurry and tension of modern life, are hardly in a better position. Whatever we may suppose

to be our attitude toward the press, with whatever scorn we may regard its baser features, it has an effect upon our minds far greater than we suppose. It is the steady drip of the water upon the stone that wears it away. It is the steady presentation of one aspect of human life, and that the lowest, that slowly jaundices our view and that produces either a rank pessimism or else an indignation against evil so strong as to efface judgment and to paralyze reason. Day after day we see human nature presented in its worst aspects and only in its worst aspects. We see fraud, cupidity, tyranny, and violence paraded before us as being almost the only activities worth reporting. Dishonesty is offered to us as the prevailing rule of life, and we are asked to believe that the spirit of commercial oppression has allied itself with the machinery of government for the oppression of a nation. It is a dreary picture, a picture that, if faithfully drawn, would justify almost any remedial measures within human power, a picture that by the skill of its presentation arrests attention and almost compels belief.

That we so seldom compare the picture with the original is one of the anomalies of modern life. And yet the original is before us and around us all the time, inviting us to notice that it is only the exceptional that is reproduced with attractive skill and that it is only the abnormal that is emphasized with adroit arrangements of line and color. Day after day we read of the sensational divorce cases, but there is not one line of the tens of thousands of happy marriages upon which no cloud of discord ever falls. Day after day we read of the scandals of municipal government, but how often do we remember the great army of municipal officials who do their whole duty devotedly, courageously, unselfishly? Day after day we hear of corporation tyranny, corporation lawlessness, or corporation greed, but what recognition do we give to corporations that obey the laws, whose operations are above censure and who add immeasurably to the wealth of the country and to the prosperity of every citizen in it? With this constant presentation of depravity, this incessant harping upon the one string of human dishonesty, what wonder that our visions should be distorted or that we should exclude from our horizon almost everything but the sinister features of modern life. What wonder that the young men and women should look at the career before them through an all-pervading fog of suspicion or that the days ahead of them should seem to be filled with the struggle against a universal dishonesty.

It is from such illusions as this that we must free our ideals if we would do effective work for the world and for ourselves. There are real enemies enough without erecting imaginary windmills to tilt against. Frauds, depravities, tragedies surely await us, now as ever, but we shall be doubly armed against them if we look upon them as the exceptions and not the rule and if we draw strength from the great background of human virtue and honesty. And there is such a background, unchanging, resistant, resolute, even though the limelight of publicity be persistently directed upon the few sinister figures on the front of the stage. We cannot afford to lose our faith in human nature, we cannot afford to shut out the greater and the best part of life or to gaze so persistently upon the abnormal that we can no longer see the normal and the ordinary. Let us cultivate our sense of ethical values and of ethical perspective rather than to crouch behind a shrub until it looks like a forest.

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