THE MEANING OF THE MENTAL HYGIENE MOVEMENT.*

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I see in the audience a number of gentlemen who are connected with institutions for the insane in Massachusetts, and I believe there are a number of social workers here. I am not going to speak to them, because I believe there are a great many persons who have been attracted to this meeting from notices that they have seen in the newspapers. This is a new movement, and I believe that those are the people we want to address; those are the people whose interest we want to stir up in this movement, and so I shall talk to what I believe to be a more or less mixed audience, and I shall try to tell them, in as simple a way as I can, what I conceive to be the meaning of this mental hygiene movement.

I have no doubt that perhaps one of the first questions that comes to your mind in connection with the mental hygiene movement is, What relation it has, if any, to insanity? and perhaps, after all, What insanity is? and I will try to answer that question for you to begin with. Insanity is a word that has been used for a great many hundreds of years, and a great many different people have tried to define it,

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and they have usually failed, but I think I can give you some idea of what the word means and what class of people it refers to.

If you will think of a primitive community out in the Middle West during the times when the Middle West was yet the frontier, you will realize that a member of that relatively primitive community could, if you will think of Mark Twain’s descriptions, ride down the centre of the street and yell and holler and shoot, and it was thought to be a comparatively normal kind of conduct and nobody thought it was strange and nobody interfered with it. Now when communities get to be older and more civilized, when they get to be more congested, one can’t do anything that he may happen to choose, without crossing the path of someone else. Then certain conventions of conduct have to be followed and there have to be greatly restricted lines of conduct, so that if a man acted as I have described, he knows just where he would land in the city of Boston. It might be and probably would be, in the jail. In other words, he is exhibiting a certain type of conduct which the community—to speak in slang phrase—won’t stand for, and they simply remove him from it.

In the group of people that are called insane, are people who exhibit a certain type of conduct which cannot be tolerated in the community in which they happen to live. I remember not long ago, in walking down to my quarters at the hospital, a woman threw up the window, thrust her head out and shouted, “Murder!” Nobody paid any attention whatever to her. We were used to that sort of thing. She shut the window down, and went back to bed. She was in a community where she was understood.

But she could not do that sort of thing anywhere outside of an institution without being shut up for insanity. And so it is that any individual must conform to the established usages of the society in which he lives.

Now what is the characteristic of these types of conduct of which I have been speaking? It is social inefficiency. The individual who manifests a kind of conduct that is calculated to tear down the existing conventions, to deviate greatly from the normal conduct of the community—that person is an individual who has to be relegated to some place other than a position of free citizenship. Thus a certain type of socially inefficient conduct may be said to be insane conduct, and so the word insanity comes to be, as I see it, not a medical term at all, but a social term which defines a certain kind of socially inefficient conduct.

Let me elaborate a little further what I mean by conduct. You or I or anyone else can think all we want to about threatening someone’s life; we can formulate all sorts of plans about meeting him and shooting him, as long as we don’t say anything about it and don’t do anything about it. But let us for a moment start to put such a plan into execution, and that moment something will happen to us. In other words, we may have any sort of desire, our thinking apparatus may function in any one of a great number of ways, but so long as it doesn’t manifest itself in our outward conduct in any way, society hasn’t any interest in it. So then, I would say that insanity is a certain type of socially inefficient conduct, a certain degree of socially inefficient conduct that causes trouble in the community.

But there are a great many different kinds of
socially inefficient conduct. The insane is one type, the feeble-minded is another type, the criminal is another type, the neurotic and nervous patients show another type, and I call your attention to the fact that in the exhibit downstairs, if you will go over the various charts of admissions to different institutions and hospitals over the State of Massachusetts and the penal institutions and asylums, you will see that all these different groups of individuals which are characterized as juvenile delinquents, alcoholics, syphilitics, etc.; you will see that all these different varieties of people are recognized in that exhibit as coming within the purview, in one way or another, of the general movement that this meeting represents,—the mental hygiene movement.

Let me give you some illustrations of the type of socially inefficient conduct of the feebleminded. The feeble-minded individual is an individual who has not developed to the full mental stature of maturity. We speak of the feeble-minded as having a certain psychological age. We mean by that that they have reached a certain age mentally, irrespective of what their chronological age may be, so that a person forty years of age chronologically—a person who has really lived forty years—may really be only nine years old so far as his mental development is concerned, and so that person is only a child, and we should call him an imbecile, from the mental standpoint. Now in our society our forty-year-nine-year-old has all the rights of society. He can vote, if he is a he,—and in some places if he is a she,—and enjoys all the rights of citizenship. But that type of people often do things which are socially destructive, and they ultimately drift into some of the various institutions caring for their kind, according to the thing that they have done rather than according to the kind of person they are.

The paupers also belong very largely to the group of the socially inefficient, speaking of them from the point of view of their social development. That seems at first blush not to be so. Let me give you an extreme instance of what I mean. Suppose a man loses his arm and suppose his position happens to be that of a blacksmith and he can’t any longer ply his trade, and he goes to the poorhouse. One naturally supposes that his pauperism is dependent upon the physical injury. But how many people have you known who have lost an arm or leg, or both legs, or perhaps their eyesight, and yet were able to get along and lead efficient lives in the community? Helen Keller comes immediately to my mind,—a young woman now, I think, in the neighborhood of forty,—who lost her eyesight absolutely and her hearing when she was about three years old, and yet she is not only an efficient member of the community, but is a capable writer and speaker, and very much beloved by everybody. I saw her not long ago in Washington. She had been to see the Adams Memorial. She goes to see things, you know, just like any one else does. She jumped out of the auto, she felt around the base of the statue, and her first remark was, “I have never seen such beautiful azaleas!” And then she felt up further and she remarked instantly upon the trees. She climbed out upon the statue and felt over the face of that marvelous piece of sculptured work, and in a few minutes she exclaimed, “This should not be here. This ought to be on a battle-field.” Perfectly marvelous! And yet she has been blind and deaf from her third year.
Now as to the man who loses his arm. If he goes to the poorhouse, it is because he has not been able, you may say, to make a readjustment; it is because he has lost his nerve; or you may formulate it in any other way you wish. If he had had the mental capacity, he would not have had to go to the poorhouse. So the greater number of people who are in our poorhouses are there because of some type or other of mental inefficiency.

The criminal belongs to another type of inefficient individual—a type of inefficient individual positive rather than negative. The so-called insane person usually has not done anything of a positive nature to destroy property or life, but the criminal has done something positive to injure society. Dr. Fernald says at least 25% is a conservative estimate, and I am sure the per cent. is as large as that, or larger—at least 25% would absolutely come within the purview in some degree of feeble-mindedness by the present methods of examination; and when you look at the thing broadly in the way that I am trying to show you now, it is a perfectly proper thing to say that they come within the group of socially inefficient individuals: and socially inefficient must mean some degree of mental defect at its highest level, so that all these groups of socially inefficient individuals belong within the problem of the mental hygiene movement.

What are we going to do with them and who is to judge? We have two large types of problems to meet, and I am dividing the matter off into two groups. We have two great groups of people, one of which we may say is salvageable,—can be saved,—and the other group cannot be saved. We have another group of people who can be prevented from breaking down in this sort of way, and certain other people who, if they have broken down, can be brought back to a condition of social efficiency—of ability to live in the community; and then we have another very large group who cannot be gotten back to a condition of social efficiency. As to the first group, those who can be saved, those about whom something can be done: to give you an illustration, let us take a child, for instance. Suppose the child is an only child and suppose in addition that he has had some serious illness so that he is more or less crippled. What happens to a child under such circumstances? The parents are extremely solicitous of such a child; they take the greatest care of him, they do everything in the world to protect him, to prevent harsh words from hurting him in any possible way, and so they rear a child who is tender, who is incapable of meeting the ordinary rough problems of life, and who finally when he has his own way to make, finds that he is quite unfit to do so, and he meets his problems of readjustment with irritability and crossness and attempts to get away from them, and he feels that the world is a pretty tough place to live in and that people are pretty harsh individuals, and that the world is all thumbs down for him. Now here is a type of case that we see very frequently, a type that seems quite unable to meet the ordinary problems of life in a quiet, effective and efficient way. Such children as that very often break down, and there the problem of mental hygiene fits right straight into the problem of education. I remember, in a talk that I gave not long ago, I said that we sometimes do a great deal of harm by education. Let us go down into the mining regions of Pennsylvania and here we find a miner who gets
three or four dollars a day and lives in a little house and has two or three children. His girl goes away to school and she learns a little algebra, a little French and a little piano-playing, and she has been spoiled for occupying the position into which she was born, while she has not been given the means to rise out of it. Then a good dominie came and took me very much to task for what I had said, and told me that it was right for every miner to have a piano in his household, and that the poor people were entitled to everything that they could get in the way of education. And then I realized that I had not put it quite as clearly as I should, and that I had not said exactly what I had intended to say. If we are going to succeed in our valuation of human individuals, and are going to succeed early enough during the educational period, we have got to learn how to be able to tell what sort of material a person is made of before we crowd them with tasks that they are ill fitted to perform. This is the point I endeavored to make and not that opportunity should be denied anyone.

We know something about the other organs of the body,—the heart, lungs, etc.,—but we don't know how to value the strength of the mind. We don't know how far we may go in our education in forcing our young people, and we may do them a great deal of damage. But the neurologist and psychologist have asked the question how to determine this very point. We have now what you have heard called vocational psychology, which represents an effort to try to find out what children are fitted for, and educate them along those lines and not try to educate them for what they are not fitted. We cannot solve that problem in a number of cases, but in some the main lines are fairly clear. To the parents of a feeble-minded boy, we may be able to say, "This boy may be taught to run errands and do such simple tasks as, but he is only so far developed and he'll never develop any more: that is, his limit is reached, and if you try to push him beyond his limit you will soon get into trouble." In the case of normal people the question becomes a more difficult one, and we do not know how to answer it. But the question has been asked, and the main thing is to ask the question, because as soon as the question has been asked, we may be sure that some day we will find some way to answer it.

A youngster who has been brought up in a family where the father is a drunkard, and the father comes home at night and raises the old scratch, curses and swears and beats his wife, etc.,—and we all know there are plenty of such cases on record,—never gets the right attitude in the beginning. This youngster, who ought to be raised in a situation where he will look up to his father with respect, look to his father as the source of authority, learns to hate his father for the way in which he acts, beats him and is unreasonable with him, and so such a child grows up into later life and you can see how it comes about that he grows up hating all sources of authority; he hates all forms of restraint, he hates the social institutions which form the controlling situations in which he lives. Such people become the rabid type of anti-social or anarchistic persons—anything you wish to call them—and they shoot and destroy; they become such individuals. And so mental hygiene is interested in the family situation; it is interested in the social conditions that are brought about and that begin and have
their root and source and origin in the childhood of the individual.

Now take the neurotic. A hundred years ago the mother of a household did all the housework, made all the children's clothes, had to weave the cloth that the clothes were made out of, and a hundred other things. Nowadays there isn't a single thing that the mother of those days used to do that can't be done a hundred times cheaper and better by a corporation around the corner. So to speak, the woman, and the mother of today both, are, to a certain extent, out of a job, and she is looking for some legitimate and adequate outlet for her energies, and that is one of the reasons for the so-called "woman movement." Mental hygiene is interested in all movements like that because they have their root and make-up, too, in the individuals that go to form society.

How about the individuals who can't get hold of themselves; who are so broken and so damaged in one way or another that they can't be sent back into the community as useful and efficient members of that community? We have a duty towards them, and while it appears to be a simple humanitarian, altruistic duty of love to your brother without any compensation, it involves a larger duty to society. If this were not so, I don't believe I should want to talk to you about it, because I don't believe I could impress you with it in a way that would be of value. I don't believe anybody does anything of importance in this world nowadays without some such sort of return, and I believe that a great big movement of this sort could not live unless the thing that we were trying to do brought some sort of return to society as well as to the individual. Therefore, there are two things that we want to do for these individuals. We want to give them something and we want them to give something back to us, because anything that isn't paid for isn't worth having. Indiscriminate alms-giving is a vicious principle of humanitarianism and it usually isn't a method of procedure that has back of it any valuable idea. People who give alms to suffering individuals, usually do it to relieve themselves of seeing the suffering rather than to help the individuals. The only way to help people is to do it intelligently, and the real way to help people is to help them to help themselves. So there are two things that we want to do for these unsalvable members of the community. We want in the first place to provide an environment for them in which they can live and find the maximum individual expression that they are capable of.

I was thinking in Illinois the other day, and Mr. Johnson of the Vineland Institution for the Feeble-Minded was speaking about the feeble-minded problem, and he started off with the general proposition that the danger from the feeble-minded is all a delusion. There isn't any danger from the feeble-minded. The danger is the danger that arises from the unkind and unintelligent things that the people in the community do to the feeble-minded. The feeble-minded person in the community can't get along usually because he isn't left alone. The feeble-minded boy is teased by his companions and bothered and made fun of until he turns around and kills somebody. Then the community says there is a problem. The feeble-minded girl is made use of by some morally unscrupulous individual, and then she brings feeble-minded children into the community. She would be all right if let alone. Mr. Johnson gave instances
of this, for example, a feeble-minded girl—a girl in a physician’s family—forty years of age. He went to call on the physician and rang the bell. When the maid answered the bell he recognized her as a girl that he had recommended for this position. She had been living in that house, taking care of the children and doing simple tasks, for over twenty years. Living in a place where she was understood, where she was decently treated—100% efficient. If she had been out in society, out in the open, absolutely dependent upon her own resources, among people who did not know or understand anything about feeble-mindedness, her efficiency would have been zero.

There are any quantity of just such feeble-minded people who get along at 100% efficiency, if in the type of environment which our institutions provide. I remember an insane man, for example, who used to go out and dig every day—trenches—a valued worker, working every day. Now digging trenches is worth $1.50 a day. About once in so often he would stop in the midst of his work, more particularly when he was coming back from work, and jump and stamp and howl and make a tremendous display. He had the idea that the devil was on his back and he was trying to get him off. This thing might happen a hundred times a day, but nobody paid any attention to him. He was crazy, and yet, although he had been so for many years, he was probably 100% efficient, so far as his earning capacity, his capacity to earn an ordinary day’s wage, was concerned. Outside of the institution he would have come to grief in fifteen minutes. And so one of the things that society has to do is to provide a proper environment for these people.

A proper environment means a great many things. It means the whole problem of institutional management. A hundred years ago proper environment was locking such a person up in a cell, chaining him to the floor, or beating him to death. But we know now that this is not the best plan, and that it is economically the worst way to deal with these people. You deal with people in that way, and it will cost you twice as much to take care of them, because they are made destructive. We had a woman come to the hospital the other day who came to us with the history of having attempted suicide. She was a criminal from one of the federal prisons. We have not had a minute’s trouble with her since she came. They had been watching her every move, repressing her at every turn, but we simply let her alone and gave her freedom to do the thing which she had attempted to do, and which she then no longer had any desire to do.

So, then, the community wants to provide, both as a matter of common decency and of economic value, an environment in which these people can find their best personal expression. And second, it wants to provide an environment where these people can pay back what they are getting from the community; so if we provide an environment, it should be an environment where these people can do something to pay for what the community is giving them. Those are the two general principles with which we have to deal in working with the unsalvable type of mentally defective individuals.

The hospital for the insane has a great many functions to perform, one of which is to take care of these unsalvable types, and another is to get well those who can be gotten well; the
third is to represent in the community in which it is located the centre of information about all such problems as this, so that the community will feel that it is not an institution absolutely surrounded by walls, but an institution which is willing at all times to reach out in a helpful way in every direction and to all persons in the community in which it is located.

The institution is the natural place and the scientific place where problems in regard to the types of people of whom I have been speaking should be worked out, and they should be worked at until solutions have been reached which are sufficiently valid, sufficiently correct, sufficiently definite and far-reaching to be backed up by the community and formulated in some sort of statute.

The same thing is true of the prison problem. In the prison problem,—and it is largely a mental problem, too,—I think that if we endeavor to correct the mistakes that have been made in shutting up a great many real defectives in prisons, it will help a great deal. In this way we could try to save those who are salvable, and if they are not, at least prevent them from becoming more dangerous. After these problems have been worked out by the psychologists, then the social workers and all the different agencies of these various institutions can finish the good work by formulating it in the crystallized forms known as statutes, and then, being generally accepted, the institutions can carry them out.

I am neither a pessimist nor an optimist; I try to take a middle course. I don’t believe that we are ever going to get away from the problem of the mental defective; there is always going to be a problem; but the thing we can do is, perhaps, to make the distance which separates the man at the top of the ladder from the man at the bottom a little bit shorter, but we can shorten that distance only by a concerted, really tremendous effort. But society is advancing. It is going ahead all the time. We have to a certain extent largely solved the general problems of sanitation and hygiene, and we finally come to the disorders of the mind and what to do about them, and that, after all, is the most important of all of them, because upon the conditions of our minds rests whether we are happy or unhappy, whether we are efficient or inefficient, whether we are successful or unsuccessful, and our manner of living is, after all, simply dependent upon our minds.

So then, finally, after all these things are formulated by legislation, we can go on with new problems, always believing that there is something more to be accomplished further along the line. We are never going to be able to solve all the problems, but the most important thing for the individual and for society is to try to solve them. We shall never reach the goal, and we should not want to reach it, for the person who has finally accomplished everything to the perfection of his ideals is usually through with his work and is of no more use in life.

So I want you, if possible, to feel that here is an effort of the very greatest importance that is just beginning now to be born in this present-day society. You have here in Massachusetts one of the best organizations for dealing with the questions of mental disease that there is in the United States. I hope that the citizens will take that individual interest in what that system is trying to do—which is the key-note of success in a democratic form of government;
and it is because we want the citizens to take that interest that these meetings are being held, for upon that interest depends the success which any such movement as this can hope to have.