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A Problem in American Education: Loss of Speech Through Isolation

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Washington, D.C.

A PROBLEM IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

Anna J. Cooper.

Sketches From a Teacher's Notebook.

No. 1: Loss of Speech Through Isolation.

One summer during the World War as director of War Camp Community Service I had charge of a playground in West Virginia.

Standing out conspicuously in my impressions of that summer's experiences is a family whom I shall call Berry--chiefly because that is not their name. The two lads, about ten and twelve, who first presented themselves to my acquaintanceship were perfect little Ishmaelites--their hand against everybody and every man's hand against them. Teachers of the neighborhood said that their school record was simply an annual repetition of suspensions and expulsions. They would present themselves regularly in September all spic and span with clean shirts, clean, if patched trousers, and clean eager faces for the year's start; but something always happened before the first lap of the course was run, and everybody thought the Berry boys lucky if October found them still on "praying ground where e'en the vilest sinner may return."

They were rather shy of the playground, especially when other children were there having a good time. Decidedly anti-social, they would slip in after the gates were shut and the swings locked, pick or break the locks to enjoy criminally what they might have had freely by simply being in the current with other people. They were never openly

and bravely bad--they were only bad as rats are bad--with a passion and a genius for getting around all constituted authority. They would delight in climbing a hill overlooking the playground whence they would roll down boulders and huge stones that came crashing to a full stop just outside the limits of my jurisdiction. I noticed that their bedevilment was peculiarly voiceless. Most urchins of that type would be ready to sing out in fiendish glee when they thought they had you wrought up to a charming pitch of impotent rage. Not so the Berry boys. In fact they resembled nothing more than the silent little old men of the mountains that Rip saw amusing themselves at ninepins; and if you uttered the word "police!" the whole panorama would disappear so quickly, vanishing so completely you would imagine it had all been a horrid nightmare, and there wasn't any such thing as Berry boys after all.--You had been dreaming!

One day when I was almost alone on the playground in consequence of a steady drizzle all forenoon, I noticed a forlorn little figure with a pair of big round mellow eyes, peeping at me through chinks in the palings. As I started down to speak to her, the frightened little creature, a child of five or six made a dash as tho she would run away. I coaxed her in and putting her in one of the little folks' swings, stood by giving her a gentle push now and then, an excitement that she enjoyed very much. Tho she said nothing, one could read her gratitude in those lustrous round eyes--her joy was too deep for utterance. Alas, short

lived joy! A tall soldier lad in khaki, puttees and an over-seas cap, came stalking up the walk. Without recognizing me or uttering a word he took up a position at the rear where he caught the eye of the little mite in the swing. The effect was electrical. The child fell out of the swing as if she had been shot! and pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, as fast as her little legs could carry her she flew, neither looking back nor waving goodbye. Startled out of my Olympian calm, I turned on the stranger and demanded to know what was the matter.

"Meh wants her home," he replied sententiously.

"Yes? but why didn't you say your mother sent for her? You haven't said a word!"

"She know what I mean."

"Perhaps! But it isn't right for you to deal in dumb signs in conveying what you mean. You owe that child the English language. You are grown and have travelled. You can express yourself and interest her in the wonderful world outside that you have had glimpses of. She will never be anything but a dumb, shut-in creature unless you make opportunities for her to cultivate human speech!" More of the same sort I poured forth out of a full heart from my accustomed store. What struck me all the time I was talking was the unbroken stolidity with which my bursts of eloquence were received. He showed neither resentment at the lambasting I gave him nor a gleam of appreciation that it was fairly well done for a woman. He was chewing a bit of wheat straw pulled in the field

and regarded me with the patient, passionless eyes of a yoke of oxen at the end of a furrow when the day is done. Finally in sheer desperation at getting no response, I turned on my heel and left him. Reaching down he pulled another bit of straw which he caught in his teeth and stalked out as he had stalked in. My notebook records this day:

"Encounter with the oldest and youngest of the Berry family."

Act II, Scene 1, discovers me in the midst of my basket weavers, reed and rafia all around and busy little fingers holding up mats and baskets in various stages of imperfection--all clamoring to be set right and shown how at the same instant. Walter Berry, the younger of the two tormentors I had known from the first on the playground, now becoming less shy and perhaps, too, a little less savage, was hovering near in the background, evidently struggling with something he wanted to say but having a hard time getting it out. At last he sidled up, and speaking over my shoulder from behind he managed to blurt out desperately:

"Mith Coo' show--I make bick too!"

"Why certainly, Walter," I said with ready comprehension. "I'll be glad to show you how to make a bas-ket," speaking very distinctly and letting him observe the motion of my lips in pronouncing "bask-et."

"You must try to come every day and you have to take lots of pains, you know. But it will be real nice to make a basket for your mother.--Don't you think so?"

Well, from that day till the end of my stay I was taming Walter

and incidentally getting a basket ready to present to his mother.

Not infrequently I had to take out at night what Walter had put in by day so as to have him start right the next day, but on the whole the basket, between us, got on amazingly well and I determined to use it as a card of introduction to Mrs. Berry the "Meh" of whom I had heard much but never seen. Accordingly, armed with my playground products I fared forth to break the ice and force a passage into some homes I had never succeeded in luring out to any of our many tempting "occasions" at the playground. Mrs. Berry's was my first coup de main. The house was at the top of a high hill with more steps to climb to reach the porch which spanned a plain but scrupulously neat living room. The floor was freshly scrubbed with white sand, there was a deal table also scrubbed to snowy whiteness and a few splint bottomed chairs scrubbed likewise. All this I noted standing on the threshold of the front door which stood wide open from habit, one could see, rather than with any notion of inviting wayfarers to enter. I knocked on the floor with the point of my umbrella and after some minutes a comely little black woman appeared in the doorway just opposite and stood with hands crossed in front of her waiting to learn the cause of the intrusion. "Oh," I said with an ingratiating smile; "This is Mrs. Berry, is it not? I am Mrs. Cooper, Walter's teacher on the playground. I came to bring you a little basket that Walter made for you--I taught him how," I added truthfully. "Rather pretty don't you think?" Appealingly now--for I

was becoming a wee bit phased at whipping my own top. For the lady held her pose of dignified aloofness in queenly silence. She might have been an artist's conception of Juno just after that goatherd Paris had pinned the blue ribbon on his amorous little charmer. She did not frown, neither did she beam a smile. She did not ask me in nor say that she was glad I brought the basket. She did not make a pretence of thanking me for any interest I had taken in Walter nor did she try to act out the lie that she was glad to meet me, and yet with it all her manner was singularly free from active repulsion. Byron's line comes to mind: "I seek to shun, not hate mankind," and yet Byron's misanthropy was a pose put on to write about it, and the curl of his patrician lip, the *négligé* of his open collar and the somber lilt of his dreamy eyes were sedulously cultivated before the mirror by all the dudes and dandies in New York and London. But here in this solitary little woman was something that was no pose, something commanding respect, almost akin to awe and reverence, something, I felt instinctively, too sacred for prying eyes and inquisitive "investigators". She stood and appraised me with that same unfrowning eye I had noticed in her first born that made you think of uncomplaining oxen, too strong to weep, too weighted down to smile. After a while she parted her lips--and this is what she said: "I keep to myself; I don' want nothin' to do wit nobody." Her tone was even and clear without the slightest suspicion of hysteria or overwrought emotion. The words might have been borne in from a disembodied spirit, so passionless were they, so sublimated, so purified of the tenseness and dross of the physical and earthly.

"But Mrs. Berry," I persisted, "You can't live that way! You can't be in the world without having something to do with other people!"

"I been livin' that way longer'n you been livin' yo' way," she rejoined, "I'm older'n you." (She wasn't at all; but a comparatively young woman.) I accepted the compliment without debate, however, and tried by the most beguiling arts I knew to entice her out of her solitude. After using all the illustrations and arguments I could think of to suggest the interdependence of man on man I was rewarded by seeing the merest ghost of a smile flit across her countenance, more like the quivering gleam of faraway lightning than the steady radiance of sunlight and dawn. We were still standing where I could look out from the threshold of the porch on the muddy water of the Ohio River. "There's nothing you could get to eat," I continued, "without calling in someone to help you out. You can go to the river and fish--"

"And then I'd have to have lard to cook 'em wit," she put in brightly."

Good! I knew I had struck fire and we were friends at last.

As I came down the steps she called out almost shamefastly, "When you come to W.--- again, come to see me!"

"Oh, no," I bantered--"you don't want to see anybody!"

"Well, if all was like you," she answered dismally.

It was not till I had left W.--- that I understood the tragedy of Mrs. Berry's grim struggle with life. Her husband, an innocent man, had been torn from her arms by an infuriated mob and brutally murdered--

lynched. The town realized its mistake afterwards when the true culprit confessed but it was too late to bind up that broken family, and the humble drama of that obscure black woman like a wounded animal with her cubs literally digging herself in and then at bay dumbly turning to face--America--her "head bloody but unbowed"--I swear the pathos and inexorable fatefulness of that titanic struggle--an inescapable one in the clash of American forces, is worthy an Epic for its heroic grandeur and unconquerable grit!

And I wondered what our brand of education, what our smug injunction that the home "is expected" to cooperate with the school will find or create for the help and guidance of such a home, a type as truly evolved from American environmental conditions as are the blind fish in the Mammoth Cave or the bronchos of the western plains.

A Problem--Will isolation solve it?

Anna Cooper