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Moral Training Through the Teaching of History

WILLIAM A. MOWRY, LL. D.

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Patrick Henry said: "I have but one lamp by which my feet may be guided; and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past."

The past is unfolded to us in the pages of history. The true study of history is found in its relations: in cause and effect. The incidents of history by themselves are of but little value. We learn our lessons from the annals of the past by observing the causes of certain results and by studying the results of certain causes.

God reveals himself to us in the realm of nature, and especially in the history of nations. There is a power that makes for righteousness. The most important and at the same time the most difficult part of historical study are the inferences we draw from the facts which history presents to us.

We must rely largely upon the schools for our moral lessons derived from history. The school teacher has the grand opportunity of pointing out to his pupils these strong inferences from the historical facts.

In this connection one thing is vastly important, and that is that the lesson be drawn from fact rather than from fiction. Several pretty stories are told by Weems in his life of Washington, which have been widely used by teachers for a hundred years past to enforce certain moral lessons. Perhaps the one used most universally is the well-known story of the hatchet and the cherry tree. This beautiful legend telling how George Washington, the father of his country, would not tell a lie to his father, seems to be a splendid way to impress truth-telling upon the young children. When I have objected that there is no foundation for the story, but that Weems manufactured it out of whole cloth, I have been met by the opinion, strongly held that that did not matter, if it was not true they should use it just the same. Well, is that truthful? Using a lie to enforce truth telling! It may have its effect for the time, but when the child gets a little older and learns that the story has no foundation and that Weems is notorious for telling legend for truth—then what inference will he draw?

But there are many opportunities to "point a moral" if the teacher is disposed to look for them and search them out. Here the skill of the teacher is the principle reliance. A wise course is not bound up in selfishness. Altruism in the long run brings the best results. The Saviour's Golden Rule is the best rule both for individuals and for nations. These are the lessons that a skillful teacher will draw from the teachings of history.