

Don't Bury Your Gifts

I believe the present era holds great opportunity for the daughters of America. But in order to lay hold of this opportunity and obtain success in this wonderful battle of life, there is one thing you must do: Keep to your specialty, to the doing of the thing that you accomplish with the most satisfaction to yourself and the most benefit to those about you.

Keep to this, whether it be raising turnips or tunes; painting screens or battle-pieces; studying political economy or domestic receipts; for, as we read in a great author who has a genius for common sense: "There is not one thing that men ought to do, there is not one thing that ought to be done, which a women ought not to be encouraged to do, if she has the capacity for doing it. For wherever there is a gift, there is a prophecy pointing to its use, and a silent command of God to use it."

Such utterances as these are assertions of the "natural and inalienable rights" of the individual as such. They are deductions of the Christian philosophy that regards you and me, first and chiefly, as human beings, and makes the greatest possible account of personal identity.

In all the ages there have been minds that saw this truth.

The intellects who towered like alpine peaks above the mass of men were
the first to reflect its blessed light. Two thousand years ago, the
Roman poet Juvenal made the heroine of a famous satire say to the hero:
“I like our Latin word for man, which equally includes your sex and
mine. For you should not forget that, in all things highest, best and
most enduring in our natures, I am as much a man as you are.”

The sun of truth looms high above the far horizon in our day, and even the plains of human thought and purpose are glowing with
the light of this new inspiration. Terms such as “personal value” and
“personal development” will be the noontide watchwords “when the race
out of childhood has grown.” Only yesterday I heard a fashionable
butterfly, in the surroundings of a luxurious home, say with sudden
enthusiasm: “Of one thing I am sure; every woman who lives is bound to
find out what is the very best thing she can do with her powers, and
then she’s bound to do it.”

In creating each of us with some peculiar talent, God has given us each “a call” to some peculiar work. Indeed, the time is almost
here when the only call that will be recognized as valid, in any field,
must involve in him who thinks he hears it both adaptation and success.

Each one of us is a marvelous bundle of aptitudes and

capacities. But just as I prefer the active to the passive voice, I prefer to put the aptitudes first in my present inventory.

Besides, the world has harangued us women on our capacities from the beginning, and it is really refreshing to take the dilemma of our destiny by the other horn at last! Civilization (by which I mean Christianity's effect on the brains and hands of humanity) wonderfully develops and differentiates our powers.

Among the Modocs Indians, there are only four specialties—two for the squaws and two for the braves. The last hunt and fight; the first do the drudgery and bring up the papooses.

Among the Parisians, on the contrary, the division of labor is almost infinite, so that the hand perfectly skilled in the most minute industry (such as molding the shoestrings of a porcelain statuette) needs no other resource to gain a comfortable livelihood.

Among the Modocs, skins are about the only article of commerce. Among the Parisians, evolution has gone so far in the direction of separating employments formerly blended that you cannot buy cream and milk in the same shop.

By some unaccountable perversion of good sense, the specialties of human beings who are women have been strangely circumscribed. But they were there all the same, and now, under the genial sun of a more enlightened era, they are coming airily

forth, like
singing birds after a thunderstorm, and wonderfully they help
some of
us to solve the toughest of all problems: What is life for?

Let us see. Lift the cover of your sewing basket: There
are thimble, scissors, spools of thread and other tools needed
by a
seamstress, but minus the needle they have no explanation and
no
efficiency. Unlock your writing desk: What are paper, ink and
sealing
wax without the pen? They are nothing but waste material and
toys.

So it is with you and me. We have no explanation that is
adequate; we have no place in the workbox and portfolio of
today; no
place in the great humming hive of the land we live in, save
as some
predominating aptitude in each of us explains why we are here,
and in
what way we are to swell the inspiring song of voluntary toil
and
beneficent success.

Suppose that here and now, you proceed to take an
"inventory of stock," if you have not been thoughtful enough
to do that
already. Made up as you are, what is your forte, your
"specialty," your
"best hold," as men phrase it? Be sure of one thing at the
outset: The
great Artificer, in putting together your individual nature,
did not
forget His crowning gift, any more than He forgets to add its
own
peculiar fragrance to the rose or its own song to the lark.

It may not lie upon the surface, this choicest of your
treasures; diamonds seldom do. Miners remove a great deal of
mere dust
before the sparkling jewel they are seeking gladdens the eye.

Genius has been often and variously defined. I would call
it an intuition of one's own best gift. Rosa Bonheur, the
French
painter, knew hers; American actress Charlotte Cushman
recognized hers;
British writer George Eliot was not greatly at a loss
concerning hers.

As for us of less emphatic individuality, sometimes we
wait until a friend's hand leads us up before the mirror of
our
potential self. Sometimes we see it reflected in another's
success (as
the eaglet, among the flock of geese, first learned that he
could fly,
when he recognized a mate in the heaven-soaring eagle, whose
shadow
frightened all the geese away). Sometimes we come upon our
heritage
unwittingly, but always it is there, be sure of that, and "let
no man
take thy crown."

As iron filings fall into line around a magnet, so make
your opportunities cluster close about your special gift. In a
land as
generous as ours, this can be done by every woman who reads
these lines.
A sharpened perception of their own possibilities is far more
needed by
our girls than better means for education.

But how was it in the past? If there is one reflection

that grieves me as no other can, it is this thought of God's endowment bestowed upon each one of us, so that we might in some special manner gladden and bless the world by bestowing upon it our best; the thought of His patience all through the years as He has gone on hewing out the myriad souls of a wayward race, that they might be lively stones in the temple of use and of achievement; and side by side with this the thought of our individual blindness, our failure to discern the riches of brain, heart and hand with which we were endowed.

But most of all, I think about the gentle women who have lived and died and made no sign of their best gifts, but whose achievements of voice and pen, of brush and chisel, of noble statesmanship and great-hearted philanthropy might have blessed and soothed our race through these 6,000 years.

There is a stern old gentleman of my acquaintance who, if he had heard what I have just said, would have stated his objection in this fashion: "That's all folderol, my friend; a mere rhetorical flourish. If women could have done all this, why didn't they, pray tell?

"If it's in it's in, and will come out, but what's wanting can't be numbered."

He would then proceed to ask me, with some asperity, if I thought any of my "gifted" women could have invented a steam engine.

Whereupon I would say to him what I now say to you, "Most

assuredly I
think so; why not?"

And I would ask, in turn, if my old friend had studied history with reference to the principle that, as a rule, human beings do not rise above the standard implied in society's general estimate of the class to which they belong. Take the nations of Eastern Europe and Western Asia—"civilized" nations, too, be it remembered; study the mechanic of Jerusalem, the merchant of Damascus and Ispahan; in what particular are the tools of the one or the facilities of commerce familiar to the others superior to those of a thousand years ago?

Surely, as far as Oriental inventions are concerned, they have changed as little as the methods of the bee or the wing-stroke of the swallow. We hear no more of man's inventiveness in those countries than of woman's.

Why should we, indeed, when we remember that both are alike untaught in the arts and sciences, which form the basis of mechanical invention? They are inspired by no intellectual movement, no demand, no "modern spirit."

It is not "in the air" that men shall be fertile of brain and skilled of hand as inventors there, any more than it is here that women shall be, and where both knowledge and incentive are not present,

achievement is evermore a minus quantity. None but a heaven-sent genius,
stimulated by a love of science, prepared by special education and
inspired by the prestige of belonging to the dominant sex,
ever yet
carved types, tamed lightning or imprisoned steam.

Besides, in ages past, if some brave soul, man or woman,
conscious of splendid powers, strove to bless the world by his
or her
free exercise, what dangers were involved! Was it Joan of Arc?
The fagot
soon became her portion. Galileo? On came the rack.

Christopher Columbus? The long disdain of courtiers and
jealousy of ambitious coadjutors followed him. Robert Fulton?
He faced
the sarcasm of the learned and the merriment of the boors.

Even for the most adventurous inventor of today (as the
aeronaut experimenters), what have we but bad puns and insipid
conundrums—until he wins—and then ready caps tossed high in
air and
fame's loud trumpet at his ear—when death's cold finger has
closed it up
forever.

Times are changing, though. The world grows slowly better
and more brotherly. The day is near when women will lack no
high
incentive to the best results in every branch of intellectual
endeavor
and skilled workmanship.

Not a week passes without some favorable verdict as to
woman's inventive power coming from the Patent Office; I
believe we

shall receive similar validation from other high offices as
godly women
uncover their gifts and step out to use them for God's glory.

*Frances Willard (1839-1898) was a well-known lecturer,
writer and educator. She became president of the National
Woman's
Christian Temperance Union in 1879.*