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EMOTIONAL BLOCKS TO LEARNING

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In our newspapers, in our magazines, and in thousands of groups of citizens meeting under P. T. A. and similar auspices we read and hear of innumerable thoughtful as well as heated discussions of what our schools should be doing. Some want a return to the three R's, others want indoctrination in various points of view, while still others would like to see the development of young people who are not only well informed but who are capable of independent thinking as well. Practically everyone would like to advise the teacher how he may do his job better, though only a few are willing to find out what his real problems are. Still fewer bother to back up the teacher in an effective manner by moral and financial support.

Psychiatry, like other related professions, sees in the school system the best possible area for the development of wholesome conditions for civilized living. The psychiatrist looks upon the

teacher as his firm ally in the struggle to bring about a certain harmony in getting along with others, an efficiency which permits our society to be progressive and constructive, and an inner integrity which furthers mutual self-confidence in our democracy. The two are equally interested in and concerned with the parents' role in these endeavors, a role which is even more fundamental than that of the teacher or the psychiatrist. The parents set the stage, the teachers promote or correct, while the psychiatrist deals with the unusual, the unhappy, or with any who may be at odds with themselves or the environment. Each needs to know something of the ideas and ideals of the other if conditions necessary for optimum progress by the child are to be maintained.

While trying to determine what kinds of information should be shared by the psychiatrist and the teacher, a psychiatrist friend of mine, a few weeks ago, asked me to make up a list of ten things I would say to a group of teachers, facts that would be useful from their point of view and yet which would be within the province of psychiatry. That sounded like a very simple thing to do, but the more I thought about the task the more I confirmed an old opinion that in psychiatry, no less than in education, the last word is never spoken. Yet growth and progress in these, as in other fields, is not to be denied, and those of us engaged in teaching young people can only hope that our influence on them will cause that growth and progress to be made in the right direction, even though we cannot always formulate our goals succinctly or our principles of action scientifically.

In the meantime Dr. Johnson invited me to come to talk with you; so it became apparent that I had begun to prepare for this meeting even before I knew I was coming. While pondering over the job my friend had given me as well as this assignment, I happened to have a patient in the hospital who had taught for many years in a large city somewhere west of the Hudson. I asked her what questions she would like to have answered by a psychiatrist. She responded as follows:

1. Should night work be assigned?
2. Shuld pupils study in a room at home with a radio or T. V. turned on?
3. Is it the duty of the school to teach courtesy, honesty and fair play?
4. When a child misbehaves, should he be sent out of the room or kept after school?
5. Should a boy or girld hold a job after school and then sleep in class?
6. Should a pupil be allowed to come to school without eating breakfast?
7. When a boy or girl has a cold, should he be allowed to come to school?
8. How should a new pupil be received by the rest of the class?
9. It is better to explain the subject matter of each lesson before the class as directed study or should the pupil work out the assignment by himself?

The answers to her questions would certainly be interesting topics for discussion, and it would indeed be a wise teacher who could successfully manage all the situations with which she was concerned. Her questions indicated a preoccupation with details, which to her were of the greatest importance; yet since we are looking at hindrances to learning this afternoon, we must of necessity consider somewhat more general principles. After this, we can hope that answers to specific individual situations may be attained more readily.

To me it is axiomatic that effective teaching is much more a matter of exciting interest and curiosity and a love for learning in the student than imparting facts alone, even though the basic aim of learning includes the assimilation of useful facts.

The most important thing for a teacher to know, in my opinion, is himself. The person who can look objectively at his

own childhood, understand his relationships with parents and other relatives, and who has worked through the long term effects of those relationships, is not as easily upset by the curiosity and behavior of children as the one whose defenses are so vulnerable that sensitive areas of personality are disturbed daily. Furthermore, he can understand his pupils better.

From this it follows that such teachers tend to think of their pupils as active, developing human beings, incomplete but possessed of great potential qualities, who are in a sense a composite of all their previous experiences. They are then in a better position to guide the development of their students than the teachers who think of students as young things to be restrained and made to learn.

Instead of trying to cause them to develop along some preconceived pattern, the wise teacher realizes that his function is to cultivate and encourage the traits already possessed by the student, building inner controls as soon as possible, replacing discipline from without with controls from within in the form of integrity, reliability, and a sense of duty and obligation to others. This amounts to saying that the teacher promotes maturity in any and all possible ways both in others and in himself. Maturity is both intellectual and emotional, and is in a sense a by-product of satisfactory living just as happiness and peace of mind should be. There are times, such as this one, when it is worthwhile to look at some of its characteristics.

Like education, maturity is not something one acquires all at once, or completely, nor is it the same in any two individuals. As Dr. Eric Lindemann so clearly states, maturity means different things at different ages, the older and more responsible the person the higher are the standards by which he is is judged. What is appropriate at one age may become inappropriate at a later one, but there is always a tendency to revert to an earlier stage when acute stress is experienced. This regressive behavior may frequently be called "immature." The more that is expected of a person, the more opportunities there are for inappropriate behavior to be observed.

Dr. Lindemann's definition of the mature person is most complete and perceptive:[1]

1. He should be able to perform the tasks put before him by himself and his society in such a way to make full use of his capacities without having his efforts hampered by emotional tensions.

2. He should be able to meet the ordinary stresses of life without disintegration or symptom formation, discharging the tension mobilized by the experience in a relief producing and ultimately constructive manner.

3. He can operate without making others sick, either by depriving them of some element of support or freedom needed for their well-being or by so depleting them by his own demands for love or reward that they have little energy left to carry on their own tasks.

4. He can adapt his perceptions of people and situations to the realities involved rather than falsifying the picture he forms of them by projecting his own needs into it.

He says we must learn to distinguish between maturity and pseudo-maturity, which conceals severe developmental flaws under a surface of apparent adequacy. People who seem overfriendly may be wearing a mask which hides hostility or a feeling of emptiness. Others develop the device of martyrdom or willing self-sacrifice in order to control those around them.

He goes on to say that some persons may appear on the surface to be well adjusted, but who are really socially impoverished because of having had an insufficient number of models to love and emulate during the years of personality formation. Such a person might possibly feel comfortable only when he was operating in his own small area of competence, whereas outside that area he might be quite ill at ease in other human relationships. By assuming a superior attitude he could cover up feelings of deep inferiority.

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[1] Lindemann, E., "Mental health: fundamental to a dynamic epidemiology of health", *Epidemiology of Health*, Health Education Council (Publisher), New York City and Minneapolis, 1953, pps. 109-123.

To explore this concept of maturity somewhat further, let us look at it from the administrator's point of view. To him a teacher may be growing, curious, flexible, receptive to new ideas; his point of view cannot be predicted ahead of time; he can see remote as well as immediate reasons for any given act or decision, and he has a concept of discipline based on self-understanding and self-control. On the other hand, another teacher may be very brittle, easily angered, dogmatic in his views, take some particular concept and try to make the facts fit it, confuse issues, and have defenses which are obvious to everyone but himself. He makes up his mind quickly and changes it only with great difficulty. The second teacher must be treated in an entirely different way from the first one; he is much less mature and suffers from it in failure to achieve as much satisfaction from his work as would the first teacher.

From the pupils' point of view, there are certain general principles that apply to all individuals which the good teacher keeps in mind: 1) people like to be considered as individuals, 2) individuals need a sense of belonging — of teamwork, 3) sentiments or feelings are facts to be respected, whether based on logical or irrational premises, 4) activity, whether hostile, casual, or friendly, tends to be mirrored or reflected by others, 5) good communication at all levels is fundamental. "No" can be said in a friendly fashion. The teacher is frequently quite unaware of how much time is spent by pupils studying his manner, his attitudes, his way of doing things.

Sometimes it is interesting to hear what the pupils themselves say about the teacher insofar a discipline and attitudes are concerned. For instance, one was observed to say, "I like my teacher because she doesn't pound the desk, scream and holler." Professor Strang[2] of Teachers College, Columbia University, has reported on some of the comments among which were, "I like Mr. E. because he won't let you fool around as much as some of the other teachers do. He is strict, but always

[2] Strang, R., "How children and adolescents view their world", *Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 38, No. 1, Jan. 1954, pps. 28-33.

ready for a laught." Another said, "I like my fifth grade teacher when she gets up on the right side of the bed." A sixth grader in a rural community wrote, "My first grade teacher was a very old woman who had never been married. I liked her because she liked children a powerful lot." Another said about her teacher's fairness, "She did not have only one child who was her pet. She always found a way to use pupils, even dumb ones. She would make them feel at home and that they were welcome."

In the background of almost every child who is having trouble with his school work are a number of factors which are monotonously familiar to every experienced teacher, as well as to the psychiatrist. The chief one is almost invariably discord between the parents or parent substitutes. Children have an almost uncanny way to recognizing parental tensions long before the parents themselves think it possible. Furthermore, since the children cannot verbalize their own reactions to this tension, not knowing in many instances what is wrong, they "act out" their feelings more or less unconsciously in the form of reading or scholastic disability, defiant behavior, or other poorly defined aggressive attitudes, bodily symptoms, and in dozens of other ways.

It is the complex of attitudes formed about others in early childhood that determines in large measure whether the adult shall be secure or insecure, able to give and receive affection or be suspicious and self-protective, generally optimistic or pessimistic.

If only this one concept could be gotten across to our present-day young people in such a way that they would believe it and act as if they believed it, the problem of the mental health of the next generation would be well on the way to a solution. It is one of the tragedies of this field of the emotions and mental health generally that people tend to learn the principles in a detached intellectual fashion; the when under stress they are apt to behave as if such information had not been acquired.

Other background situations frequently observed in the disturbed or underachieving child, all related more or less to parental characteristics, are 1) faulty discipline, either absent, inconsistent, or too authoritarian 2) lack of warm feelings on the part of the parents giving rise to feelings or rejection 3) rigidity in thought and emotional reaction 4) a relative lack of appropriate masculine attributes in the father or feminine traits in the mother 5) distorted or squeamish attitudes about body functions and 6) poor neighborhood environment.

I was consulted not long ago by a man in his late forties because he was very much distressed about the behavior of his son, a senior in high school. The son had been involved in automobile accidents in which he had misrepresented the facts in the case; he had played truant from school; he had failed to tell the truth in several other situations, and in general was a great disappointment to his family. In the course of getting the history, the chief fact that stood out was that between the ages of six to twelve, this youngster almost never saw his father. The father was very busy in his professional work, he had a long distance to commute which took an extra two hours per day, and as a result, he left home in the morning before his son got up, and returned in the evening after he had gone to bed. The situation was somewhat aggravated because the mother was not skillful in discipline. She kept a mental account of all the infractions of rules in order that the father might deal with them all at once in the rare intervals that he did see his son. Thus it came about that the relationship between the father and son had almost no characteristics except a punitive one. When the father's schedule became lighter and he had a chance to spend some time at home, his son was a stranger, and no close bond grew up between them. It is not difficult to derive from these facts the principle that the son was going to get some attention from his parents of one kind or another, but unfortunately his efforts were of the annoying variety. It is pleasant to note that when the father made effors to become a better friend to his son, the behavior problems likewise became less. Along these lines Dean Wilson of Amherst once said,

"Threats, punishment, rewards and exhortations do not change attitudes in the adolescent boy. When your son's behavior disturbs you, a sympathetic ear, an understanding heart, and a continual affection are your best assets."

Recently I heard of a boy of eleven who had been a behavior problem for a year or more, being a source of concern, not only to his family, but to the entire neighborhood. Finally he became interested in the Boy Scouts, worked through the various activities necessary to qualify for membership, and while doing this was able to get along in the neighborhood in a way that was quite acceptable. After qualifying for membership, he was in high spirits and went home to tell his mother that now he should have a uniform like the other boys. His mother being somewhat less confident in him said, "No, you cannot have a uniform until you prove to me that you will stay interested in the Scouts." This was a real blow to the boy, his manner immediately changed back to sulfink and petulance, and he began a subtle emotional campaign to gain by indirection what he could not get by direct, logical means. After much nagging, together with sympathy and indirect pressure from neighbors who knew of the boy's disappointment, the mother "gave in" saying, "Well, I'll buy you the uniform if you will promise to be a good boy and mind what mother says." Of such episodes are later neurotic behavior patterns derived.

As an example of lack of consistency so far as the child's thinking is concerned, a little episode occurred in my community recently, in which everyone involved meant well, but the effect was regrettable. A young mother, carrying her small baby and accompanied by her six year old son, was waiting to cross a busy street where there was no traffic light. Finally the boy thought he should go across and started to run to the other side. A car was approaching but not near enough to endanger him. The mother got panicky, screamed at the boy, who immediately stopped in front of the car, ran back to his mother, narrowly escaping being run down. She then scolded him publicly for running in front of a car, while he was frightened and crying,

saying, "Why don't you do what I tell you?" He replied, "But mother you always told me to run across the street to keep out of the way of cars." More scolding and more crying followed, and both the mother and the boy no doubt felt hurt, ashamed, and somehow each felt justified in his behavior.

In the attempt to develop children who will at least have the opportunity to acquire mature concepts, behavior, and patterns of thinking, the teacher and the parents encounter many obstacles in the community. We as teachers know that the acquisition of facts is difficult enough even when the facts are constant. How much more difficult it is when the facts change frequently, or the ground rules for interpreting what seem to be facts change. I am referring to a large number of inconsistencies that characterize our behavior but which puzzle children. Some inconsistencies are presumably desirable in order that a child not be educated for an unreal world — but too many, as Brock Chisholm has observed, are like putting poison in the intellectual soup.

For example, consider the custom of teaching children that Santa Claus is a real person who comes down all chimneys no matter how small or large, at the same time, and rewards only the good little boys and girls. Or the speed limits posted on some of our streets and highways which are seldom observed or enforced. Or the parking signs which are often not even meant to be observed. Grown-ups often give incorrect answers to children to satisfy their curiosity, and in a variation of this, such as the woman who told her young son she didn't have a quarter when he asked her for one (when he had just seen one in her purse), the child is actually taught that lying is all right when convenient. What can the young boy or girl think when his elders condone lying by a politician but condemn it in others? Or when they see smoking by older people near "No Smoking" signs? They very soon learn who means what he says and says what he means, but equally quickly they learn how to cut corners, how to take ethical short-cuts, and then how to convey false impressions without actually doing any one thing that is out of

line. From that we see derived the current morality which seems to stop at the legal level, still somewhat short of a moral level. In the words of a recent *New York Times* article, most people only talk about principle while the rare person tries to defend it. Our children will be like us, only more so, in this regard unless we pay increased attention to consistency, fair play, and the need for honesty in all our dealings with one another.

With our chief agencies of communication, namely the radio, movies and television, we do indeed have a major problem in the attempt to raise the standards of taste of those who plan the programs. A favorite defense of the policy-makers in those fields is that they are giving the people what they want, and they do not want anything serious or educational. H. L. Mencken said a generation ago that no man ever went broke under-estimating the tastes of the American public. However, all too often we find the demands of the public being exploited rather than satisfied. A very well known teacher in West Virginia, commenting in his autobiography on the lack of anything but chalk and a piece of sheepskin for an eraser in the school rooms in which he taught his first school, said that modern aids to teaching were not missed because it takes a kind of genius to miss what one does not know about. The tastes of the general public will go up, I believe when it has the opportunity of continued exposure to programs of good music and other features more desirable than hill billy songs and soap operas. Experiments such as the new educational television station, Channel 2 in Boston, will be watched, and I hope supported, with much interest.

Mrs. Agnes E. Meyer, writing on "Schoolboy racketeers" in March 1954 *Atlantic Monthly*, reports with rare insight and perception on some of the social factors which ultimately result in poor school work, juvenile delinquency, and outright criminal behavior. She says our social imagination has failed us in this area largely because the American people, under the lure of materialism, have failed to appreciate the importance of education. We have failed to see that the role of the school is very

different in a war-torn, migratory, industrial, urban society than in a more slow-moving, largely agricultural, rural one. As she so eloquently states, "It is high time that we make up our minds what the public schools can and cannot do. For at present the average teacher is expected to be a policeman, a psychiatrist, a public health expert, a doctor, a clergyman, a night club entertainer, and a parent. All this we demand from one underpaid public servant because the nation lacks the wisdom and the will power to face its social problems with honest, effective, and comprehensive insight."

She suggests that true prevention of juvenile delinquency so far as the school's part in this ideal is concerned lies in a greater awareness on the part of the public of the needs of children and teachers together with the willingness to pay for them, classes not over 25 in number so that teachers can treat pupils as individuals, giving the brighter pupils full scope for their abilities, stopping the practice of promoting by chronological age for political and unwise psychological reasons, closer ties between school and family, and family counseling.

Love and affection always form prominent components of a good home and a good institution, just as hatred seems to be associated with crime and delinquency. This emotion and the uses to which it can be put by unescrupulous persons deserves a closer look.

Hatred is a dangerous weapon, always difficult to keep under control. In a social situation filled with stress, demagogues frequently see an opportunity of serving their own special interests in whipping up strong feelings of frenzy, apprehension, fear, and other such reactions, hoping that the people can be molded and controlled by means of hate. Unfortunately hatred is an emotion so strong that it needs a violent outlet, such as war or some equivalent violent conflict. If no outlet is achieved, it tends to turn to some other target, usually inappropriate, and hence acts as a divisive force. In our society at present it is dividing us from within rather than uniting us. Frequently hatred and hostility in all their various forms are

a means of maintaining personal integrity, even though such emotions are undesired by the individual. This often happens in two married individuals seeking a divorce. Likewise dictators strive to keep their countries united by causing their people to hate other countries, regardless of the logical grounds for enmity. Hatred in the young child, even though not well directed toward any one target, is about as effective a block to learning as any in existence. In a very real sense it is an inverted cry for love. Hatred in the individual blocks his personal development, including learning, just as hatred in a community blocks its social and moral development.

Because hatred is used by so many pressure groups in all societies and tragically in our own, those of us who believe strongly in education, and in the basic decency and good will of mankind generally, must find some antidote for it. Democracy itself, if taught properly, could be the uniting factor behind which all men of good will could exert their strength. As Goethe has said, "Sentiments unite, opinions divide." Ralph Barton Perry has pointed out that Democracy means popular government. It assumes a general confidence in the intellectual and moral capacities of the people. In a social sense it means equal rights and privileges of those who live under government and the spirit of equality that prevails among them.

However, I would like to suggest that Democracy may well mean much more than this. It means a respect for the dignity of the individual. It means freedom accompanied by a sense of responsibility. It presupposes a deep sense of caring for the other person. It requires an awareness, of greater or less degree, of current problems as they arise. It assumes that each person has a duty not only to the community but toward all human beings.

Education contributes toward the maintenance of Democracy and freedom only if it is really free, only if there is room for dissent. The elementary lesson which we have not learned in this country and which is the very essence of Democracy is that one can disagree completely and heartily with one'e neigh-

bor and still respect him and cooperate with him on matters of general welfare. Education has thus far failed to live up to all that we have expected of it either because it has not been sufficiently widespread and thorough, or, more probably, because our concept of education has not been as broad as it should have been. It must include the training of the feelings or emotions as well as the intellect. Knowledge without virtue is dangerous as we have repeatedly learned and as often forgotten.

We have now considered at some length the attitudes and characteristics of the good teacher, some of the social factors which inhibit the growth of maturity, some of the desired goals sought for by the interaction of the teacher and the pupil, and finally some of the specific blocks to the learning process. It is time now to consider some of the positive ingredients in the teacher-pupil relationship which will act to extend the influences of the good home, and to correct in some measure the harmful influences or lack of positive influences in the homes from which some pupils come.

Perhaps the strongest of these influences is that of love and affection. Someone has said that we must learn to love those we do not like. Even Bertrand Russell has conceded that love or compassion, in the Biblical sense, is the one unifying force in a world that is torn apart by dissention and hatreds. "If you feel this, you have a motive for existence, a guide for action, a reason for courage, an imperative necessity for intellectual honesty."[3]

Quite frequently we see the pupil who has an emotional problem, who has struggled against the problem in so many ineffective ways, that he has made himself very unpopular in his community so that his friends have turned against him. Yet if he is to be helped to develop in the proper way, the good will and sympathy amounting to real affection of his associates, is usually necessary.

[3] Russell, B., quoted in Sperry, W. L., *Sermons Preached at Harvard,* Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, p. 131.

Another very strong factor is that of good communication between the teacher, who represents the school administration, and the pupils. Quite naturally everything that goes on in the school system cannot be passed on the pupils, but enough can be given them so that they have some sense of participation in the planning of day-to-day activities.

The good teacher also recognizes that the development of attitudes in the pupils is fully as important as the imparting of facts. In fact the pupil with an enormous accumulation of knowledge is not in a position to make good use of it unless he is free enough within his own personality to apply the facts in a logical and social manner. As we have said earlier, the teacher constantly tries to understand the meaning of behavior, while at the same time trying to guide this behavior into proper channels.

From he mental health standpoint, discipline is the constant endeavor to transfer authority from without to responsibility and control from within the personality of the young developing student. To assume that discipline means that the pupil does as he is told is to miss the main point. We see many well drilled young boys in military schools or in schools that have a military attitude, but these same youngsters can raise an enormous amount of trouble when out on their own. The most successful discipline is self-discipline. It is based on knowledge and an awareness of one's own place in the scheme of things, and it cannot be transferred in an arbitrary or authoritarian fashion. It seems clear, therefore, that the inculcation of discipline must be done with a permissive attitude, although permissiveness must not be carried to the point where "anything goes." The permissiveness that I speak of his the same kind that the teacher automatically practices in teaching reading, arithmetic, or any of the other school subjects. No one assumes that the young student will get everything right the first time. Similarly one should not assume that all the ethical lessons will be learned equally well at one time. Guidance, not control, thus becomes the central theme.

Last but not least, running through all these general principles must be a strong thread of consistency. We need to keep constantly in mind how things look from the child's point of view. What may seem just to us may seem unfair to the child, and when there is such a paradox, a clear explanation will usually serve to mitigate the sense of injustice felt by the pupil.

I believe we are now ready to come back to the original request from my psychiatrist friend and see if the list of ten concepts valid in psychiatry and useful to teachers can be formulated. It is general, it is philosophical, and it is idealistic, but it must be these if it is also to be practical and inclusive.

1) The teacher should know himself well, accept his own short-comings and determine to overcome them when possible, and be able to recognize in himself when emotions begin to displace reason. In this way he should not have to work out his own problems at the expense of his students.

2) He should understand his students in terms of their being products of all their previous experiences, as well as heredity. Each one is, therefore, different, and hence treating them all alike is frequently futile.

3) The teacher cannot cause growth in his students, but only influence and direct it to a limited extent. He can remove obstacles, add material to make greater growth possible, and aid in every way possible to help the child achieve self-realization of his own potentialities.

4) Immaturity in all its forms — lack of knowledge, misconceptions, prejudice, sensitivity, tensions between individuals and groups and unreasonable fears — is the reason for the existence of the teacher as a professional person.

5) Next to mastery of subject matter, the teacher's own attitudes toward students is the most important factor in his success. If he likes them, is consistently firm and patient in applying pressure toward achieving high standards, and can wait patiently for favorable results, his teaching will be successful.

6) What the teacher *is* and *does* is more influential on students than anything he may say. It is sometimes a shock

to teachers to realize how much their students are concerned with what they do, say, read, wear, enjoy, and their manner and behavior generally.

7) Discipline is a slow process of transferring authority from without (parents, teachers, law enforcement officers) to the individual's own personality (self-discipline, self-control, maturity). The older the student, the greater the proportion of reason and explanation and self-participation in enforcing discipline. Without outside standards at first self-discipline is nearly impossible.

8) A permissive attitude coupled with firm discipline is the quickest route to responsibility and self-control, especially when the latter is applied with consistency, kindness, and thoughtfulness.

9) Authoritarian, inflexible, and impersonal attitudes in the teacher encourage and keep alive rebellion, negativism, and hostility in the pupil.

10) The good teacher should have a personal philosophy that will tolerate frustration and defeat. He works for the long-run goals. He has the habit of reasonable expectation rather than wishful thinking. He has a respect for, but does not worship fact. He can be uneasy without being unhappy. He can tolerate uncertainty without being paralyzed by anxiety. He can show joy and enthusiasm as well as righteous indignation.

By a happy spirit of cooperation between all of us who work for better children and wiser adults we may stand together against all those forces and individuals who would deprive the people of this country of their right to be free individuals. As Santayana said of an earlier threat against Democracy, that which resulted in World War I, "Liberty may be maimed, but not killed; reason may be bent but not broken. The drak aggression is to be repelled — by the indomitable moral resistance which mature races, richer in wisdom, can exert successfully against the rude will of the conqueror."[4]

[4] Santayana, G., *Egotism in German Philosophy*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1940, Preface XI, 173 pages.