

What I Am Trying to Do

BY

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SOON after I settled down for my life's work near the little town of Tuskegee, Ala., I made up my mind to do as an individual that which I am striving to get my race to do throughout the United States. I resolved to make myself, so far as I was able, so useful to the community, the county, and the state that every man, woman, and child, white and black, would respect me and want me to live among them.

I foresaw, before I reached Tuskegee, that I should be classed as an "educated Negro," and I knew that this meant that people would expect me to be a kind of artificial being, living in the community but not a part of it in either my dress, talk, work, or in my general interests. My first duty, therefore, was to convince the people that I did not have "education," but only a head and heart to serve.

This personal illustration will, perhaps, suggest one thing that I am striving to do, that is, to get the Negro race as a whole to make itself so valuable and so necessary to the community in which it lives that it will not merely be tolerated, like a poor relation, but rather welcomed and sought after. To do this I learned years ago from my great teacher of Hampton Institute, Gen. S. C. Armstrong, that it would first be necessary to get out of the Negro's mind the idea that education unfitted a man for any kind of labor, whether with the hand or head. So from the first I have striven to get the educated Negro to feel that it was just as honorable and dignified for him to use his education in the field, the shop, the kitchen, or the laundry as to use it in teaching school or preaching the gospel.

The most difficult and delicate task that Tuskegee, in common with institutions like Hampton and others, had to perform has been to convince members of my race that in preparing them to use their knowledge of chemistry, mathematics, or any other form of knowledge, to improve the soil, develop the mineral resources, to construct a house or prepare and serve a meal, it was not necessary to limit or circumscribe their mental growth or to assign them to any special or narrow sphere of life. I have constantly urged upon them that we must begin at the bottom instead of at the top; that there will be little permanent gain by "short cut" methods; that we must stick to that which is fundamental and enduring -and we must overcome evil with good.

But in all this I have not sought to confine the ambitions, nor to set limits to the progress of the race. I have never felt that the Negro was bound to behave in any manner different from that of any other race in the same stage of development. I have merely insisted that we should do the first things first; that we should lay the foundation before we sought to erect the superstructure.

At one time, when I was a young boy working in the coal mines of West Virginia, I came out of the mine after a hard day's work feeling tired, sick, and discouraged. A neighbor, wishing to cheer me up and make me feel better, offered me a large red stick of candy. That candy looked good to me and I took it eagerly. My mother, who knew my condition and needs, told me that it was not candy that I needed, but a good big dose of vermifuge, which is about the worst tasting and smelling medicine, I firmly believe, that was ever concocted. However, it was in general use in those days for almost every real and imaginary ailment. In fact, vermifuge was about the only medicine on sale at that time in the coal mining districts of West Virginia.

Contrary to my mother's advice I took the candy and put the vermifuge aside. The next day I came out of the coal mine feeling no better, and the next day I was still worse. Finally I decided to follow the advice of mother and take my medicine. So I threw back my head and held my nose while my mother forced the nasty stuff down with a large spoon. The next day, however, I felt fine.

Now, in my experience in working with my race I have found that the Negro meets with two classes of advisers, each of which is equally well-meaning and kindly disposed. One class of advisers hands him the red candy and the other offers the vermifuge. Very often it has been a hard task for me to make certain kinds of colored people see that it is the vermifuge the race needs rather than the red candy. Still, the Negro is learning this lesson, and nothing gives me more genuine satisfaction at the present time than to note that the great masses of my race, in every part of this country, are willing to take the vermifuge in place of the red candy.

I recall another experience that I had while working in the coal mine that has helped me in trying to lead my race in the direction of things that are permanent and lasting rather than the things that are merely showy and temporary. As a boy I long cherished a desire to own a suit of "store" clothes. I worked hard in the mine and finally saved enough to gratify this desire. It was a flashy, showy suit with many colors, called, in those days, I think, a Dolly Varden suit. It cost at wholesale, I suppose, about five dollars. At any rate, I purchased it for ten or twelve. The following Sunday I wore it with great pride to church. On my way home, however, a heavy rain came that drenched both me and the suit. Monday morning I put the suit out in the sun to dry. Presently I noticed that the colors had begun to flow. In fact, they had gotten all mixed up with one another and the whole suit seemed to be in a process of disintegration. My mother had advised me that it would be wiser to spend my money in buying some "homespun" cloth which she promised would make into a

good, sensible, and serviceable suit. Eventually she did make me a "homespun" suit which was far from being showy. However, I wore it for several years.

The lesson which I learned in this simple fashion at home was of great value to me when, later on, I went away to school, for though I learned many new and interesting things at Hampton Institute, it did not take me long to discover that, back of all else, the lesson which General Armstrong was trying to teach us was the same that my mother had taught me. He stated it in other words, and gave it a deeper and broader significance, but what I learned at Hampton, through the medium of books and tools and through contact with my teachers, was at bottom what I had learned at home, namely, to distinguish between the real and the sham, to choose the substance rather than the shadow, to seek the permanent good rather than the passing pleasant. And so it is a source of great satisfaction to me to observe throughout the whole country that my race is beginning to prefer "homespun" to "Dolly Varden."

It is not easy to teach a new people, just out of slavery, the kind of lessons I have described. For a number of years the purposes of General Armstrong and of Hampton were misunderstood by a number of the Negro people. The same has been true at Tuskegee. I have had some mighty interesting experiences, both in school and out, in trying to teach the members of my race some of those simple but fundamental lessons, the meaning and significance of which I learned at Hampton Institute.

At one time, while stopping for a day in one of the border states, I visited a colored family whose son had recently graduated and returned home from college. The mother of the young man was naturally very proud of her son and told me with great satisfaction how he had

learned to speak Latin, but lamented the fact that there was no one in the neighborhood who was able to talk Latin with him. She had heard that I had some education and felt rather confident that I would be able to converse in the Latin language with him. When I was obliged to confess that I could not, her feathers fell, and I do not believe she ever afterward had the same respect for me. However, I got acquainted with the son, and, as I knew more of the young man, learned to like him. He was an ambitious, high strung young fellow, who had studied books, but he had not studied men. He had learned a great deal about the ancient world, but he knew very little of the world right about him. He had studied about things, through the medium of books, but had not studied things themselves. In a word, he had been infected with the college bacillus and displayed the usual symptoms. However, I had seen cases of this kind before and felt sure that he would in time recover.

This young man was exceedingly sensitive concerning the "rights" of his race, and propounded to me the very popular theory that the only reason the Negro did not have all the rights coming to him was that he did not protest whenever these rights were infringed upon. He determined to put this theory into practice and so wrote a very learned lecture which he delivered on every possible occasion. The subject of his lecture was "Manhood Rights." As he was really a rather brilliant speaker he was able to work up an audience with this lecture to a high pitch of enthusiasm and indignation in regard to the wrongs committed against the Negro race.

For a season this lecture was quite popular and the author was in some demand as a lecturer. During this time he was invariably present at every indignation meeting that was called to pass resolutions condemning some wrong meted out to members of the race. Here, again, his eloquence and burning words could excite an audience to the highest degree of indignation. This was especially true when he quoted some striking passage from Demosthenes or Cicero.

Like most young colored orators he was strong on quotations from people who have been a long time dead. At the same time he forgot the fact that most of the men he quoted never so much as dreamed that the average man had any rights at all, and he totally overlooked

the really thrilling fact that never in the history of the world before were there ten million black men who possessed so many rights and enjoyed so many opportunities as the ten millions of Negroes in the United States to-day. I mention this, let me add, not because I want to minimize or make light of the injustices which my race has suffered and still suffers, but because I believe that it is important that we view our present situation in its true light and see things in their proper perspective. In no other way can we gain the courage, the wisdom, and the patience that will help us to go forward, not only steadily and persistently, but cheerfully.

In the course of time it gradually began to dawn upon my young friend and his mother that neither indignation meetings, the passing of resolutions, nor his lecture on "Manhood Rights" were providing him or the family with shelter, food, or clothes. For a while the old mother was quite puzzled to know why it was that neither eloquence nor Latin quotations would provide the family with the common necessities of every-day life. The young man himself grew morose, peevish, and miserable. He could neither eat nor sleep properly, because he was constantly thinking of the wrongs of his race. He was not only unhappy himself but he made everyone he came in contact with unhappy. Nevertheless, for a number of years, he went on in the way that he had started. Finally he seemed to have struck bottom. He found himself face to face with, not a book world, but an actual world. Home, food, clothes, rent were now pressing so hard that something had to be done.

At this point I had an opportunity to renew my acquaintance with him. In fact, he called to see me. He had now become quite softened, mellowed, and even sweet, but I could discern that he was still troubled about the "rights" of his race, and he ventured to suggest a little vaguely once or twice that he would be willing to "die for his race." I noticed, however that he was not quite so emphatic in his desire to "die for his race" as he had been a year or two before, when I heard him pouring out his soul before a small but enthusiastic audience. In one of the first conversations I had with him after the mellowing process had set in, I ventured to suggest to him rather mildly that there were other methods by which he could help the Negro race to secure those rights and opportunities which both he and I were so anxious they should possess and enjoy.

At first he was rather taken aback at the thought that I was just as much interested in the rights of the race as he was, and he was still further surprised when I told him that I felt just as indignant and outraged when my race was insulted and persecuted as he did. This opened the way for a heart to heart talk, which was followed by others, all which resulted in a changed life for my young friend, a change not in the end that he was seeking, but rather in the method of seeking that end.

The story of the young college man that I have just tried to sketch is not different, except in particular circumstances, from that of many other young men that I have known. Several of these young men I have come to know intimately and, as we came to understand one another, they have become faithful friends and supporters of the work I am trying to do. Let me now relate as briefly as possible the sequel of the young college man's story.

After several backsets, my friend persuaded his mother to sell her little property and invest the proceeds in a farm some miles from the city. Here my friend began a new career. He began to study the soil, to observe and study animals, birds, and trees. Soon he became so absorbed in his new life and work that he forgot that he had ever been to college. After a time, however, it began to dawn upon him that his college education could be serviceable in the highest degree by applying all that he had learned to the development of the soil, and so he proceeded to do this. The result was that for the first time in his life he experienced real joy and satisfaction in living. In finding that he could apply his education he had found out what education really is.

He has continued to prosper as a farmer and is looked up to as the leader among his people in his community. He has the respect and confidence of his white neighbors as well as of those of his own race. Although he lives in a county where it is not common for colored people to vote, my friend votes regularly and his white neighbors seem glad to have him do so. He has not only made himself a useful citizen but has become a large taxpayer and keeps a considerable balance in the local bank. He has a wholesome and happy family. Through his influence the local school has become, instead of a mere form, a real power for good in the community. My friend has become so influential in his own community that his word or wish controls the colored church. He virtually decides who shall teach the public school, what wage shall be paid, and how many months the school shall continue in session. He is not only the leader in church and school, but he is president of the farmers' institute, and has control of the county fair. If difficulties arise between white and black people, his advice and counsel are invariably sought. His children, with better preparation than he had, will perhaps attend the college from which he graduated.

I do not pretend that my friend has secured all the rights and privileges that he thinks belong to him. What man of any race or color ever does? Some of the most miserable and ineffective people that I ever met are those who, when viewed from a distance, seem to have all the privileges that the world can confer. No man ever enjoys privileges in the highest sense until he has had the experience of having privileges withheld from him. The people who get the most enjoyment out of wealth are those who have experienced poverty. Sometimes people ask me how I can get so much happiness out of my work and my surroundings when I must be conscious of the suffering and wrongs endured by my race. I usually reply that I am happy because I can compare the present with the past, that I know the depths from which we have come as well as the heights to which we have attained.

During a recent trip through Europe for the purpose of studying the condition of the poorer classes in that part of the world, it was a source of encouragement to me that, wherever I found misery, almost without exception the people told me that things were better than they used to be, that people were looking up, not down. It is not so much what we have as it is the upward look, the knowledge that we are making progress, which makes life worth living.

And so it is with my friend as I observe him to-day. Instead of being miserable he is happy. He is happy because he is engaged in a definite, vital, and constructive work, and through this work, and because of it, he exerts a larger social and political influence than would ever come to him by pursuing the mistaken course on which he first set out. In fact, with all his handicaps, I believe I am safe in saying that he exerts more real influence than nine out of every ten persons of the white or colored people either in the North or in the South.

As the solution of the problems of the individual colored man consists very largely in turning his attention from abstract questions to the concrete problems of daily life -consists, in other words, in interesting and connecting himself with the local, practical, commonplace work and interests of the people among whom he lives -so, too, the solution of the Negro schools consists in connecting the studies in the classroom with the absorbing and inspiring problems of actual life.

Another thing that I am trying to do, therefore, is to get people to see that education in books and in the schoolroom can be articulated into the life and activities of the community surrounding the schoolroom in a way to make the local activities the basis for much of the mental training that is supposed to be furnished by the old traditional and abstract education. In using the local and practical activities as a means of education nothing is sacrificed in culture and discipline, and much is gained in interest and understanding and in earnestness. Children who hate the schoolroom and love the fishing pond, the berry patch, or the peach orchard frequently do so because one is artificial and the other real life. There

is often a better opportunity to do this kind of work, I am convinced, with a new race as mine is, whose ancestors for generations have not been educated in the old formal methods, than with a race that has much to unlearn.

I have had some experiences in helping teachers to connect schoolroom work with real life. Often so simple a thing as a button can be used to make this connection. I have often referred to the "button" connection. Early in my experience as a teacher in Alabama I was called into a community to help compromise between parents and teacher. The parents wanted their children educated. The teacher was earnest and a hard worker, but somehow she was at "outs" with the parents and the parents were at "outs" with the teacher. One of the complaints was the far-reaching one that the school did not seem to accomplish any good.

On my first visit to this community I spent some time in the schoolroom listening to the recitations, which were of the usual sort. But, as I have said, the teacher was in earnest, and, in the effort to be of service, she had got hold of a text book on embroidery which she had seen advertised somewhere. The children were first required to read some lessons from this text book on embroidery a number of times; then they were instructed in the art of embroidery in the most up-to-date and approved fashion. There was about as much difference between the garments which the people actually wore in their homes and the embroidery the children were making as there is between the pictures that you sometimes see in a fashion magazine and an actual human being.

In the first place, about half of the children in the school were more than half naked, and so, as I told the teacher, embroidery was not what they needed most. The teacher complained that although she had gone to considerable expense to prepare to teach embroidery the people showed no interest in what she was trying to do for them. Looking the school over, I noted that there were few buttons on the clothes of any of the children, even of those who were fully dressed. That suggested to me a point of attack upon the situation. As gently and tactfully as I could, I suggested to the teacher that she had missed a step in the evolution of the people in this community and that from almost no garments to embroidery was too sudden a transition. I suggested that she defer her lessons in embroidery for eight or ten years until she could work the people up by gradual processes to the point when they needed embroidered garments and the other things that go with them. She readily consented. Then we began on the "button" connection. The teacher asked the children to count the missing buttons on their garments. The number was amazing. Here was an interesting problem in mathematics.

After that the teacher asked every pupil to get permission from his parents to bring to the school the next day all the garments from home that needed buttons sewed on, and what was her surprise to find that we had about all the spare clothing in that community in the school. When the hour for the sewing lesson came it was a mighty interesting hour, one that pupils and teacher looked forward to, because every child felt that the lesson in sewing on buttons was of vital interest to him and to his family. When the clothes were taken home by the pupils at the close of the day, with all the buttons in their places, the parents for the first time in their lives began to understand what education meant; for the first time in the history of the community a vital connection had been made between the schoolroom and the home. As a result new interest was awakened in the subject of education. The parents now felt that the school was a part of themselves. The teacher found that her work in the school room was no longer a burden, that it was no longer a treadmill of dull routine, but a living reality. The reason was that she was touching and teaching life. Instead of dreading the hour for the reopening of school, pupils and teacher were impatient for the hour to come. It was the "button" connection that did it all. The school continued to grow and expand in the directions which the teaching had taken. Garments that needed darning and patching were regularly brought to

the school to be mended. Later, vegetables were raised by the pupils in the school garden and the pupils were permitted to carry home specimens of vegetables that they themselves had raised. Some of them were better vegetables than their parents had ever raised. Still later, the pupils were encouraged to have their own plots at home for the growing of vegetables, and after a while one of the teachers was appointed to make weekly visits to the homes of the pupils to inspect the vegetable plots.

On these activities as the basis, real problems in arithmetic were constructed -problems as to the cost of cloth, of buttons, the time required to sew on the buttons or to do the darning and patching; compositions were written describing how parents, teachers, and pupils had worked together in bringing about these results. The children no longer dreaded the sound of the word "composition," because in a natural, simple way they were describing something that they were all genuinely interested in.

Another thing that I have tried to do has been to bring the white people in the Southern States and throughout the country into what seems to me a proper and practical attitude toward the Negro in his efforts to go forward and make progress. I am seeking to do this not only in the interest of my race, but also in the interest of the white race.

There are in the Southern States nine million Negroes. There are three million Negro children of school age. Fifty-three per cent., or more than half, never go to school. Many of these Negro children, particularly in the country districts, are in school only from three to four months in the year. I am trying to get the white people to see that, both from an economic point of view and as a matter of justice and fair play, these conditions must be changed. I am trying to get the white people to see that sending ignorant Negroes to jails and penitentiaries, putting them in the chain gang, hanging and lynching them does not civilize, but on the contrary, though it brutalizes the Negro, it at the same time blunts and dulls the conscience of the white man.

I want the white people to see that it is unfair to expect a black man who goes to school only three months in the year to produce as much on the farm as a white man who has been in school eight or nine months in the year; that it is unjust to let the Negro remain ignorant, with nothing between him and the temptation to fill his body with whiskey and cocaine, and then expect him, in his ignorance, to be able to know the law and be able to exercise that degree of self-control which shall enable him to keep it.

Still another thing that I am trying to get the people of the whole country to realize is that the education of the Negro should be considered not so much as a matter of charity, but as a matter of business, that, like any other business, should be thoroughly studied, organized, and systematized. The money that has already been spent by states, institutions, and individuals would have done vastly more good if there had been, years ago, more thorough organization and coöperation between the different isolated and detached members of the Negro school system in the Southern States.

I am trying to get the white people to realize that since no color line is drawn in the punishment for crime, no color line should be drawn in the preparation for life, in the kind of education, in other words, that makes for useful, clean living. I am trying to get the white people to see that in hundreds of counties in the South it is costing more to punish colored people for crime than it would cost to educate them. I am trying to get all to see that ignorance, poverty, and weakness invite and encourage the stronger race to act unjustly toward the weak, and that so long as this condition remains the young white men of the South will have a fearful handicap in the battle of life.