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A Plea for Public Playgrounds

— Address Delivered By —

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Mr. President and Members of the
Collinsville Commercial Club:

There was a time and not so very many years ago when it would have been considered very inappropriate and bordering on the ludicrous for one to attempt to discuss the subject of play before a company of sober-minded business men. In fact such a discussion a few years ago would have been thought out of place anywhere outside of a kindergarten or a college classroom of psychological theorists.

Times have changed however and men's ideas have changed and I find it unnecessary to make an apology for selecting this subject for presentation before the Collinsville Commercial Club. On the contrary I am at ease in the belief that most of you will sympathize with my point of view and will admit that my theme is a worthy one even though I may not be able to discuss it very entertainingly.

If we were to attempt to study the history of play we would be compelled to study the history of the human race, for there never was a time when man did not play and there never was an age when the extent and character of his play did not influence mightily his physical, intellectual and spiritual development. An intelligent study of the historical aspect of our subject would take us back to the time when the race was in its infancy, into that mysterious past which is known to us only through myth and legend and folklore.

Those who have unearthed the mysterious evidences a long past tell us that man has always played. Civilized and uncivilized he has always indulged in those activities which many of us seem to deem of little value to our existence or well being. It would be a long story to trace the connection between the games which the modern school boy plays and the sports of the skin-clad child of primitive man, but it would be an enchanting story for it would be the story of that part of man's life which has always been to him the best.

Play is generally regarded as an instinct of considerable complexity and one which makes its appearance quite early in the life of the child. It is common to humanity and is possessed of many of the lower orders of animal life. Various theories, each possessing a degree of plausibility, have been advanced in an effort to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of the play instinct.

Herbert Spencer, while not the first to promulgate it, was the most earnest and elucidating exponent of the theory that the activity, which we call play, is nature's means of relieving the organism of a surplus of energy. This accumulation of energy, over and above the amount necessary for biological development, can find at least in childhood, no utilitarian means of discharge and hence functions in play. Other writers have claimed that play is recreative. Energy is restored it is claimed through change of occupation and by mere pleasurable activity. This theory is apparently an-

tagonistic to the theory advocated by Spencer although the antagonism is probably more apparent than real.

G. Stanley Hall and other acknowledged leaders in modern educational thought argue that the instinct is atavistic, that it is a recurrence of activities that were once necessary in the struggle for existence in the lives of our remote ancestors, but which are now no longer needed. This explanation is entirely consistent with the theory that the child in his development epitomizes the history of the race.

What appears to be the most acceptable theory of all, judged from an educational standpoint, is that held by Karl Groos, a German philosopher. He maintains that play is a preparation for the future and more serious duties of adult life. The child in his games and recreations acquires that coordination of his motor and sensory powers which will be necessary to his later efficiency. In his various playful activities he develops unconsciously those instincts such as curiosity, imitation, constructiveness, and the like that will make him a useful member of society in later years. He also learns to inhibit or to keep under control other instincts which would be of questionable value in modern life if permitted to develop, such as fear, jealousy, anger, thieving, fighting, etc.

While there may be great diversity of opinion in regard to the real meaning and origin of play, one need not go into the subject very minutely to become convinced of its great educational significance.

It makes no great difference which one of the theories is accepted, for they all abound in principles which are sufficiently basic for educational procedure. We may even reject every theory that has ever been advanced in explanation of the play instinct and resign ourselves to the most fatalistic view of the matter still we would be blind indeed did we not perceive something in the free spontaneous activities of childhood, that reaches out into the future and which in some, perhaps mysterious, manner bears mightily upon after conduct and behavior.

But I take it for granted that we are not especially interested in the theoretical or historical phases of my theme. If we had the time it would be a pleasure for me to discuss with you the various games and play activities of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians and Romans. Suffice it to say that the desire to play is inherent in all intelligent life. Animals play. Children play. Men play. Beware of the man who does not indulge in some form of play. Why have you met here tonight? Is it merely to hear a speech exploiting a commercial idea? Do you meet here from time to time merely to get new ideas of business? Is the feeling that you may be able to learn how to put dollars in your pocket-book the only motive that brings you here. I suspect that if you were to analyze your innermost thoughts, you would discover that the idea of having a good social time with your friends and neighbors draws you here. And social enjoy-

ment is but another name for a form of play.

I have said beware of the man who does not play. I might say also look carefully after the child who does not want to play. There is something wrong with him. The child who will not play will very likely develop into an imbecile. The child who is not permitted to play with other children will very likely develop into a molly-coddle. The child learns on the playground many lessons that are absolutely essential to his preparation for life. And for the common playground there can be no good substitute. This is a broad subject and there are many angles to it. I can only hope to touch a few of the high places in it tonight.

Now if children desire to play. If they must play in order that they may develop into normally healthy men and women. If it is right that they should play and play together, what are we going to do about it? I hold that it is our duty, our public duty, to give them the means and the opportunity for exercising their activities. In my opinion the community that does not make some provision for this part of the child's education is guilty of great neglect if not of moral crime against childhood.

Twenty-five years ago the necessity for providing children at public expense with the means and opportunity for recreation was not so great as it is today. There was more room then. The cities and towns were much smaller. Population was not so congested. Nearly

every urban community had a large commons where children might play without molestation. There were forests and fields and streams that were common property. The sign, "no trespassing allowed" which we now see at every turn, was almost unknown. There were vacant lots within the reach of a: and nobody cared how many boys and girls played there or how long they played. The natural groves furnished picnic grounds and there was no rental to pay. Such a thing as a park, maintained as a commercial enterprise, was a rare institution.

What man among you, let me ask, does not remember with the utmost pleasure the "old swimming hole"? What sacred memories cluster around that hallowed spot! Even now at the mention of the word, I suspect your minds are wandering back through the misty years to that common meeting place where, each summer day was enacted the thrilling comedies, yes and tragedies too, of your boyhood, and where John and Tom and Bill and Dick and all the rest learned their first real lessons in citizenship in a common democracy.

But the old swimming hole is an institution of the past. Last summer I visited the place where I lived when a boy. In company with an old time boyhood friend I walked to where the old swimming hole used to be. What did we find? What was once a considerable stream with forest trees along its banks is now an insignificant branch almost devoid of water. The ravages of time and the progressiveness of the age

have almost obliterated it. The trees have been cleared away and the channel has been straightened to permit the rapid flow of the water. Our old swimming hole has been destroyed. About all that is left of it are the sentimental recollections that are inscribed on memory's walls.

Now that community is not unlike thousands of others in this and other states. The old swimming hole is no more. The free ball ground is no more. The picnic groves are gone. Civilization has established a closed season for hunting and nearly all other sports. Property owners are forced to demand protection. Game Wardens are vigilant. Policemen are everywhere. Boys are denied even the privilege of playing in the streets. They sneak into the alleys and dives out of way of policemen and automobiles and early learn the ways of sin.

I am discussing tonight public parks and playgrounds but the same arguments apply with equal force to the advisability of having free public recreation halls and swimming pools and dance halls and theatres. These latter institutions are perhaps too far in the future to have much interest for those of us who live outside of the large cities, which are always expected to take the lead in matters pertaining to progressive reforms along this line.

In making my plea for public playgrounds I am not moved merely by sentiment. I would not advocate them merely for the purpose of affording entertainment for the boys and girls, but because the proposi-

tion concerns the moral and economic welfare of the community and by community I mean the entire community. The character of our future civilization depends very largely upon the kind of life which the boys and girls live today.

This is indeed a commercial age. Everything has been commercialized. Every conceivable human industry has been intricately organized and capitalized for the sole purpose of making money, as much money as possible. Avarice or greed or necessity or whatever you have a mind to call it has not been content to commercialize the skill and labor of our adult population but it has taken our boys and girls and has commercialized their youth and their energies before they have had an opportunity to prepare for active participation in the affairs of life. Not only have their labor been commercialized and exploited in the shops and factories but their desire for pleasure also. Witness the many dance halls and picture show houses and theatres and skating rinks and parks and so-called "places" where pleasure, so-called, is to be had not for the asking or for the seeking, but for a price. These places, most of them, are unchaperoned and here all classes and conditions of men and women meet and no questions are asked, and none are expected to be asked, with reference to character or reputation. Here the future citizens are being trained. Is it let me ask a good training ground?

Are we satisfied for our boys and girls to spend their recreation hours in these places whose proprietors as-

sume no responsibility beyond a mere formal observance of the statute laws and often not that? But I am not here to preach a sermon on the amusement question. It is unnecessary. You are intelligent men. Many of you are the heads of families and have boys and girls growing up or you have immature brothers and sisters whose welfare is as dear to you as life itself. You know as well as I the dangers and temptations which beset and befall the young in amusement places fostered by private enterprise. You do not want your daughters and sisters to go there unless their mothers are with them. Neither do you want your sons to go there. But they do go nevertheless and they will continue to go until we provide safer places for them and we cannot help ourselves. Churches and other social institutions are doing much to improve conditions but their ability to do and the extent of their influence upon the great mass of young people will always be limited to those of their own circle.

The public play ground suitably equipped and properly supervised and open all day long and every day in the year is the step in the right direction. However it is only one step. Public recreation halls will follow in due time.

The State of Illinois and every other state and every community in every state spends a large amount of money every year to prevent and punish criminality. Collinsville is not worse than other communities yet every year it adds to the sum

total its quota of criminals. Every year we must spend a great deal of money detecting and punishing these criminals. In an economical sense this money is wasted because it produces nothing and is spent in an endeavor to suppress energy which could and should be made productive. It must be spent however as long as boys and girls develop into law-breakers.

The sociological question as to what influences are responsible for existing crime is too large a question to be discussed tonight. You will agree with me I think when I say that some of the criminals that are now in the making are haunting the alleys and dark places of Collinsville because there is no other place open to them. Others are sneaking their way into places of amusement where it costs money to go or are mooching from the passerby for the price of admission.

A great Englishman once said that England's great battles were fought and won on the playgrounds of Eaton and Rugby and Harrow, meaning that the training which the boys received in their cricket and football games properly equipped them for success in after life. Someone has said that a playground on a city street is worth more than three policemen so far as the prevention of crime is concerned. Another has said, "better a playground without a school than a school without a playground." These statements may seem pretty strong but anyone who has seriously studied the child problem will admit that they are not very far from the truth.

I verily believe, basing my belief upon what I have observed and experienced, that a public playground is one of the best investments that a community can make and that it will pay large dividends in community betterment.

The size of the playground is an important question in itself. The school playgrounds are as a rule too small for the number of children who must play there. School authorities and patrons should give the matter of the size of school sites much more thought than they do. There is not a school playground in Collinsville that is large enough. Some of these school sites might be enlarged and made into public playgrounds in the true sense. Many progressive cities are doing this thing. If we had the time it would be interesting to tell what some other communities are doing with the playground question. The city of Houston, Texas, recently appropriated \$500,000.00 to enlarge the school playgrounds. The city of Gary, Ind., located the last public school that it built on a 20 acre site. No school, however small should have less than a city block for a playground.

Finally my friends I want to plead with you and ask that you, as voters and taxpayers and men of affairs who mold public opinion

and who have the best interests of the community at heart, think seriously of this matter, for it is a matter that is deserving of your most serious consideration. Give the boys and girls a chance to develop strong and vigorous bodies, pure minds and pure hearts. Give them a chance to live their normal lives. Help them to grow up in an environment that is permeated with an atmosphere that is clean and pure and wholesome, so that when the adolescent boys and girls step out into their new new life, and the responsibility of young manhood and womanhood falls full upon them, that their cheeks may reflect the crimson blood that courses through their veins, rich in health, pure and untainted by evil habits or neglected development.

Give them a place to play where they will be safe. Where they will have just enough of direction and supervision to keep them safe. The cost will be a mere pittance and will be infinitesimal when compared with the gain that is bound to come in health and vigor of mind and soul and body. Provide public parks and playgrounds and recreation halls and libraries and gymnasiums, where all the children of all the people may meet and mingle and live and learn. Do this and future generations of boys and girls will rise up and call you blessed. Do this and you will be contributing a glorious service to humanity.