An Address Delivered Before the Wiscasset Female Asylum, Oct. 8, 1811

Alden Bradford
AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE

THE

WISCASSET FEMALE ASYLUM,

OCTOBER 8, 1811.

BEING THEIR FIRST PUBLIC MEETING,

AFTER THE ACT OF

INCORPORATION.

BY ALDEN BRADFORD.

HALLOWELL.
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ADDRESS.

AMIDST the numerous evils, to which the condition of humanity is incident, and the various defects, by which the human character is deformed, it is at once pleasant and useful to recollect the traits of moral excellence, occasionally displayed in the conduct of our species, and to contemplate the efforts which are made to alleviate the wants and sufferings of man. We all perceive, that to much of evil and distress, the sons and daughters of men are constantly liable; and the contemplation excites our compassion and sorrow—that to many failings and errors of conduct, they are naturally prone; and the recollection is a source of regret and humiliation. To turn from this view of the circumstances and attributes of human nature, and to dwell on the displays of benevolence and virtue, which frequently adorn the character of our fellow beings, is an elevated and delightful employment. We thus find relief from the mortifying and desponding reflections excited by the sufferings and the vices which exist among men; our views be-
come more exalted, and more honorary to human nature.

When we perceive, that with all the ills of life, there is still much enjoyment, and various means of improvement and happiness, we are convinced of that consoling doctrine, which teaches us to believe in the benignity of the Divine Being. And when besides the errors and vices of men, which go to show the great depravity of our nature, we perceive there is something of benevolence and compassion in our constitution, something of a celestial spirit prompting us to communicate happiness to those around us, we shall be induced to appreciate the rank we hold in the scale of moral and intelligent beings. And these reflections are as profitable as they are elevated and consoling. Under this view of things, we shall be prompted to greater exertions for the good of others. We shall be excited to cherish our good feelings, and to improve our nature to the highest degree of moral excellence, by the cultivation of the social and benevolent affections.

To consider human nature as totally destitute of all benevolent feelings, and of all good dispositions; to represent man as a perfect fiend, the enemy of his fellows, and as gratified by the evils and miseries which exist in the world, is not more incorrect in theory, than it is discouraging to all human efforts for the relief and welfare of mankind. We therefore discard this gloomy doctrine as dishonorable to God: and we
dismiss such misanthropic ideas as hostile to the best hope and wishes of man.

That there is some original goodness, some native benevolence in the heart of man, we have convincing evidence in the distress excited in our bosoms by the sufferings of others; in our compassionate feelings for those in affliction; in our involuntarily benevolent exertions to relieve misery; and in the numerous associations established by the generous contributions of individuals for the express purpose of comforting the poor, protecting the destitute and improving the moral condition of the ignorant and vicious. Here are indications of benevolence and disinterestedness, at once honorary to our nature and consoling to our minds, amidst the various evils which afflict, and the various faults which degrade our species. In this proof of at least a partial goodness in the nature we possess, let us glory. Let us dwell on this trait of humanity with exultation and profit.—From this view of human nature, and we are satisfied it is correct, we should derive motives to stimulate and increase our exertions for the welfare of our fellow beings. And certainly much is to be done, to excite our benevolent efforts and to reward our humane attentions. The field of labor in the cause of humanity is but too extensive. “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards.” He is exposed to evil and misery from the moment he draws his first vital breath. In infancy and youth how ignorant and helpless, liable to error, to temptation and suffering. Alas!
doubly exposed and pitiable indeed the case of the infant, when unprotected and unfriended by a parent's tender care, it is left to make its course through this world of sorrow and danger. Surely the Divine Being, whose essential attribute is compassion, and who is the father of the fatherless, looks down from heaven with complacency on those, who assume the character and the duties of parents to such unprotected objects; and who have saved one of his little ones from the abodes of wretchedness and vice.

In providing for the necessities, the education and the moral improvement of those youth, who are left without parents to guide them, there is ample occasion for the exertion of benevolence and compassion. By such efforts, we are instrumental in forming a good member of society; and it may be, also, in preparing an immortal being for everlasting happiness. There are frequently demands on our benevolent feelings, from those under the infirmities of age, and who once have seen days of prosperity and affluence. So precarious, so changeful is the condition of man in this world of trial, that often, those, who have been nurtured in the lap of plenty, and enjoyed an abundance of temporal blessings for many years, are afterwards bereft of all worldly goods, and without any vice or imprudence, are plunged into the depths of poverty. The situation of such calls loudly for our compassion and aid. They have strong claims upon our benevolence, which we must be peculiarly happy to have ability to satisfy. Such are objects of our
charity, to be bestowed with decency and readiness; but without publicity or ostentation.

Often have we seen the aged widow, who once knew better days, deprived of the friend of her heart and her youth, on whom she relied for protection and support, and sorely pressed by the hand of penury and want. She is perhaps unable to labor, and of too great sensibility to obtrude herself, like the common subjects of mendicity, upon the capricious generosity of the world. To alleviate the wants of such, and to contribute to their welfare, by imparting a portion of the good things God has given us, is an act of charity of no ordinary character. Deeds like these are effects of feeling and benevolence, which prove uncommon merit.

But few in their individual capacity, have ability to contribute with effect to the comfort of the afflicted and destitute. However well disposed, however benevolently inclined, they possess not sufficient means to alleviate the wants of those objects of distress, they meet in the world. They may have children, to provide for whom they are solemnly obligated by the laws of nature and of God. And yet it may be in their power, occasionally to contribute a small sum, without injury to their families, for the purpose of relieving the wants of others. Hence the propriety of associations with a view to relieve the distresses of the unfortunate. In this united capacity, they act, perhaps, with more judgment, and certainly with great-
er effect, in securing the benevolent designs of their institution.

With the views and designs similar to these, originated, as we understand, the Society in this place, incorporated by the name of "The Wiscasset Female Asylum." It is declared to be the laudable and benevolent purpose of this institution, "to relieve the wants and to improve the morals of such indigent females, as shall appear to be objects of charity." To a society formed for the promotion of such generous and benevolent purposes, every friend of humanity and religion cordially wishes success.—All associations, like these, intended to relieve the wants of the wretched and to improve the morals of the ignorant and depraved, reflect the highest honor on those by whom they are established and supported.

Happily for poor human nature, many such societies exist in civilized countries. For it must be admitted that incalculable good has resulted to individuals and to society, from these benevolent associations. The indigent and destitute have been relieved; the ignorant have been provided with the means of moral instruction; the vicious have been reformed from evil habits and made useful to their fellow beings.

In Christian countries, these charitable institutions have been much the most numerous. To the divine influence of Christianity, which at once proclaims the
mercy of God towards men, and teaches us to be compassionate and merciful to each other; whose heavenly author came to console the afflicted, to cure the diseased, to enlighten the ignorant, and to reclaim the thoughtless wanderer to his God;—to the influence of this divine religion, it must be imputed, that societies have been greatly multiplied in modern times for the purposes of benevolence and piety. And it seems to have been reserved almost exclusively for the honor and boast of the present age, to witness the associated efforts of female virtue for these godlike purposes. Yet it would seem to be the just claim and the natural province of the gentler sex, to engage in purposes and deeds of humanity; to be the organs of relief and comfort to the distressed. Yes, O virtuous, amiable woman, 'tis thine to cherish the tender, helpless infant; to guide and warn the heedless youth—'tis thine to alleviate the distresses of misfortune, to soothe the heart of man when agitated by the storms of adversity, and the attacks and the persecutions of an unfeeling world; 'tis thine, like the angel of mercy, to minister to the wants of the suffering stranger, when far removed from the dear friends of his native home. These are works for which ye are peculiarly fitted; and in all the tender offices of charity and compassion, we must admit, however reluctantly, ye have the pre-eminence. With your efforts directed to these noble purposes, ye will in truth deserve more of society, ye will be more approved by celestial beings, than the warrior or the
statesman, who may perhaps have given his country a name in the history of the world; and whose fame is wafted to far distant climes.

In a place like this, where there are few individuals of opulence, it cannot be expected that the funds of your society will very speedily be sufficient for you to relieve all known objects of distress, or to carry into full effect all your benevolent wishes and intentions. Much prudence and judgment are necessary in the management of your funds, that they may be gradually augmenting; and thus enable the society to do more good at some future period. Many members of the society have large families; and with only an ordinary portion of worldly goods, they may not feel it their duty to contribute large sums, which are to supply the wants of others. Let prudence and discretion guide you in your charities. To take from your own families the necessaries of life, for the sake of contributing to societies, however well established, is neither required by christianity, nor approved by reason. And there is sometimes, we apprehend, something of ostentation in such contributions. But generally the error and the fault are of an opposite kind; and we withhold our charity from motives of selfishness and avarice. Alms-giving can scarcely be considered a virtue, unless it be in some degree the price of self denial. And how often might we retrench in some article of luxury or superfluity—how often might we lay a small tax on our pride or our passions; and deposit the saving in the funds
of some benevolent society; or appropriate it to the relief of the indigent and the destitute. It can hardly be necessary, perhaps, to admonish you to select proper objects of your charity, and to be careful that you do not, by the relief you may afford, give any encouragement to idleness or intemperance. This is evidently a matter of importance. For when our gifts are bestowed on the indolent and vicious, it becomes a question, whether they do not produce more evil than good to society. When objects of great distress and suffering are presented to us, we ought not indeed to withhold relief, because of former errors and misconduct. But, usually, in the bestowment of our charities, they should be so distributed, as to show our abhorrence of vice, and to encourage industry and virtue.

But it appears also to be the benevolent intention of the Female Asylum, to direct their exertions to the moral improvement of their fellow beings. Heaven grant, that you may be instrumental in promoting this most important object. This, in truth, is the principal aim of genuine christian charity. It would lead us to instruct, to admonish and to reform; it would direct us to preserve the young and thoughtless from the delusive paths of vice, and to show them the fitness, the obligations and the satisfactions of virtue. I am sensible this is a laborious and delicate task; and most females, who are heads of families, have children of their own to guide, to instruct and educate. But if you are attentive and faithful,
you may, as a society, do much good, by introducing an orphan or destitute child into some religious family, where it will receive a moral and Christian education, at the same time that it is laboring for those who protect it; and by giving the sacred volume, or some other moral and religious book to a poor family, which may be the means of awaking the attention of some of its members to the momentous concerns of eternity.

The duty of contributing to the wants of the destitute, and of aiming at the moral improvement of the ignorant and depraved, is obligatory on us all, both as individuals and as members of societies. As proper objects come within our notice, and as we have ability, we should consider ourselves obligated to contribute to their relief and welfare. This is the great cardinal virtue which the gospel inculcates. And to be truly acceptable in the sight of heaven, our charities must be the result of religious principles. If we give, that we may be seen of men—if we are not willing to be charitable when it would cost us anything of sacrifice or self denial, we cannot justly expect a reward from him who looketh at the heart, and who considers the motives and efforts attending our actions. No; the opulent, who bestow their charities ostentatiously, merely to be seen of the world, and who make public contributions for purposes of fame or popularity, have no promise of the divine favor for such splendid show. But the widow’s mite, and a cup of cold water, given from truly Christian and
benevolent views, shall not fail of their reward in heaven.

That our charities, then, may be meritorious, and that we may be supplied with principles and motives to regulate our whole moral conduct, it becomes necessary that we imbibe the spirit of christianity, and be careful to act under its influence in all situations of life. This will make us humble and devout towards God; just and charitable towards our fellow men; and sober, temperate and pure in ourselves. With this divine religion to direct and sanctify us, our virtue will be secure: And if the consciousness of virtue remain with us, we shall not be greatly dismayed by the changes and adversities of life. Come, then, religion, thou bright seraph of celestial origin, with all thy soothing, animating influence, descend from thy native skies, and take possession of thy pilgrim’s breast—warm my heart with devotion and piety to God, with compassion and charity to man—sanctify my affections, regulate my passions, and direct my steps—give me patience, faith and holy hope, to prepare me for the vicissitudes of life; console me in affliction, support me in sickness—and when the hand of death touches me, snatch my trembling spirit from his cold embrace, and convey me to the realms of everlasting day.

Will you permit me, my neighbors and friends, to avail myself of this unexpected occasion, in the expression of sentiments, which press powerfully on
my mind. In presuming to offer you advice relative to your conduct and duties, the station I once sustained among you must be my apology. Allow me then to say to you—remember the words of truth and salvation which were spoken by our divine Lord and Saviour, and which are now statedly preached unto you in his name. Attend to the instructions and counsels ye receive from your affectionate pastor, who is laboring and anxious for your religious improvement and spiritual welfare. Hold fast your faith in the gracious doctrines of the gospel. Display good examples before your children. Let them be made to worship God in his holy temple, and be taught the precepts of truth, of sobriety and virtue.

Are we sensible that we live in a christian country? Do we recollect, that we have received a christian education from our parents? Alas! how have we degenerated from the zeal and purity displayed in their characters!—If we have become less superstitious, and less bigotted; if we are more enlightened and catholic, it is well. But it is feared, that in some instances our boasted liberality of sentiment is but another name for hostility or indifference to all religion; and that if our children are not better instructed in the doctrines and duties of christianity, they will become immoral, licentious and impious. It is indeed, an account of awful moment and import, which we must hereafter render to our Maker, in what manner and with what efforts we have taught our children his holy laws, and directed them to take
heed to his divine precepts. Let us faithfully discharge all our duties, as parents and as christians—and when the trials, the labors and sorrows of life are past, may we be able to say with a renowned saint of former times—"I have not withheld the poor from their desire, nor have caused the hopes of the widow to fail; I have not seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering—I have not lifted up my hand against the orphan, when I saw him helpless at the gate—I have not eaten my portion myself alone, and the fatherless not eaten of it."—For with this character and with these virtues sincerely and habitually exercised, we shall be prepared to meet our Judge in peace, at that awful and decisive day, when the mask shall be torn from the visage of the hypocrite, when the abandoned sinner and the scoffing infidel shall be overwhelmed with infinite confusion, and we shall be welcomed to the mansions of endless glory, by the son of God, with this joyful salvation—

"Come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world—For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; naked, and ye clothed me; sick and in prison, and ye ministered unto me."
THE CHILD WITHOUT A HOME.

I.

WHILE Fortune strews her smiles on some,
And swells their cup of joys,
She bids th' afflicted child to roam,
And all his hopes annoys.

Still though adversity oppress
The Orphan doom'd to roam,
Kind Charity has smiles to bless
The Child without a Home.

II.

The same great hand who from on high
Doth all our gifts bestow,
Who doth the sumptuous board supply,
Protects the child of wo.

For though adversity oppress, &c.

III.

A bounty well bestow'd, ascends
Like incense to the sky;
The smile of heaven with nature blends,
To wipe the tearful eye.

For though adversity oppress, &c.

IV.

Look where the tender hand has strew'd
Its alms upon the poor;
The cheek with tears so late bedew'd,
Now smiles to weep no more.

For though adversity oppress, &c.

V.

The mother feels the orphans sighs,
And instant comfort brings,
Her cheerful bounty oft deprives
Chill sorrow of its stings.

For though adversity oppress, &c.

VI.

Then smile, ye bounteous fair, and shew
Your works are those of love;
Rewards, though partial here below,
Are full in realms above.

For though adversity oppress, &c.