

## The Secret of Efficient Expression (July 8, 1911)

The secret of efficient expression in oratory — if secret it can properly be called — is in having something efficient to express and being so filled with it that it expresses itself.<sup>1</sup> The choice of words is not important since efficient expression, the result of efficient thinking, chooses its own words, moulds and fashions its own sentences, and creates a diction suited to its own purposes.

In my own case the power of expression is not due to education or to training. I had no time for either and have often felt the lack of both. The schools I attended were primitive and when I left them at fourteen to go to work I could hardly write a grammatical sentence; and to be frank I am not quite sure that I can do so now. But I had a retentive memory and was fond of committing and declaiming such orations and poems as appealed to me. Patrick Henry's revolutionary speech had first place.<sup>2</sup> Robert Emmet's immortal oration was a great favorite and moved me deeply.<sup>3</sup> Drake's "American Flag"<sup>4</sup> stirred my blood as did also Schiller's "Bürgerschaft."<sup>5</sup> Often I felt myself thrilled under the spell of these, recited to myself, inaudibly at times, and at others declaimed boldly and dramatically, when no one else was listening.

Everything that was revolutionary appealed to me and it was this that made Patrick Henry one of my first heroes; and my passion for his eloquent and burning defiance of King George inspired the first speech I ever attempted in public, with Patrick himself as the theme. This was before the Occidental Literary Club of Terre Haute, Indiana, of which I was then a member, and I still shudder as I recall the crowded little club-room which greeted me, and feel again the big drops of cold sweat standing out all over me as I realized the plight I was in and the utter hopelessness of escape.

The spectacle I made of myself that evening will never be effaced from my memory, and the sympathetic assurances of my friends at the close of the exhibition did not relieve the keen sense of humiliation and shame I felt for the disgrace I had brought upon myself and my patron saint. The speech could not possibly have been worse and my mortification was complete. In my heart I hoped most earnestly that my hero's spiritual ears were not attuned to the affairs of this earth, at least that evening.

It was then I realized and sorely felt the need of the education and training I had missed and then and there I resolved to make up for it as best I could. I set to work in earnest to learn what I so much needed to know. While firing a switch-engine at night I attended a private school half a day each day, sleeping in the morning and attending school in the afternoon. I bought an encyclopedia on the installment plan, one volume each month, and began to read and study history and literature and to devote myself to grammar and composition.

The revolutionary history of the United States and France stirred me deeply and its heroes and martyrs became my idols. Thomas Paine towered above them all. A thousand times since then I have found inspiration and strength in the thrilling words, "These are the times that try men's souls."<sup>6</sup>

Here I should say, for the purpose of this writing, that from the time I began to read with a serious mind, feeling keenly as I did my lack of knowledge, especially the power of proper expression, both oral and written, I observed the structure and studied the composition of every paragraph and every sentence, and when one appeared striking to me, owing to its perfection of style or phrasing, I memorized it, and this became a fixed habit which I retain to this day, and if I have any unusual command of language it is because I have made it a lifelong practice to cultivate the art of expression in a subconscious study of the structure and phrasing of every paragraph in my readings.

It was while serving an apprenticeship in a railroad shop and in later years as a locomotive fireman and as a wage-worker in other capacities that I came to realize the oppressions and sufferings of the working class and to understand something of the labor question. The wrongs existing here I knew from having experienced them, and the irresistible appeal of these wrongs to be righted determined my destiny. I joined a labor union and from that time to this the high ambition, the controlling purpose of my life has been the education, organization, and emancipation of the working class. It was this passionate sympathy with my class that gave me all the power I have to serve it. I felt their suffering because I was one of them and I began to speak and write for them for the same reason. In this there was no altruism, no self-sacrifice, only duty. I could not have done otherwise. Had I attempted it I should have failed. Such as I have been and am, I had to be.

I abhorred slavery in every form. I yearned to see all men and all women free. I detested the idea of some men being ruled by others, and of women being ruled by men. I believed that women should have all the rights men have, and I looked upon child labor as a crime. And so I be-

came an agitator and this ruling passion of my life found larger expression.

In the clash of conflict which followed and the trials incident to it I grew stronger. The notoriety which came in consequence enlarged my hearing with the people and this in turn demanded more efficient means of expression. The cause that was sacred to me was assailed. My very life and honor were on trial. Falsehood and calumny played their part. I was denounced and vilified. Everything was at stake. I simply had to speak and make the people understand, and that is how I got my training in oratory, and all the secret there is in whatever power of expression I may have.

In reading the history of slavery I studied the character of John Brown and he became my hero. I read the speeches of Wendell Phillips and was profoundly stirred by his marvelous powers. Once I heard him and was enthralled by his indescribable eloquence. He was far advanced in years, but I could see in his commanding presence and mellow and subdued tones how he must have blazed and flashed in the meridian of his powers.

At about the same time I first heard Robert G. Ingersoll. He was in my opinion the perfect master of the art of human speech. He combined all the graces, gifts and powers of expression, and stood upon the highest pinnacle of oratorical achievement.

Robert G. Ingersoll and Wendell Phillips were the two greatest orators of their time, and probably of all time. Their power sprang from their passion for freedom, for truth, for justice, for a world filled with light and with happy human beings. But for this divine passion neither would have scaled the sublime heights of immortal achievement. The sacred fire burned within them and when they were aroused it flashed from their eyes and rolled from their inspired lips in torrents of eloquence.

No man ever made a great speech on a mean subject. Slavery never inspired an immortal thought or utterance. Selfishness is dead to every art. The love of truth and the passion to serve it light every torch of real eloquence. Had Ingersoll and Phillips devoted their lives to the practice of law for pay, the divine fire within them would have burned to ashes and they would have died in mediocrity.

The highest there is in oratory is the highest there is in truth, in honesty, in morality. All the virtues combine in expressing themselves in beautiful words, poetic phrases, glowing periods, and moving eloquence. The loftiest peaks rise from the lowest depths and their shining summits glorify their hidden foundations. The highest eloquence springs from the

lowliest sources and pleads trumpet-tongued for the children of the abyss.

Wendell Phillips was inspired by the scarred back, the pleading eyes, and the mute lips of chattel slavery and his tongue, eloquent with the lightning of Jehovah's wrath, became an avenging flame to scourge the horror of slavery from the earth.

Denial of one's better self seals the lips or pollutes them. Fidelity to conviction opens them and truth blossoms in eloquence. The tongue is tipped with the flame that leaps from the altar-fire of the soul.

Ingersoll and Phillips were absolutely true to their convictions. They attacked monstrous evils and were hated and denounced. Had they yielded to the furies which assailed them they would have perished. But the fiercer the attacks upon them the stauncher they stood and the more eloquent and powerful they became. The truth fired their souls, flashed from their eyes, and inspired their lips.

There is no inspiration in evil and no power except for its own destruction.

He who aspires to master the art of expression must first of all consecrate himself completely to some great cause, and the greatest cause of all is the cause of humanity. He must learn to feel deeply and think clearly to express himself eloquently. He must be absolutely true to the best there is in him, if he has to stand alone. Such natural powers as he may have should be cultivated by the study of history, science and literature. He must not only keep close to the people but remember that he is one of them, and not above the meanest. He must feel the wrongs of others so keenly that he forgets his own, and resolve to combat these wrongs with all the power at his command.

The most thrilling and inspiring oratory, the most powerful and impressive eloquence is the voice of the disinherited, the oppressed, the suffering and submerged; it is the voice of poverty and misery, of rags and crusts, of wretchedness and despair; the voice of humanity crying to the infinite; the voice that resounds throughout the earth and reaches heaven; the voice that awakens the conscience of the race and proclaims the truths that fill the world with light and liberty and love.

Published in *The Coming Nation* [Girard, KS], July 8, 1911, pp. 7-8.

<sup>1</sup> This article was originally written for the Department of Education of the University of Wisconsin as part of a series by "distinguished contemporary orators or lecturers." Whether the piece was published by that institution is not known.

<sup>2</sup> Debs frequently quoted the speech of Patrick Henry (1736-1799) to the Second Virginia Convention in March 1775.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Emmet (1778-1803) was an Irish revolutionary nationalist that led a failed uprising against British rule in 1803, leading to his execution for treason. Emmet was immortalized by the speech he made from the dock at time of sentencing, in which he defiantly proclaimed his continued fidelity to “the emancipation of my country from the super-inhuman oppression under which she has so long and too patiently travailed.” Emmet dramatically concluded “I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world — it is the charity of its silence. Let no man write my epitaph, for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them. Let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them and me repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times, and other men, can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written.”

<sup>4</sup> Reference to “The American Flag” by Joseph Rodman Drake (1795-1820).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to “Die Bürgschaft” [The Pledge] (1799) by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805).

<sup>6</sup> From “The American Crisis” (1776) by Thomas Paine (1737-1809).