AN ORATION DELIVERED BEFORE THE SOCIETY OF PHI BETA KAPPA, AT CAMBRIDGE

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HORACE BUSHNELL

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ORATION.

Mr. President, and Brethren of the Society, —

There are many subjects, or truths, and sometimes those of the greatest moment, which cannot well be formally announced. They require to be offered rather by suggestion. They will enter the mind and be in it only as they are of it, generated by the fertile activity of a meditative spirit. This is frequently true even in matters of scientific discovery, where, also, it is often remarked, that the best suggestives are the humblest instances; such as the mind can play itself upon with the greatest facility, because it is not occupied by their magnitude or oppressed by their grandeur. Some lamp is seen swinging on its chain, some apple falling from the tree, and then, perchance, the thoughtful looker-on, taking the hint that nature gives, will be able also to look in; thus to uncover truths not measured by their instances, — laws of the universe.

More true is this, if possible, of moral subjects; for there are many of these which the soul will not suffer to be thrust upon her. She must ask for them, catch

the note of them in some humble suggestive, entertain them thoughtfully, take them into her feeling, and there, encouraging, as it were, their modesty, tempt them to speak. So especially it is with the subject in which I desire to engage you on the present occasion. To name it, or in definite form to propose it, would be in fact to hide it, or to thrust myself between it and your minds. I must rather seek to draw it forth from you.

Let me call to my aid, then, some thoughtful spirit in my audience; not a poet, of necessity, or a man of genius, but a man of large meditation, one who is accustomed to observe, and, by virtue of the warm affinities of a living heart, to draw out the meanings that are hid so often in the humblest things. Returning into the bosom of his family, in some interval of care and labor, he shall come upon the very unclassic and certainly unimposing scene, — his children and a kitten playing on the floor together; and just there, possibly, shall meet him suggestions more fresh, and thoughts of higher moment concerning himself and his race, than the announcement of a new-discovered planet or the revolution of an empire would yield him. He surveys, with a meditative feeling, this beautiful scene of muscular play, — the unconscious activity, the exuberant life, the spirit of glee, — and there rises in his heart the conception, that possibly he is here to see the prophecy or symbol of another and

higher kind of play, which is the noblest exercise and last end of man himself. Worn by the toils of years, perceiving, with a sigh, that the unconscious joy of motion here displayed is spent in himself, and that now he is effectually tamed to the doom of a working creature, he may yet discover, in the lively sympathy with play that bathes his inward feeling, that his soul is playing now, — enjoying, without the motions, all it could do in them, manifold more than it could, if he were down upon the floor himself, in the unconscious activity and lively frolic of childhood. Saddened he may be to note how time and work have changed his spirit and dried away the playful springs of animal life in his being; yet he will find, or ought, a joy playing internally over the face of his working nature, which is fuller and richer as it is more tranquil, which is to the other as fulfilment to prophecy, and is, in fact, the prophecy of a better and far more glorious fulfilment still.

Having struck, in this manner, the great world-problem of WORK AND PLAY, his thoughts kindle under the theme and he pursues it.

Now the living races are seen, at a glance, to be offering in their history, everywhere, a faithful type of his own. They show him what he himself is doing and preparing, — all that he finds in the manifold experience of his own higher life. They have all their gambols, all their sober cares and labors. The lambs

are sporting on the green knoll, the anxious dams are bleating to recall them to their side. The citizen beaver is building his house by a laborious carpentry, and the squirrel is lifting his sail to the wind on the swinging top of the tree. In the music of the morning, he hears the birds playing with their voices, and, when the day is up, sees them sailing round in circles on the upper air, as skaters on a lake, folding their wings, dropping and rebounding, as if to see what sport they can make of the solemn laws that hold the upper and lower worlds together. And yet these play-children of the air he sees again descending to be carriers and drudges, fluttering and screaming anxiously about their nest, and confessing by that sign that not even wings can bear them clear of the stern doom of work. Or passing to some quiet shade, meditating still on this careworn life, playing still internally with ideal fancies and desires unrealized, there returns upon him there, in the manifold and spontaneous mimicry of nature, a living show of all that is transpiring in his own bosom, — in every flower, some bee humming over his laborious chemistry and loading his body with the fruits of his toil, — in the slant sunbeam, populous nations of motes quivering with animated joy, and catching, as in play, at the golden particles of the light with their tiny fingers. Work and play, in short, are the universal ordinance of God for the living races, in which they symbolize the fortune and interpret the errand of man. No creature lives that must not work and may not play.

Returning now to himself and to man, and meditating yet more deeply, as he is thus prepared to do, on work and play, and play and work, as blended in the compound of our human life, asking again what is work and what is play, what are the relations of one to the other, and which is the final end of all, he discovers, in what he was observing round him, a sublimity of import, a solemnity even, that is deep as the shadow of eternity.

To proceed intelligently with our subject, we need, first of all, to resolve or set forth the precise philosophic distinction between work and play; for upon this distinction all our illustrations will depend. That, in practical life, we have any hesitancy in making the distinction, I by no means intimate. At least, there are many youths in the universities, not specially advanced in philosophy, who are able to make their election with the greatest facility, be the distinction itself clear or not. But as I propose, on the present occasion, to speak of the state of play in a manner that involves a philosophic extension of the idea, I am required to distinguish the idea by a careful analysis.

You will discover, at once, that work and play, taken as modes of mere outward, muscular activity, cannot be distinguished. There is motion in both, there is an exercise of force in both, both are under the will as acting on the muscular system; so that, taken outwardly, they both fall into the same category. Indeed,

they cannot be discriminated till we pass within to view them metaphysically, considering their springs of action, their impulse, aim, and object.

Here the distinction becomes evident at once, namely, that work is activity *for* an end; play, activity *as* an end. One prepares the fund or resources of enjoyment, the other is enjoyment itself. Thus, when a man goes into agriculture, trade, or the shop, he consents to undergo a certain expenditure of care and labor, which is only a form of painstaking, rightly named, in order to obtain some ulterior good which is to be his reward. But when the child goes to his play, it is no painstaking, no means to an end, — it is itself rather both end and joy. Accordingly, it is a part of the distinction I state, that work suffers a feeling of aversion, and play excludes aversion. For the moment any play becomes wearisome or distasteful, then it is work, — an activity that is kept up, not as being its own joy, but for some ulterior end or under some kind of constraint.

Another form of the distinction is made out, and one that is more accurately adapted to philosophic uses, by saying that work is done by a conscious effort of will, and that play is impulsive, having its spring in some inspiration, or some exuberant fund of life back of the will. So that one is something which we require of ourselves, the other something that we must control ourselves not to do. We work because we must, because prudence impels. We play because

we have in us a fund of life that wants to expend itself.

But man is not a muscular creature only; he does not consist of mere bones and integuments. He is a creature also of thought, feeling, intelligence, and character. And what we see of him in the muscular life he is, or should be, in the higher domain of spirit. Regarding the child as a creature full of life and spontaneous motion, thus and therefore a playing creature, we are to see in him, not the measure, but the sign, of that which shall be. For as the race began with an outward paradise, which, being lost, may yet offer the type of a higher paradise to be gained, so each life begins with muscular play, that, passing through the hard struggles of work, it may carry its ideal with it, and emerge, at last, into a state of inspired liberty and spontaneous beauty. In short, we are to conceive that the highest and complete state of man, that which his nature endeavours after and in which only it fulfils its sublime instinct, is the state of play.

In this view, study is to be regarded as work, until the disciple gets beyond voluntary attention, application constrained by prudence, rivalry, ambitious preparations for life, and begins to dwell in beauty and truth as inspirations. For then he passes into another and more perfect kind of activity, an activity that is spontaneous or impulsive, and is to itself both reward and end.

And this kind of activity, call it enthusiastic or in-