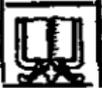


Lessons, a Teacher's
 **Mistakes
May Teach Us**

Eugene Victor Debs

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few months ago the city of San Francisco and its vicinage was startled by an exciting scene in one of its popular schools. A certain teacher of most excellent repute, of many years' experience and regarded as peculiarly efficient in the guidance of young children, was haled into court to answer to a charge that reflected on her common sense if not her sanity.

Among the small children whom she taught, there seemed to have been a certain youngster who instinctively and unrestrainedly had become a victim of the lying habit. The good teacher had striven in all possible ways to break the habit, dreading the consequence in his future years, should she not succeed. But the little fellow seemed to have been incorrigible. An appeal to his parents did not apparently meet with their approval as they were inclined to insinuate that perhaps the teacher herself was the liar rather than their only and most amiable child.

Finally all other efforts failing, the

misguided teacher resorted to a somewhat savage inspiration, and when again the little liar was caught in the act, she called him to her side and lifting, so it was charged, a heated iron to his tongue, she proceeded to burn the lying habit out of the "unruly member". Naturally she was overwhelmed with criticism, and the outraged parents sought to secure damage and oust her from her position.

This peculiar circumstance it seems to me invites many curious philosophical speculations. First was the teacher at all justified in her crude Puritanic inspiration? Is any teacher, for any cause whatsoever justified in inflicting any punishment on a pupil that might endanger its health or menance its physical integrity? I shall not here discuss the propriety or expediency of corporal punishment, in general, as that would lead too far afield. My own private judgment is that except in cases of extreme necessity corporal punishment should never be resorted to in the public schools and a law should be passed in every state legislature making corporal punishment a misdemeanor.

Let us however for a moment study this subject from the point of view of eth-

ics and psychology, to learn whether the teacher was mistaken in her effort at reform and whether the very method she used would not cause greater mental injury to the pupil than the habit of lying which she sought to eradicate.

In the teacher's mind the thought doubtless lay that if she burnt the child's tongue when he lied and he knew she did it on that account then whenever the impulse to lie occurred to him, he would recall the pain and be deterred from his fault. But a little knowledge of psychology would have taught her a more excellent way. She would first have considered the possible danger resulting to the child from the shock which the burn would cause. Such a shock might have left a psychological scar in the child's mind that could bring on most dangerous results in after life. Your psycho-analyst will explain to you that such a shock might have registered a deep effect resulting from forced or irrational suppression that might reveal itself in a disguised form of disease in the after life of the child.

Again, the teacher should have been better informed of the home life of the child to learn the origin of the act of lying.

It may have been caused by a dislike of the child for either father or mother. The psychoanalyst instructs us, while the child is at school, the school takes the place of the parents.

It may have been that the child saw in the teacher what the psychoanalysts call the father-image, that is, a suggestion of the masculine qualities which aroused the unconscious antipathies of the child--and that very suggestion caused it through fear (of course unknown to the child) to prevaricate or boldly lie.

Had this good teacher known this, on investigation, she then might have sought to displace the suggestion in the unconscious realm of the child by assuming the attitude of the mother-image toward the child which would have awakened its confidence and love, and thereby up-rooted the unconscious fear that may have been the cause of the lying habit.

Instead of attempting to suppress the lying disposition by force and puritanic harshness, had she been a good psychologist she could have destroyed the lying tendency by making herself the custodian of it and thus, through its exhaustion, eradicating it.

Had she said to that little boy, not "Stop your lying; the next time I catch you at it, I'll burn your tongue and keep on burning it till you stop it entirely;" had she, I say, not said this but instead have told the child that she would permit it to lie but only on one condition, which she will mention, she might have gotten better results. Had she said to the little fellow, "Now my darling, everybody always wants to tell the truth but you are different than other boys and girls who don't like to lie. Lying is not a good thing; it will hurt and hinder you all through life and get you into lots of trouble; but now I am going to let you lie on one condition; that condition is that whenever you are prompted to tell what is not so, you will tell it only to me. You may come to me at any time and when you are asked about anything and you want to answer with what you know is a lie come to me and whisper it in my ear and I will not punish you. But everytime you do that you will know that what you tell me is not true, and you will get so ashamed of yourself every time you lie to me you will be eager to tell everybody else the real truth"

By that method she would have ac-

complished two things; first she would have released the sense of suppression in the unconscious mind of the child, thereby freeing it from the tendency to express itself in some possible disguised form of disease in the child's after life; and second she would have started a new energy in the child's mind by the strong suggestion that as soon as he told her the lie he would know it was wrong and hurtful, and would be eager to tell everybody else the truth.

The enlightenment of the new psychology might have saved the unfortunate teacher we are discussing from the social infliction and ostracism she suffered in consequence of her misguided puritanism so practically applied.

But now I would divert in my contemplations to the ethical phase of the dramatic scene. What evil results following the scarring of a child's little tongue can compare with the evil resulting from scarring or branding the little child's pliant mind with traditional error and bigoted teachings? How ridiculously puerile are the little lies that a human fledgling might utter compared with the monstrous lies that its elders consciously and persistently utter in its presence. What wonder when

the child awakens in after years, as many do, and learn that their minds have been packed with moral lies, social lies, religious lies, theological lies, hypocritical lies, mock lies of every character, which his later intelligence disarms; what wonder, I say, he hates a civilization which has been built on them.

To brand a child's tongue--shocking indeed! But to brand his brain with the hot irons of traditional falsehood when they who thus brand it, do so wilfully and shamelessly, is to commit a crime, compared with which the timid lies of a child are "as water unto wine."

To brand the child's brain, for instance with the conscious lie, that there is a frightful Devil who pursues him, and is hourly trying to snatch away his little soul and drag it into hell. What redder scar of falsehood burnt into a little brain can be conceived?

To brand that little brain with the fear inspired by a Mighty Being, possessed of all power, omnipotent and omniscient, who sits upon a great throne in the skies, ready to condemn into the power of the Devil whomsoever defies his will. What a horrid cicatrix such a falsehood makes.

Yet how often are the brains of children branded with such ignorance?

To burn into the brain of a little child the searching fear of an eternal Hell, where his feeble soul will suffer everlasting torture, unless it yields to the demands of a man-created theology: what hotter blister would you have than that; what more cruel falsehood?

To teach a little child that by sprinkling of "holy water" on its brow the Devil can be exorcised and sins be washed away, as the mystic crucifix is marked out on the body; what is a simple childhood lie compared to that?

To teach a child that a soul can be brought out of purgatory by the purchase price of prayers for the dead which are lengthened to the weight of the gold that is proffered: how venial is a child's petty lie compared to such a monstrous falsehood: how painless the moment's shock of hot iron on the tongue compared to the life-long pain caused by such mendacity?

A burnt tongue indeed; bad enough! But a burnt brain—burnt with infamous untruths which parents, and priests and teachers have wilfully plied until the frail

heart trembles with fear and the tortured soul is black with pain, ah, there is a brand that spells shame and rebuke to our Christian civilization.

Before we conceive a discipline that shall deter the young from indulging the petty lies of infancy, would it not be well if we sought the path of truth that would deter adults from pursuing and inculcating lies that have too long held honored niches in the temples of religion and the halls of ethics?

Our misguided teacher yielded to a truly venial wrong when she burnt the infant's tongue; if we compare that fault with the greater one which, doubtless she indulged, of suggesting images of horror, conjured by medieval and ignorant tradition, that grip the heart with nightmare fears.

Would it not be better for us all if our teachers and preachers sought first the beam of falsehood in their own eyes, before they undertook to extract the mote of childhood lies out of the eyes of infants.

Lies, lies, lies: alas, our religion, our civilization, our social system, our business world, our mutual relations, are all built on lies.

Why not try the experiment of applying the hot irons of truth to the tongues of all who utter them, that the painful scar of an awakened conscience may remind us daily and hourly of our constant sin, that at last truth alone may be the monitor that shall guide us in our every thought and in the precepts we inculcate?

Misguided teacher, you have taught us a great truth by your unfortunate error. Little boy, if your tongue still hurts you, you will learn as you grow older, that that pain is as nothing compared with the pain of horror and shame that will possess you when you awake to the truth and learn that the traditions you imbibed at your mother's knee in the name of religion are falser than any petty prevarication your infantile imagination ever concocted for you.

Eugene Victor Debs

One of the noblest men who ever lived now lies languishing in a felon's cell. A man of whom James Whitcomb Riley the "Hoosier Poet" said "God was feeling good when he made him, and he didn't have anything else to do all day." That man is Eugene Victor Debs.

You all know my friends I am no anarchist; I am no Bolshivik; I am no rebel but believe ardently in my country and its laws and ideals. Yet I say my heart bleeds that my country has found it necessary to condemn to a prison cell a man so just, so tender, so true, so ideal, as the victim who now lingers in a Federal prison.

To be mistaken is not always to be wrong. To be sincere, though in error is twice to be blessed; first because sincerity is its own excuse, and second because error may always be corrected.

As Antony said of Ceasar, "if he committed a grievous wrong, grievously has he answered it". So may we say of Debs.

Who does not love a hero? And surely he is as great a hero as ever lived, who when confronted with a felon's cell could in his own defense before an unfriendly court, exclaim, "I have been accused of obstructing war. I admit it. Gentlemen, I abhor war. I would oppose the war if I stood alone. When I think of cold glittering steel bayonets being plunged in the white quivering flesh of a human being, I recoil with horror."

To dare to make such a statement when the whole nation had been caught in the fever of war-hysteria, required the lion heart of an unflinching hero. However we may disagree with his logic who can but honor him when before that court, he continued to exclaim, "I would refuse to kill a human being on my own account. Why should I at the command of any one else, or at the command of any power on earth?"

That speech will stand among the great orations of all time. It compares with Patrick Henry's glorious defiance of King George and the Red Coats; with Warren Hasting's brilliant defense; with Robert Emmet's heart gripping, self-condemning words under the shadow of the gallows that was to crush him.

I do not defend Debs's logic. I think he grossly erred. I think he failed to distinguish between laws that prevail in peace and special laws that are made necessary by the demands of war. I think he forgot that laws once made are to be obeyed or the offender must needs suffer the penalty.

But let it be said to the glory of Debs that he at no time begged for leniency; that he well knew he was violating the law and was willing cheerfully to endure the penalty the violation would entail on him.

Debs doubtless felt that some voice must be raised against what he conceived to be the unconstitutionality of the law that oppressed him and those who labored with him for the Cause they had espoused. He doubtless felt that he could be more useful as a victim of protest in bringing about a reaction against what he believed to be a subversion of justice and the rights granted by the nation's Constitution, than by submitting to the fardels he must bear.

Debs undoubtedly was wrong, acting as he did at such a time. The nation's life was threatened; the enemy was at our heels; the world was being engulfed by

tyranny, brutalism and the crushing enginery of war. If the foe had won, liberty, freedom, human rights and individual opportunity would undoubtedly have disappeared for a time from the earth. Debs was blind; made blind by a theory which he passionately proclaimed. He believed the nation should lie down and suffer the murderous heel of the enemy to trample it rather than it should resist through the use of "the cold, glittering bayonet." He was at the time so blind that he could not see that not to resist meant probable annihilation. Debs obeyed his impulse; his vision. Rather than be false to his own convictions he defied, he scorned, he rebuked his countrymen for answering what they believed to be the call of liberty.

To obey the government meant national security, rescue from the grip of the foe; permanence to our principles and ideals.

But Debs thought the war was hurling the world, this nation and all others into the caldron of irremediable wrong.

Debs dared to set his will against the nation's when the enemy's dagger was lifted to thrust at its heart.

Debs was wrong. America was right.

The nation won; Debs is imprisoned. The law must take its course.

But then, war is only a moment's gesture in the march of time. The principles, which for the moment, wars may confuse and darken, if true will rise from the fumes of battle and live on forever.

Time only will tell whether the ideal for which Debs now languishes in jail shall ultimately prevail and conquer the earth.

Time only will tell whether Debs's final words to the court ring true or false to history's course: "Gentlemen I am the smallest part of this trial. . . I am not on trial here. There is an infinitely greater cause that is being tried by this court. American institutions are on trial here before American citizens."

Debs may be mistaken. His ideals may be wrong. His vision may be false. But he braved a crisis like a man. His sweet spirit never soured; his tender hand never grew callous to human grasp; his eye never shot fire of hate.

Debs is a martyr to a Cause. Many martyrs have erred in their ideals. Debs may be in error. But the spirit of martyrs never perishes; such great suffering cannot be in vain. The race is made better by

those who suffer for it, even though they be not its saviors.

All the world loves a lover and no greater lovers ever lived than they who so love a cause they are ready to die for it.

Long live thy spirit noble 'Gene. The world will never doubt your honesty how so it may refuse your leadership.

None can lift the veil of the future; none knows whether behind it rears a grim Gorgon of despair, or, the white winged angel of redeeming hope.

If you erred you erred with honest heart. If you were wrong time will tell. If right, out of the dim shadows of your dingy cell may come forth such light as shall guide the feet of men to keener sense of justice, to clearer vision of liberty, to kindlier spirit of human comradeship and brotherhood.

