Tuskegee: A Retrospect and Prospect

Booker T. Washington

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THE Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute celebrates this year on April 4, 5 and 6, its twenty−fifth birthday. As I look back at its humble beginnings, and its gradual growth into what it is, and the promise of what it shall be, it seems to me that one of its more important services has been to provide Negroes with an unusual opportunity to engage in the education and upbuilding of their own race. This school represents, in a large measure, the effort of the Negro race to help itself, and therein is the real significance of its work.

From the first, it has been the effort of the Tuskegee Institute to teach the lessons of self−help by furnishing an example. With this aim in view, the task of building up and maintaining the school has been largely entrusted to its own students. They have, in a large degree, made the bricks and erected the buildings. They have, for the most part, done the work of the farm, raised the provisions and cooked the food. The fact that they have done this under the direction of Negro teachers, with very little assistance from outside the school, has given them self−appreciation and self−reliance and an added respect for their race.

In saying this, I do not forget the debt that this school owes to Hampton Institute, whence so many of its teachers came, nor the debt of gratitude it owes to its friends among the members of the white race in the North and in the South who have furnished moral and material support. But it should not be forgotten that the success of this school, like that of any other, depends, in the last analysis, less upon the effort of any one individual or group of individuals than upon the native qualities of its pupils and the people from whom they sprang. While the school at Tuskegee owes much to others, I believe it is but fair to say that it owes most to the patience and persistence of the students, and to the simple piety, earnestness and self−sacrifice of their fathers and mothers at home on the farm and plantation.

A careful investigation of the records last spring revealed the fact that, in addition to its 888 graduates, something like 6,000 students, who were not able to remain to complete the full course of study, have been helped to such an extent that they are doing reasonably efficient work. Of the graduates of the school, less than ten per cent., so far as we can ascertain, have been unsuccessful in their trades; and special investigations that we have made indicate that all have increased their economic efficiency, on an average of about three hundred per cent., some more and some less. This shows the increased value that the average Southern white man places on the services of a Negro educated in the trades. It indicates what, under reasonably favorable circumstances, Negroes can do and what they are doing. It ought also to be added, in reply to those who assert that education has not improved the Negro, but rather injured him in respect to his moral life, that so far as we can learn no graduate of Tuskegee has ever been convicted of crime.

The idea uppermost in my mind, when I began the work of establishing the school at Tuskegee, was to do something that would reach and improve the condition of the masses of the Negro people in the South. Up to that time — and even to−day to a large extent — education had not touched, in any real and tangible way, the great majority of the people in what is known as "The Black Belt. I had not been many days in Alabama before I realized this fact. As my knowledge of conditions grew, I became increasingly convinced that any institution which was to be of real service to the millions of the lower South must not confine itself to methods that were suited to some distant community where conditions of life were vastly different. I made up my mind from the first that a school which should perform for the masses the service I had in mind would have to teach its students many things that students in the North and West were taught in their homes. I found that the teaching of books alone was not sufficient for the students who came to Tuskegee to be trained as teachers and leaders. Our students needed to be taught how to sit at table and eat properly, the uses of a napkin, table−cloth, knife and fork, and tooth−brush. Large numbers of them were wholly ignorant of the very elements of right living. In addition to this, they had to be taught how to care for tools and animals and how to systematize their labor. The girls had to be trained to an intelligent appreciation of the value of housekeeping, cooking, sewing, laundering.

From the very outset of my work, it has been my steadfast purpose to establish an institution that would provide instruction, not for the select few, but for the masses, giving them standards and ideals, and inspiring in them hope and courage to go patiently forward. I wanted to give Negro young men and women an education that would fit them to take up and carry to greater perfection the work that their fathers and mothers had been doing. I saw clearly that an education that filled them with a "divine discontent," without ability to change conditions, would leave the students, and the masses they were to guide, worse off than they were in their unawakened state. It was my aim to teach the students who came to Tuskegee to live a life and to make a living, to the end that they might return to their homes after graduation, and find profit and satisfaction in building up the communities from which they had come, and in developing the latent possibilities of the soil and the people. To establish this idea, the Tuskegee Institute, with its 1,500 students, its 156 officers, teachers and employees, its 86 buildings, and its varied ramifications for extension work, has come into existence.

Starting in a shanty and a hen−house, with almost no property beyond a hoe and a blind mule, the school has grown up gradually, much as a town grows. We needed food for our tables; farming, therefore, was our first industry, started to meet this need. With the need for shelter for our students, courses in house−building and carpentry were added. Out of these, brick−making and brick−masonry naturally grew. The increasing demand for buildings made further specialization in the industries necessary. Soon we found ourselves teaching tinsmithing, plastering and painting. Classes in cooking were added, because we needed competent persons to prepare the food. Courses in laundering, sewing, dining−room work and nurse−training have been added to meet the actual needs of the school community. This process of specialization has continued as the school increased in numbers and as the more varied wants of a larger community created a demand, and instruction is now given in thirty−seven industries.

Although we have constantly emphasized at Tuskegee the dignity and the nobility of labor, it has never been my idea that the training of the Negro should be limited to trade or industrial work. I have always felt that our students, in connection with their technical training, should have their minds thoroughly awakened and developed by a severe and systematic training in the academic branches.

Here I might add that Tuskegee's emphasis on industrial education implies by no means a lack of appreciation of the colleges and professional schools. The race needs both kinds of education, and each type of institution complements the work of the other.

But it was recognized that something more than industrial or academic training was necessary if our students were, in any large degree, to make themselves useful in changing the conditions of the masses of their people. They needed an education which not only did not educate them out of sympathy with the masses of their people, but made them actively and practically interested in constructive methods and work among their people. The better to accomplish this end we taught our girls, not only to work at their trades in the schoolroom, but to meet the people in their churches and other gathering−places on Sunday. In addition to the ordinary duties of the schoolroom, teachers who go out from Tuskegee are taught how to conduct monthly farmers' institutes or local farmers' conferences. They are expected to be able to show the farmers how to buy land, to assist them by advice in getting out of debt, and to encourage them to cease mortgaging their crops, and to take active interest in the economic development of their community.

Some months ago, I was rather severely criticised by an educated colored man in Washington because I had spoken rather frankly to the colored people in this section of the country about the habit of buying pianos and organs to put in their rented log−cabins. This man thought the colored people ought to be free to buy pianos and organs just the same as the people of any other race. As far as the right of colored people to buy pianos and organs is concerned, I think the Negroes should feel that they have the same right that any other people have. I do think, however, that one is doing them service in telling them frankly that, while they have the right, it is hardly the part of wisdom for them to waste money in buying musical instruments before they get a home in which to put them, and before their children have had enough education to use them properly.

During the early days of my work at Tuskegee, I found that the Negro people in this section of the country earned a great deal of money, and were willing to work, and did, for the most part, work hard. What they needed was stimulation and guidance. In order to reach the masses with the knowledge that they most needed, we have worked out several methods of popular education which seem to be peculiarly adapted to the needs of the Negro farming communities. Among them we have (1) mothers' meetings, conducted by Mrs. Washington; (2) visits of

teachers and students to communities distant from the school; (3) local Negro conferences, which meet once a month in various sections of the South; (4) the annual Negro Conference, which brings together at Tuskegee Institute every year from 1,200 to 1,400 representatives from various sections of the South, to spend a day in discussing the conditions and needs of the race; (5) the Worker's Conference, composed of officers and teachers of the leading schools for Negroes, which meets at Tuskegee the day after the annual Negro Conference; (6) the County Farmers' Institute, together with the Farmers' Winter Short Course in Agriculture, and the County Fair held in the fall; (7) the National Negro Business League, which seeks to do for the race as a whole what the local business leagues are doing for the communities in which they exist.

In addition to the work performed through these organizations, we give our cooperation, not only to the graduates who are teaching in small country schools, but to a number of large institutions like the Institute at Snow Hill, Alabama, and the Voorhees Industrial School, at Denmark, South Carolina, that are doing in a modified way the kind of work that we are seeking to do at Tuskegee. Sixteen institutions, offshoots of Tuskegee, have grown to a size where they have been incorporated by the State authorities. One of our Trustees, the Rev. R. C. Bedford, gives a large part of his time to keeping in touch, through correspondence and personal visits, with our graduates who are working in these schools and elsewhere throughout the South.

I have been asked in what way my views of Negro education have changed during the twenty−five years and more that I have been engaged in this work. As I look back over the past, I cannot now see that my notions have been modified in any material way during that time. I have sought at all times to put into effect at Tuskegee the ideas I had imbibed under General Armstrong's instruction at Hampton. Whatever difference there is between the work of the Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes grows out of the difference in the conditions of life in the territory surrounding the two schools. We, for example, are in a cotton−raising district. Agriculture plays a larger role in Alabama, perhaps, than it does in Virginia. Furthermore, civilizing influences have been at work for a shorter time here than at Hampton. While the Tuskegee students have, perhaps, gone further in the direction of putting up their own buildings than have the students at Hampton, yet the work of the two schools is in all essentials the same. Hampton, being older, is more perfect and complete; Tuskegee, still in the making, is necessarily imperfect, incomplete.

Although I have not in any appreciable way modified my views concerning Negro education within the last twenty−five years, I have found it necessary from time to time to correct impressions that have somehow got abroad. I do not, for example, advocate any kind of industrial or technical training for the Negro that I would not advocate for any other race in the same relative stage of civilization. From time to time, I have thought it necessary to say something that would prevent the impression spreading abroad that industrial education is class education. Nothing could be more harmful to the cause of industrial or technical education than to permit the idea to become current that industrial education was created especially for the benefit of the black race.

But, if I have in no important respect changed my views in regard to industrial education during the twenty−five years that I have been working at Tuskegee, I have become more and more convinced, as I have gained a more extended experience, of the value of the education that is imparted through systematic training of the hand. Of this I have had constant evidence in my acquaintance with a number of students who have appeared dull in their books, and yet have shown themselves extremely methodical and systematic in their work after they have left us and gone out into the world to work for themselves. This ability to meet conditions may be largely accounted for by the fact that our students have studied not merely books, but things.

I do not care to venture here an opinion about the nature of knowledge in general; but it will be pretty clear to any one who reflects upon the matter that the only kind of knowledge that has any sort of value for a race that is trying to get on its feet is knowledge that has some definite relation to the daily lives of the men and women who are seeking it.

There is constant danger that boys and girls who have grown up on the farms, with very little familiarity with books and the ideas that one meets in books, will learn to repeat what they hear in the class−room or read in books without being able to interpret what they read. One of the best ways of testing the pupil's knowledge, in such cases, is to compel him in some way to act. In this way, it is possible to use the training of the hand to give definiteness and precision to the ideas acquired in the class−room. The pupil can be led to see the necessity of constantly applying the ideas he has gathered from books to an actual situation, in order to test his knowledge and

find out the real significance of what he has learned in the class−room. We have sought to carry out this principle of putting everything learned in the class−room to the test of action in all departments of the school: to supplement and enlarge the knowledge obtained in the industries by studies in the class−room, and to give precision and definiteness to the things learned in the class−room by the practical application of them in the industrial departments.

Even in our Phelps Hall Bible Training School, which, to the ordinary student, seems farthest removed from the practical affairs of life, we have demanded of students, as a test of the value of what they have learned, that they take an active part in one or more of the various lines of extension work in which the school is engaged. While we constantly seek to interest all classes of students in the work of extending the influence of the school to the masses of the people, we have insisted that it was, in a very special sense, the duty of the students in the Bible Training School, most of whom are preparing themselves to go out into the country districts to become leaders of the people, to prove by some form of practical work among the people their capacity for their professions.

If I were asked what I consider the most important thing that Tuskegee has accomplished, I should say it is the work it has done with a view to setting the faces of the masses of our people away from the sunset toward the sunrise. A brief explanation will make my meaning clear. I began my work at Tuskegee at the time when the Negro had just been deprived, in a way that is now familiar, of many of his political rights. There was some voting, but few Negroes held office when I first came to Alabama. The Negro people for the most part set great store by the political privileges that had been granted them during the Reconstruction period, and they thought that when they lost these they had lost all. I remember well the sullen sense of despair which seemed to have taken possession of the people at this time. They preserved outwardly the same good nature and cheerfulness which had always characterized them, but deep down in their hearts they had begun to feel that there was no hope for them, and that there was no use for them to try.

The most important work that Tuskegee has done has been to show the masses of our people that, in agriculture, in the industries, in commerce, and in the struggle toward economic development, there are opportunities and a great future for them. In doing this, we have not sought to give the idea that political rights are not valuable or necessary, but rather to impress our people with the truth that economic efficiency was the foundation for political rights, and that in proportion as they made themselves factors in the economic development of the country political rights would naturally and necessarily come to them.

The next important work of our school has been to change the ideas of the masses of the people concerning labor with the hand. When Tuskegee Institute was first opened, practically all the colored people in this part of the South were opposed to industrial education. For many months, the hardest task the school had to face was to overcome the opposition of the people to the notion of a "working−school." At the present time, that battle has been won. So successful have Hampton and Tuskegee been in changing the views of the people on this question that a man, in any part of the country, who now opposes industrial education for the Negro is so exceptional that he is likely to be regarded as eccentric. The students at Tuskegee now count it just as much a part of their education to spend a day on the farm or in the kitchen, in the machine−shop, or in the laundry, as they do to spend a day in studying algebra, chemistry or literature.

Something has been accomplished, also, during the past twenty−five years in interesting the Southern white men and women in a way to let them see and feel the value of educating the black man. For the future of both races, it is just as important to bring about a satisfactory understanding in regard to their mutual relations as it is to do away with the ignorant, hopeless black proletariat which came into existence in the South as one of the results of the Civil War. To me, one of the saddest incidents of our present educational effort in the South is the fact that many of the Southern white people know less about what is really being done for the Negro than do many Northern people living thousands of miles away. In some rational manner, an effort should be made — and we expect to do our part in this direction — to get hold of the thinking and more substantial class of Southern white people, in a manner that will let us have the benefit of their sympathy and cooperation in a larger degree than we have had in the past.

During the succeeding twenty−five years, it is my earnest wish that the whole work at Tuskegee may be more fully perfected and rounded out. I do not mean that we should increase our numbers to any great extent, but that we should make the training more efficient, and that the whole institution and grounds, buildings, apparatus, and

teaching−force should be brought to a higher stage of perfection. It is my hope that, sometime during the next twenty−five years, we shall secure an endowment of at least five million dollars, in order that the head of the institution may give a larger part of his time and strength in working immediately for the whole people, to the end that the work of bringing the teaching of our school home to the masses may be given the widest extension possible. My experience has taught me that wherever I go to speak, I not only meet a large number of colored people, but, usually, I am able also to speak to the best white people in the community, and I find that these meetings go a long way toward bringing about better relations between the races and to promote the highest and best interests of both.

It is, perhaps, fruitless to attempt, at the present stage of progress of the Negro race, to predict or even to suggest what can be accomplished during the next twenty−five years for Negro upbuilding and moral and material regeneration. I do not believe, however, that we are justified in taking a hopeless or discouraging view of the situation. It should be borne in mind that there are at the present time nearly 10,000,000 persons of Negro ancestry in the United States. In twenty−five years more, judging by the present rate of increase, the number will reach something like 15,000,000 or 16,000,000. This is considerably more than the total population of Belgium and Holland combined.

The position of the Negro in the United States is, in some respects, like that of the Jewish people in the different countries in which they live. They constitute, in a certain sense, a nation within a nation. But there is this difference — that there are little more than one million Jews in the United States. I believe that, if the work which schools like Hampton, Fisk and Tuskegee are doing can be continued and extended, so that the whole Negro population may ultimately have the benefit of the training they give, we may look forward with some confidence to seeing the masses of the Negro population visibly approach, not to the position of that marvellously gifted Hebrew race, but to something like the thrift, the industry, and the sturdy, thorough−going, self−respecting independence of the Hollanders and the Belgians. What that would mean to the Negro race, to the South, and to the world, is something I hardly dare contemplate. But that is, I believe, the thing that we should strive for in the next twenty−five years.

In recent years, this question has been repeatedly and insistently asked: "Suppose the Negro succeeds in making himself master here in America of the white man's civilization, what will be the effect upon the relations of the races?"

Often those who have pressed this question have answered it for themselves in the following manner. They have said: "If the Negro is allowed to remain in this country until he is able to compete with the members of the white race, in the various forms of intellectual and physical labor, one of two consequences will follow: either the weaker race will be exterminated by the stronger, or the two races will amalgamate."

I do not believe that we have reason to fear either one or the other of these consequences. It should always be borne in mind that it takes two races to amalgamate, and the absorption of one by the other cannot be accomplished without the consent of both. I do not believe that the Negro is yet willing to disappear; I believe, rather, that his unwillingness increases in proportion to his intellectual and moral advance. I think it will be found to be a fact that the process of amalgamation has been going on with much less rapidity under freedom than it did under slavery. So long as the Negro was taught that everything that was good was white and everything that was bad was black, so long as he remained a mere chattel, it was natural and inevitable that he should desire to become in everything — in style, manners, thought, and in the color of his skin — white. But now that the Negro is beginning to understand his own possibilities, to believe that he has an independent mission in the world, and to gain that sort of self−respect that comes with the consciousness of that mission, the disposition and the willingness to surrender his racial identity and to detach himself from the life and the destiny of his own people are, I am convinced, steadily decreasing.

The other question, the question of his elimination by force, is one that the Negro will have to face, just as other races have faced it. His position in that regard is not so different from that of the Jews. At any rate, it is a question he cannot escape by going to any other country. As a matter of fact, those who have studied the situation know that the Negro has less protection against the encroachments and the competition of the white race in Africa than he has here in America. The fact that he is in the majority does not help him in Africa any more than it has helped him elsewhere.

I am convinced that any one who will consider the question with patience will come to the conclusion that the

only salvation for the Negro people, or for any race, is to make themselves so useful to the rest of the world, so indispensable to their neighbors, that the world will not only tolerate, but desire, their presence. To a large extent, this is already true in the South — more true, I am convinced, than it is in the North, where the Negro has much less opportunity to work than he has in the South. In short, there is nothing for the Negro to do but remain where he is and struggle on and up. The whole philosophy of the Negro question can be written in three words: patience, persistence, fortitude. The really hopeful thing about the situation is that, on the whole, the Negro has done, under the circumstances, the best he could.

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