

The Utility of Beauty

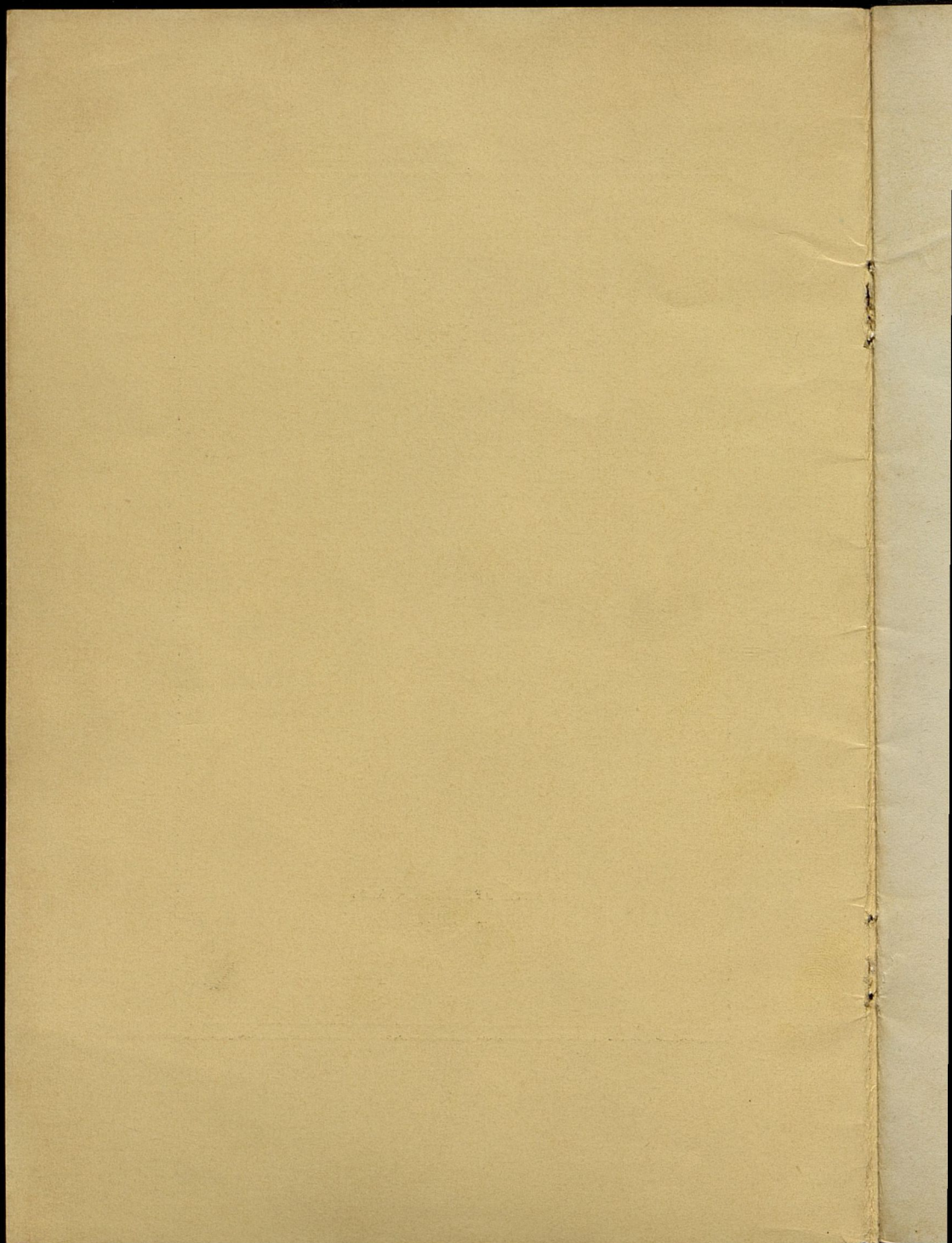
By

EDGAR L. HEWETT



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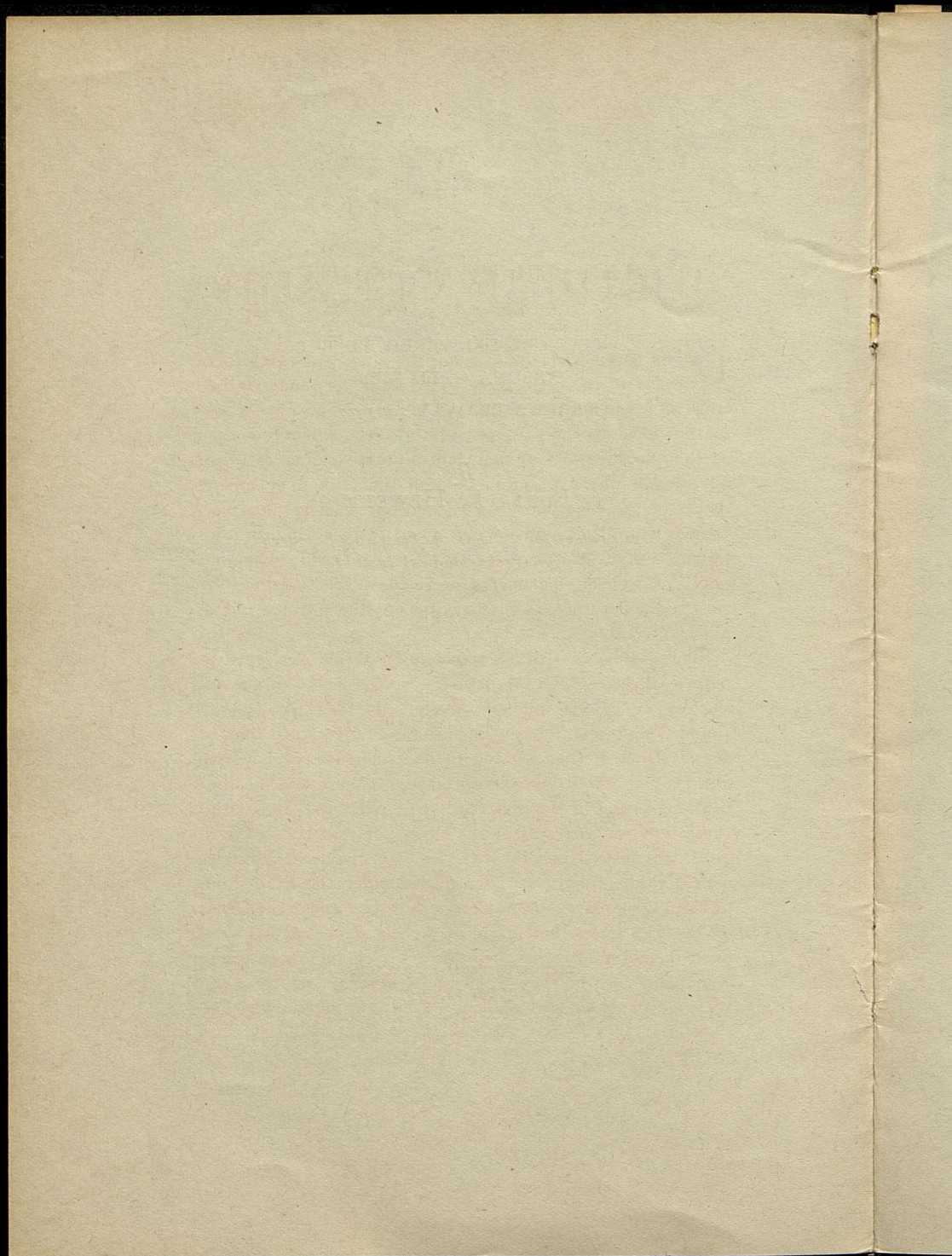
A LECTURE DELIVERED AT THE
ARSUNA GALLERIES
SANTA FE, JULY 20, 1937

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THE UTILITY OF BEAUTY

By EDGAR L. HEWETT

LET US begin with a statement of some deplorable facts. The first is that we are living in a very materialistic time. This is not new in human history. There have been in the past, epochs of gross materialism when it seemed as though the spirit of man had been subordinated to ungovernable physical impulses, and that the finer endowments of the race had been blotted out. There have been periods from time immemorial when force—blind, unintelligent, destructive—seemed to rule the world; when duplicity, falsehood, dishonesty, were considered cardinal virtues if they would aid in carrying out the purposes of an arrogant will.

Such a time was that of ancient Nineveh, six centuries before Christ. That mighty city of the Tigris plain was the terror of the ancient world. It was a city-state founded and sustained by brutal force. No state that resisted Nineveh was allowed to live. Anyone who warned against her iniquities was an enemy. There was no limit to the boasting of the invincibility of Nineveh. But within three hundred years after the climax of that time of arrogant bombast, Nineveh with its vast palaces, libraries, armed camps, engines of war, was under the sand dunes of the Tigris plain, so completely that Alexander the Great, on his way to the battlefield of Arbela, marched his army over it and never dreamed that a city had been there. Xenophon with his Ten Thousand Greeks passed by it and was not aware of its existence. I have trudged over those

desolate wastes in recent years and been able to find here and there only a mere vestige of a city that should be living today. Might does not make right, nor is it an assurance of lasting life.

The last centuries of the Roman Empire were among the most abhorrent times in the history of civilization. Human freedom went to the lowest ebb; dictatorship was enthroned in its most arrogant form. And to what result? The military power of mighty Rome crumbled under the impact of the gentlest philosophy the world had ever known. One great soul, Saul of Tarsus, armed with the Christian spirit, was mightier than all Rome's legions and all Rome's tyrants. It would take long to name the tyrants that have strutted through history, to read the records of their wars that blighted humanity; the blood-purges by which they sought to hold their power. Their names have been swept into infamy, their nations into oblivion. And who are the immortal ones who have grown greater with the flight of ages? The patriarchs of Israel, the Messiah of Nazareth, the Prophet of Islam, the Enlightened One of India, the Perfect Sage of China. These have shown the supremacy of the spiritual life. Because of them, we have a civilized world to live in.

In the history of the world, dictators have been short lived, their influence transitory. You are thinking of the dictators of present-day Europe; their boastings of the invincibility of their armies; of their ideologies of government entrenched for a thousand years. This they seem to think they have achieved by the suppression of the principal agencies of their civilization: the church and their universities; their art, literature, philosophy, even the history of their past; by the extinction of their thinking men and the enthronement of their mediocrities.

There came to me recently a report from the Emergency Committee that is making an effort to salvage something of the intellectual and spiritual life of the dictator countries of Europe. It relates to one country only, but re-

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flects a condition that exists in every country that is under one-man rule. The Committee reports the continued suppression of the spiritual life—to be expected under a regime that is based upon force, the antipodes of one based upon ideas and ideals—the essence of the life of the spirit. It reports that the purging process in the universities is almost complete, that every great scholar who, because of his race, religion, or political principles, is *persona non grata* to the state (the dictator), has been expelled from his chair, and that the evil grows. It appears that in those countries the doom of the independent thinker is sealed. The Emergency Committee pleads that all lovers of liberty and independent thought in America join in finding places for these devoted scholars whose gifts should not be lost to humanity. Already the numbers exiled or destroyed mount to the thousands. Happily, other countries are welcoming them into their institutions. Art, literature, music, religion, philosophy—the factors in culture that have made those countries glorious in history, and happy in domestic life—all are now under the ban of the dictator, whose will is carried out by weaklings, bringing to mind the motto of the sycophants of the Oriental potentate: “Should the Prince at noon-day say, ‘It is night,’ declare that you behold the moon and stars.” Liberty, honesty, manhood, atrophy under such conditions; culture is blighted, civilization withers.

Lest anyone should fear, even momentarily, that I consider these glories of the past forever lost, and the march of civilization permanently arrested, let me hasten to say that I do not believe it for a moment. Only three countries of eminence in world history are in that lamentable condition. I predict their ultimate recovery. Their present pathological state is an after-effect of the World War—of the deluge of hate that engulfed Europe. It is infectious, like any other pestilence. Spain is its pitiable victim. Two years ago it was a prosperous land; its people law-abiding, minding their own business, committed to a

fine program of internal improvement, devoted to art, music, science, peace, everything that makes for joy in life. Today it is desolated, not by conflicts that originated within, but by the scourge from without that is threatening the world. Eastern European nations are especially in peril.

Let us turn to the brighter side of the picture. The British commonwealth of nations, France, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United States of America, twenty democracies of the New World, hold to the belief in individual freedom, in national integrity, in the sanctity of treaties, in the settlement of misunderstandings by other means than violence. The signs are brightening. At the Buenos Aires convention, the nations of America came together in a compact of good will and mutual confidence. I must believe that the bellicose nations of Europe will see in this the better way. Let us arrogate to ourselves no superior virtues. We might have been victims of the blight. There have been symptoms of it, but they are passing. In common with the democratic nations above enumerated we are holding fast the freedom that man has been ages in winning. Our materialistic spirit is noticeably on the wane. Time was in recent years, when the world "realistic" appeared in almost every public address. "We must look at things *realistically*." The abominable word is out now. We are again looking at things idealistically. Idealism brought man to his manhood. It was imagination, spiritual aspiration, that gave humanity its art, poetry, music, religion, and its scientific achievements as well. Without the divine urge of idealisms, man would still be a cave dweller.

Another term much abused of late is "nationalism." It is being made a barrier between peoples. Yet we believe in having nations. We are justly proud of our nationality. For some thousands of years we have been striving for the ideal state. We have not perfected our ideal, but we firmly believe in the nation created by its own people, ruled by

its own people through individuals called by them to be their servants, never their masters, commanded to serve them through the orderly processes of law with the state as the instrument of the people's will. Make no mistake. There are at least forty democratic nations in the world as against half a dozen that submit to the autocrat. And as to these last: let us not misjudge them. I know them from long personal acquaintance. I think of the people of every country in Europe with profound admiration and sincere affection. But for dictators I have no use.

So, if we are inclined to look with apprehension upon world conditions, let us not lose sight of the basic fact concerning humanity, that in the entire race there are inherent those qualities that will eventually make mankind all that we would like for it to be. When I decided to specialize in the study of humanity, I concluded that I must seek first-hand knowledge of my subject. So my work has taken me into many lands and into contact with most of the peoples whom we call civilized, and many that we consider backward. I began with all the prejudices of ignorance. I am now ready to testify to a profound liking for every people that I have come to know. For example, I had been led to believe that the Arabs were cut-throats and bandits—that life was never safe among them. Lost in the Arabian desert some years ago, desperately injured, with my wife and other companions, I found the Arabs who rescued us to be the most gentle and hospitable people imaginable. There was no possible kindness that was not shown us. Kindly, considerate, courteous—a noble race of men.

And so, as we go among people everywhere, near neighbors or so-called savages, we find what we take to them. You find suspicion, distrust, treachery, if that is what you take with you. If you go with sincere trust, giving of what you have with no concern about return, your problem will be how to match the generous kindness with which you are met. It is an inescapable human trait to

demand an eye for an eye, a life for a life. A fortification on a nation's frontier calls for one as formidable on the other side. The battleship that one nation builds calls for one of at least equal power for its neighbor. So the wretched strife goes on, in spite of the fact that we *know* how goodwill begets goodwill. Canada and the United States live for a hundred years in perfect peace without a gun or a breastwork on three thousand miles of frontier. That three thousand miles costs two great nations less than a hundred yards of boundary between France and Germany.

Is there, then no hope for a better world condition than we are now witnessing? Is there nothing that can bring harmony into human life? I think there is. We must find a common language; a chord that will rouse a thrill of sympathy between soul and soul, transcending racial or national feeling. Does it matter in what language a great opera is sung? The emotions stirred by a noble instrument, a magnificent orchestra, a mighty chorus, are common to all. I have seen people of many nationalities before paintings in great art galleries with tears in their eyes—moved by the sheer beauty of master art; responding with identical emotions to a language that is common to all mankind. Some experiences are elemental in human existence. Herein is the key to universal brotherhood.

The great Russian philosopher-artist, Nicolas Roerich, has long contended that art will unify humanity. For a generation he has borne aloft a steady oriflamme of goodwill through art that no tumult of a discordant world has ever caused him to lower. European, American, Oriental, world-thinker, he has proclaimed art to be the unifying world-force. With Roerich's thesis, I am in full accord, understanding, of course, that by art is meant all those agencies that bring beauty and harmony into the lives of men. Art that does not do that is misnamed. Ugliness, strife, propaganda (another hateful word), do not belong to the province of art. This eliminates the

work of the much publicized Diego Rivera, he of the vast murals dedicated to strife, unrest, war spirit. The propagandist who incites the mob to violence is no friend of mankind. The artist who brings beauty into life is a bearer of peace and joy.

Then is art, beauty, simply for emotional satisfaction? I contend that it is of the highest utility. How I wish that Russia, Germany, France, Italy, would send to us and to one another their artists, musicians, poets, dramatists, to strike the chords of life that are common to us all. With the cost of one battleship they could flood the civilized world with harmony. With the expense of caring for the maimed of one battle, they could bring joy to thousands and glory to themselves. I would like to see created a university without professors or students, to select and maintain by the thousand our bravest and best young men and women to go into the countries of the world, to live and learn with their people, share their distress, their joys, their poverty, their culture; understand one another and cause the world to understand. If we could know one another, there would be no use for armies.

Am I placing before you an idle vision of perfection? No. I am giving you the convictions of plain common sense and some knowledge of the characteristics common to all humanity. Have we any tangible evidence in practical, materialistic America that beauty is coming to be a dominant force? Yes, everywhere that we look for it. Compare the automobiles of today, beautiful in line and movement, with the ugly, lumbering vehicles of a few years ago; our new railway trains and steamships, models of art as well as utility and comfort. I have seen two or three examples of noble architecture introduced into a city overcome the sordid, the commonplace, through the silent power of beauty, and bring forth a city of lovely homes and public buildings. In Santa Fe the monolithic Palace of the Governors, the Art Museum, La Fonda, the

Water and Light Company's building, displaying the fine old architectural tradition of the region, pioneered a city unique and beautiful among the small cities of our country. We have seen a new, ugly filling station promptly torn down by its owners and replaced by a building in the artistic tradition of the town. Ugliness doesn't pay any more. Beauty is becoming profitable in dollars and cents as well as in esthetic satisfaction. It is entering noticeably into our social, political, and economic structure.

Pardon me for referring again to my home town. Some of us had to take a good deal of abuse years ago for standing in the way of six-story office buildings to take the place of our historic structures. Santa Fe, many said, must become "an up-to-date burg." Red brick bungalows were in high favor. The austere, ancient architecture—Mexican and Pueblo Indian—stood in the way of civilization and progress. The demolition of an old landmark was commended. Our earliest artists were looked upon with compassionate toleration; their street in the south part of town was "nut row." Today the destruction of an ancient structure or a venerable tree starts a riot. Artists, architects, writers, are esteemed in the community. Works of art worthy of place in important galleries hang in the lobby and offices of our First National Bank, and in many other business houses. Best of all, beauty is coming into the homes and everyday lives of our people. Well, what of it? you may ask. Let that question be answered twenty-five years from now.

We of the State Museum take some virtue to ourselves in the policy of that institution. Its galleries are for the exhibition of the canvases of the most eminent painters and of the unknown Indian: for the academician, the impressionist, expressionist, abstractionist, realist, cubist, mystic: all come in on equal terms. We judge no one's art—only ask that it manifest a decent regard for the opinions of mankind with respect to morality. We claim no superior knowledge, knowing that "the stone rejected

by the builder may become the head of the corner." We watch eagerly, of course, for signs that these works of art are bringing beauty into the lives of men. That is what we think art is for. But we set up no arbitrary standards. This is the expression of our faith in the free mind. This is the stand we take for toleration. My friends, intolerance is the blight that is destroying the finest flowers and fruits of three great nations—Germany, Italy, Russia.

I have been speaking of one small community, of one small endeavor. It is but an indication of a nation-wide impulse toward a finer life. Our government has made art a prominent factor in its relief projects, along with the building of roads and dams. Acres of murals have been painted for our public buildings. True, a lot of our "depression art" is worse than the depression. But never mind. It marks the beginning of a mighty impulse towards an esthetic age, destined to modify, even to glorify, our materialistic time. That age is being forged now. Happy those who live to have a part in it.

Let us have a summation of this argument. Certain great nations of the world are under the blight of a war fever; are sinking in gross materialism; are suffering from hallucinations of invincibility, of grandeur, of vast ambitions. It is endangering civilization. It must be arrested—if absolutely necessary, by force. The rational nations have the force, ten times over, and it might become necessary to use it. But physical force is not a final arbiter. It settles nothing permanently. The world war proved that; all history proves it. Let us find the better way. That should not be difficult. Again we have the sure teachings of history. Civilization has been shaped by the great spiritual forces. They are as potent as ever over the lives of men.

A meteor flashes across the sky and sinks quickly into darkness. An individual seizes power, spreads terror, boasts his invincibility, then falters; soon the sword drops from his nerveless hand and he sinks into infamy. But

the light of a great soul glows from year to year and from age to age. The mighty spiritual forces must be marshalled against the agencies of degeneracy. But how go about it? We of free, blessed America must answer that. I claim no superior intelligence or virtue for my country, but simply unprecedented opportunity. America is a land of incalculable material resources. We do not collapse at the thought of a thirty-six billion dollar debt incurred in a good cause, for we know that if we all throw in together our resources for one year, we can cancel it. America is free, politically, economically, geographically, spiritually. America, materialistic, money-grabbing, at the same time idealistic, is moving in a mysterious way; or is it "the Divinity that shapes our ends," using America as a mighty instrument in shaping human affairs? The material wealth that is being poured into spiritual agencies—education, religion, art, research, philanthropy—in this land of ours is already beyond comprehension, and we've witnessed only the beginning.

But humanity is a vast organism. If the whole race is to be bettered, all human intelligence must bend to the task. But the individual strength is infinitesimal, you say, and you can see no result in your short life time. My friend, civilization cannot go forward without you. You include the multitude. You are the heir of all that man has achieved and become through a million years of striving. "Whatever is man in the sons of men" you possess. Know now that no creative effort is lost nor ever can be. Every great life is a success, though there may be disappointment and seeming failure in an individual span. The energy of every great soul that has lived is active somewhere in the vast labor house of existence.

I close this conference on a note of unshakable optimism. With Walt Whitman, "I see America go singing to her destiny." That great prophet had a vision of the destiny that we have tried to picture here. We may be proud to have a part in it. It should be a happy privilege to help

re-kindle the age-old altar-fires that have been dimmed by recent violence; in the spirit of another great prophet, "with malice toward none and charity for all," to help bind up the wounds of the millions crucified in conflicts of the past. Let us continue to try to find the way. I think it lies only through the way of "peace on earth, good will toward men"; through building persistently toward an age of harmony. Beauty, which is pure harmony, must be brought into the lives of men. Hatred must be eliminated. Paraphrasing the words, but voicing the spirit of Abraham Lincoln: "We must be friends. The silver cords of memory and ancient friendship stretching from soul to soul and age to age, and nation to nation, have not been and never can be broken." We refuse to have any enemies. Such, I conceive to be the spirit in which all of us must go on to our future work.