
A Day and Its Duties

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The opinion widely prevails that the present is preeminently a thoughtful, as well as a utilitarian age. That there is great mental activity, no one will deny, who is at all familiar with the enterprises of the times. The average newspaper student will often, in spite of any conservative views he may entertain, be forced to the conclusion that the distinguishing characteristic of the period is progress. In many instances, the advance movement has the appearance of a wild scramble for the attainment of the end in view, an unreasonable haste in the pursuit of purpose, which degenerates to push or rush, something quite different from progress, which usually conveys the idea of growth, prudent, painstaking improvement, solid and secure development.

In common parlance, the present is said to be "a fast age." The toilsome plodding methods of the past are no longer tolerated. During the past half century, the displays of inventive genius have been of a character which defy exaggeration. Throughout all the ages past, nothing is recorded of the operations of the mind forces of the world to be compared with what has transpired within the period we have named. The progenitors of the present generation did not so much as dream of the triumphs of mind and skill which the youth of the present behold on every hand, and men of years, who have witnessed this marvelous development and are familiar with all the facts connected with it, stand amazed in its presence. The electric telegraph, the telephone, the locomotive, the sewing and the knitting machines, the reapers, mowers, and planters, the printing press in its present perfection, and the ten thousand novel machines which quicken the pulse of enterprise and urge the world to advance by leaps and bounds, combine to impart to the present a spirit of restlessness, to which all time past has been a stranger.

It is by no means an unpleasant task to record such wonderful mental activity and material advancement, but it would afford still greater satisfaction, if with it all, we could chronicle the fact that the hard lot of labor had been able to advance to a plane of improved opportunities and secured prosperity.

It is quite within the range of probabilities that such has been the case in isolated instances, but it would be difficult to show that in the general average, anything has occurred calculated to make laboring men better satisfied with their immediate surroundings or to inspire a large share of hopefulness for improvement in the near future.

It is an old time aphorism that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and it is quite certain that so much work as leaves laboring men little or no time for mental improvement, is a condition in direct conflict with the welfare, not only of working men themselves, but of the welfare of society at large, and this view of the subject forces into prominence the problem of so dividing a day, that its duties shall contribute, not only to the material advancement of communities, but to the moral, social, and intellectual improvement of working men and their families.

Our readers are advised of the great anxiety expressed in certain quarters relating to the illiteracy of thousands of the American people, and this solicitude, without special reference to individuals, is indefinitely intensified, because it is assumed that the perpetuity of American institutions depends upon the intelligence of the people. It is held, and prudently, we think, that ignorance is the companion of vice and degradation, and in a large degree disqualifies men for the prudent exercise of the privileges which belong to free men. Indeed, it is held that illiteracy and liberty cannot long exist in alliance. But, it should be understood that by overcoming illiteracy, that is to say, by obtaining so much education as is comprehended by reading and writing, men are yet but one remove from illiteracy, and have made little advancement in knowledge and intelligence, which qualifies men for the responsibilities of American citizenship, and which enables them to comprehend and master such vital questions as bear directly upon their interests. Such knowledge must result from study, reading, and the ability to analyze propositions which in a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, are constantly thrust forward for discussion and settlement.

Any prudent deliberation, touching such questions, in so far as laboring men are concerned, involves the proper division of the hours

which make up a round day. If, by virtue of law or custom, the day is so divided that work and sleep exhaust all the time, mental improvement is out of the question. Rest is essential to life; intelligence is not. An ignorant man, other things being equal, will live as long as a philosopher. It is now conceded, by thoughtful men, statesmen and philanthropists, worthy of the name, that eight hours ought to constitute a day's work; that eight hours as the rule is ample time for sleep. Hence, there remains eight hours for reading, study, investigation, and for mental improvement, and it may be said with eminent justice, that those who demand more than eight hours as a day's work are not the friends of laboring men; that they are something less than statesmen and philanthropists, and that whatever may be their profession, they are incapable of solving the more serious questions which relate to the well being of society.

It will be observed that the discussion of such topics, brings into the boldest possible prominence a day and its duties. In this article and in this connection, we make no reference to the habits of those whose fortunes relieve them from anxieties relating to days and their duties. Our business leads in a different direction. The problem to be solved is: How shall a laboring man divide the hours of a day, so that he may meet every obligation to himself, to society and to his family? If he is to exercise the high prerogative of citizenship, he must be intelligent. If he is to inspire his children with honorable ambition, and prepare them to act well their part, in a government whose destinies, as we have intimated, in a supreme measure depend upon the intelligence of the people, he must himself be well informed. If he is to make his home what an American citizen's home ought to be, superior to the homes of workingmen in less favored lands, he must have opportunities for mental culture, but such a condition and such advantages cannot be secured, if so much of the day is devoted to work, that when the task is ended the physical condition is such as to make profound repose an absolute requirement, or, if a little leisure is secured, it is only sufficient to enable the worker to attend to duties which relate to physical comfort.

The laboring men of America ought to be a unit upon the question of what shall constitute a day's work, and in deciding it the overmastering idea should relate to their social and intellectual improvement.

The monopolist idea is, simply, work the greatest number of hours for the least possible pay. There may be exceptions. We state the

rule. What is the result? Laboring men, overtasked, find little or no leisure for mental culture. But, we inquire, is this the only or the most serious phase of the matter? If the day is so divided, and its tasks so adjusted, that there is no time for intellectual improvement; then it follows that illiteracy, or, at least, a lack of intelligence, will be the consequence, and with this lack of mental growth and strength, will come additional perils to free institutions. Taking this view of the subject, what is the remedy and who shall apply it when found? The remedy is found in making eight hours a full day's work. But who shall apply the remedy? The workingmen themselves. How? By unifying and declaring it to be their purpose to make it the law and the custom. They can do it. They have the ballot, the numerical strength to determine what is good for their physical and intellectual strength, what is good for their children and their homes. Laboring men create the wealth, and have rights which they can teach governments to respect and acknowledge, and when laboring men find time to read and study, to improve their condition socially and intellectually, society will be the chief beneficiary, for the government will rest upon the intelligence and virtue of the people. Every American home will be a citadel impregnable to the wiles of the demagogue and proof against the assaults of those who are disposed to exalt money and degrade muscle.

We are to have, in the near future, better theories in regard to a day and its duties than now prevail, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen of North America has a right, by its numerical and intellectual power, to be a leader in a reform designed to dignify labor, improve society and perpetuate free institutions. Let the question go round. What are the duties of a day?

Edited by Tim Davenport

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