

Youth and Health

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It is a very interesting task to take part in this morning's discussion and to do what one can to put forward some aspects of the interest in health and health possibilities that appear when one studies young people actually themselves as individuals. Most of my work lies in trying to get in touch with children of all ages. A very large number of them are between 12 and 18. I have to try and find out Why they have not been interested in their school work, why they are not able to adapt to the various social requirements in the school and in the home, in general, why the normal mechanism of health of body and mind and of social qualities has gone wrong.

I have been asked to speak today really because of some of the things the children tell me. I always feel that in a sense I am a bridge by which the things that the boys and girls say to me may walk over, with as little interference as possible, to those who are caring so intensely to give what the children themselves really need.

The adolescent is a very queer creature. All of us who are in ultimate contact with the adolescent feel at times completely baffled. The adolescents have odd moods, odd resentments, odd enthusiasms, So often to what we put before them, and what we think they are going to like immensely, they prove indifferent.

On the Other hand, for other unexpected things their interest awakens. and they show even a marvellous enthusiasm.

I have one or two pieces of knowledge that I believe I have inquired in comparing one child with another. The first point is that the adolescent has two main hungers, which are very real to the boy and girl themselves, though they are looked at very differently by the outside world. The first is the hunger for knowledge, and the second the hunger for power. The grown-up, looking at the child, finds it extraordinarily difficult to know when you are not going to over-burden or oppress your child by giving him responsibility. It is extraordinarily difficult to judge sensitively and to know the moment at which the hunger for knowledge is waking up and can he adequately satisfied. On the other hand, passing from childhood into adolescence, we find that life to the adolescent is full of many extraordinary factors. To be an adolescent is to live in a world in which the mud and the stars are extraordinarily mixed together. So often the things that light up the adolescent 's mind and seem so marvellous and wonderful are those which to the grown-up appear completely uninteresting. One girl, a most respected person of about 16, came in to see me, extremely thrilled. She told me with great delight that the men outside in the street were using one of those electric drills, and she said, "I do think it is perfectly wonderful." When she went on to explain what she meant, she said that she thought it was marvellous that the noise did not upset the men, and she had watched one of them looking after the apparatus and gently tending it as if it had been a kitten. Somehow this linked up in her mind with aeroplanes. and aeroplanes took her fancy. She was greatly enthused by the idea that probably we were going to get to China in a week by the time she was grown-up. It is

that sort of thing which makes the adolescent so very difficult to handle, however sympathetic we may be. We all feel that what enthused us in our young days is so very different from what enthuses the young people of the present day, and, again, the things which would thrill the boys and girls in our own school-days are passed by, by the boys and girls to-day with a laugh or a sneer or something very hurtful to a grown-up. But, again, among these young people one gets random spurts of marvellous enthusiasm. One of the activities organised by the Red Cross is a Blood Transfusion Service. That is a thing which awakes the most pure and marvellous devotion from a large number of people—a keenness which we should have felt rather odd a good many years ago.

With these two things in front of us, the hunger for knowledge and the hunger for power on the one hand, and the unevenness of response on the other, how can we make a bridge?

It seems to me that one or two things help us very much. First of all, with regard to knowledge, the adolescent wakes up into a world full of odd things. The attitude of the grown-up is one of them. The peculiar problems set out in the newspapers are another. Having knowledge, the adolescent wants to be given power, wants to be given a sense of importance. On the other hand, he has no experience at all and no knowledge of the responsibilities of power or of the disasters to which the possession of power may lead. There are only a few kinds of power that the adolescent boy or girl can be given.

The Junior Red Cross is peculiarly suited to meet both these needs in a way no other Society can, and I would like to put before you why it seems to me that that is true. First of all, both these hungers—the hunger for knowledge and the hunger for power—have been there in all generations. Adolescence is just the same now as in the old days. Only the form has changed. Linking the two there is always the sense of adventure and the desire for adventure, and that desire is always a mental, a moral, and a physical thing, the three being inextricably intertwined.

The difficulty is that the ideals of one generation are never the ideals of the next, and therefore those things which call forth the types of adventure and heroism in one generation hardly ever connect or click at all with the children of the next. So, we have to try to find the framework or the carrier for these permanent ideals to the children of the next generation.

In the absorption in science, in the fascination that there really is in health—very often we try to make ourselves believe that there is a fascination where we do not see it, but actually there is no subject more thrilling and varied in certain aspects than the science of health—in the junction between these two we have the satisfaction that we need. Take the whole question of the progress of the knowledge of disease. There is nothing so delightful at times as to talk to children on the microbe—hunters, to give them the life stories of Pasteur and Koch, and the men who cleaned the Panama Canal from yellow fever, and the men who pursued and destroyed the sleeping sickness germ in Africa. There is enough material in all that for sheer adventure and excitement and heroism, far better than anything in the cinema. The facts stand for themselves. They carry the feeling that there is in this progress of science. And that is the great thing in dealing with adolescents to be enthusiastic without being soppy.

Then we have the question of the juncture of civilisation and disease the fascination of the interweaving of, let us say, epidemiology and Eastern Europe problems. The influence of tuberculosis on the whole housing problem. The question of rickets particularly in the North, the question of pure water supply—all these things can be made to give a sense of knowledge which is like motor cars and aeroplanes, and a sense of real power, because, after all, I am a citizen of this country, and it is up to me that this movement should go forward. It seems to me that you have in both these sides just those things you want. You have the satisfaction to the mind of the child. I had the good fortune to be taught physiology by Professor Winifred Cullis, who, as those who have listened to her on the broadcast know, has a light and delightful hand in teaching physiology to junior people. One carried away from that kind of teaching the feeling that there was nothing so exciting in all the world as the battle of the white corpuscles and the germs, or the movement of the body, the building up of cells, the breakdown of cells, the fascination of growth. There is enough in that line of approach to satisfy the bookworm hunger of any boy or girl.

Then there is the story of the pioneer people, those who stood out against their generation. In their story there is full and adequate satisfaction for the natural Bolshevism of youth. Almost all progress in medicine we doctors say it to our shame—has been made against the general stream of the profession. It has been the great people at each point who have stood out for the new discovery until they have managed to put it through against the general inertia of all the others who are only too satisfied with what they learned as students. There are to—day quite a number of splendid men and women all over the world who have been courageous enough to stand out as pioneers, and there is plenty of scope for every piece of anti-everythingism” in this Junior Red Cross work, to satisfy such as these.

Then there is the question of our responsibility for Empire. We may think of the work of men like Sir Andrew Balfour, of the creation at long last of the Institute of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, of what the Empire has done for the immense and varied populations under its rule in all parts of the world. There is enough in our history, in our Empire at work, to bring home the responsibility that we hold for these various races who have been decimated by every kind of unhygienic position owing to the backwardness of all of us. There is again a province of delight for the sentimental young woman, who, after all, has her uses, and to her the nursing side offers a vocation. The programme of the Junior Red Cross has so many aspects in which education can be given. For example, take first aid: if a youth understands how a bandage can be properly applied it gives him a real and genuine satisfaction. On the other hand, it is all of such real and practical importance that unless we are going to deteriorate and to become a less and less fit and agile and effective race than we have become in the past, under the pressure of the perpetual increase of artificialism in our lives, we must have something like this which will enable us to meet everything with a cheer, and give our young people something to inspire them. Unless this is done we shall inevitably in the next century see a gradual deterioration of the human species to something not very much better than machine men or automatons. I do feel that from every point of view, speaking particularly for the boys and girls with whom I have to do, that if this Red Cross has been in the schools from which they have been made a great deal easier. We should have found a body already existing in which we could have canalised those energies which otherwise have such meagre channels in which

to flow at home or at school. Therefore from the psychological physician's point of view I would like to add to what has been said already, that I have a very earnest hope that as a result of this conference the Junior Red Cross will really be brought into our secondary boys' and girls' schools and be made an effective institution, where it will take hold of those energies of the adolescent, which can be so usefully employed, or, otherwise, may be so destructive and so harmful to themselves, if they have no good and approved channel into which to run.