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## THE CHILD'S WORLD OF IMAGINATION

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The term "imagination" in its popular sense often conveys a different significance from that which it has when employed in psychology. In everyday language it is not uncommonly used to describe an impractical state of mind, given over to illusion and the contemplation of uncertainty. From this point of view the imaginary world is a realm of shadows and ghosts, divorced from contact with vital living and fruitful thinking. Such a conception as this is unfortunate, because it is not true, and has caused no little confusion in the discussion of the desirability of imagination in the mind of the child, and the use of imagination as a means of education. What psychology means by imagination is quite simple. To illustrate:

Before me as I write is this manuscript. My knowledge of its presence is due in part to rays of light existing in the physical world as vibrations in the ether, and conveyed to my eye, where they are focused on the retina, and then carried to the cortex of the brain through an excitation of the optic nerve. This nervous discharge is correlated with a state of consciousness that may be described as seeing the paper which I have before me. Through other senses there also come other reports of the presence of the manuscript. I touch it; I hear the rustle of the pages; I recognize that it has weight when I lift it; and so on. The knowledge that comes in this way through the direct presentation

of an object to the senses is called perception. Now, if I lay the manuscript on the table and shut my eyes, it is no longer present to the senses as an object, but may exist for me as a memory. My mental state of perception is then changed to one of imagination. In this change there is no question of reality or unreality, or delusion or falsity, but of immediate sensory presence, or the lack of such sensory presence.

Commonly thought also credits imagination as being a peculiar state of mind; one which is not always present, but which comes and goes; yet psychology assures us that there is no form of consciousness which is entirely without it. Let me illustrate further by returning to the consideration of the paper before me. I perceive that it has form, that it is covered with characters, that it has weight, and that its pages give forth sound when grasped by the hand; and yet that is not the end of my knowledge of the manuscript. Blended with what I directly sense there is much in regard to it that belongs to past experience, but which in reality makes no small part of my knowledge in regard to the manuscript. Take away all these elements of past experience now present only as images, and the very object before me loses much of its reality and significance. This is true of all objects presented to the senses. And thus it is that imagination in such cases as these, instead of being something removed from and distinct from reality, is a very essential part of reality. If the image were out and out unreal, then the universe of concrete things would likewise be unreal, since all objects that compose this universe are in part made up of elements of the imagination.

If imagination, then, be so fundamental a constituent of reality, how happens it that the widespread notion of its illusionary character should have arisen? The answer is not far to seek. Simple imaginary elements, in themselves symbols of concrete realities, are capable of combination which yield products that do not correspond to any actual or possible experience. This complex of imaginative elements owes its existence to the productive imagination, while to the recalling of single sensory experiences not immediately present to the senses is the function of reproductive imagination. For example, consciousness may com-

bine elements of past sensory experience into products utterly fantastic and absurd. Such are often the dream images of our sleeping states, and the weird visionings of the paranoiac, or of others mentally deranged. Our images of a horse and a man are results of a reproductive imagination that are essentially real; but when they combine into the picture of a centaur, they constitute a productive image to which our experience denies reality. It, however, does not follow, because some of these constituents of the productive or creative imagination are unreal, that all such images are. Indeed, since there can be no image that is merely a copy of past experience, and to which intelligence has not added something, never mind how little, it follows that, if all productive images are unreal, then every bit of mental imagery has a taint of unreality about it, and that, further, each object perceived (since in it, as already said, there must be some elements not directly perceived, but merely imagined) is likewise to that extent unreal. No, we cannot say that, simply because an object is imaginary in part or as a whole, it therefore is unreal.

The test of the reality of an object, whether perceived or imagined, is its agreement with our individual and social experience. Why do I say, for example, that the centaur is unreal? Because I have never experienced such an animal, and because I believe no other being ever has or ever will. Surely the centaur is inherently no more fantastic than certain other products of the imagination in whose reality I have the most firm belief. Let us take some of the almost contradicting animal forms of prehistoric times which the scientific imagination has constructed. Do we believe they really exist? We do, because they fit in with the extended experience of those scholars who from a few scattered remains here and there, by a rare feat of productive imagination, have reconstructed in imagination the animal.

We may now turn from this general discussion of imagination to the question for our scientific consideration, the imaginary world of the child. Here we are concerned primarily with the child's productive imagination, of his combination of past experience into original mental products, although there are not a

few facts of interest which relate to his simple reproductive imagination. It is obvious that from the very beginnings of his life the simple images of past experience play an important part in his mental growth, and certainly at no very late stage of his development he begins to combine freely the simple images into higher compounds and starts to build a world of fancy, which differs from that of his ordinary experience sometimes in an astonishing degree. The study of the imaginary companions of children has revealed the fact that they come early in the child's life. The imaginary companions are sometimes the most vivid realities. They are distinctly visualized, have definite peculiarities such as manners of dress and speech, have well-known moods and mental characteristics, and converse with and aid those who have created them.

The imaginary world of the child in his early years Dr. Hall describes as follows:

In childhood credulity amounts almost to hypnotic suggestibility, not only is everything believed, but the faintest hint starts the exuberant imagination to vividness often hallucinatory. This power to believe the false and even the absurd, in infancy, is not a defect, but excess of psychic vitality. The narrow horizon of reality within juvenile ken is not enough, and the world of fancy and myth is needed to supplant it. Never is receptivity so near to creative energy, and this is why genius is defined as the preservation into mature years of the fecund mental spontaneity of childhood.

Much of the mental imagery of the child resembles the fancies of our myth-making forbears. The clouds and the stars, the sun and the moon, the snowflakes, and other of the great elemental phenomena are often explained by children in a way that suggests the poetic conceptions of nature common to primitive peoples. Here, as in other directions, the child repeats the history of the race. He peoples forest and stream, field and fountain, with conscious beings. Elves, pixies, goblins, fairies, and gnomes are as real to him as parents, brothers, and playmates. They are an essential part of his wider world.

Since the knowledge of truth and falsehood, of reality and illusion, depends on experience in which the present is formed to agree with or to contradict the past, it clearly follows that in his early years the child has no definite criterion by which he can

test his world of images, and distinguish those which refer to the actual or possible from those which represent the fanciful and contradictory. The child no more doubts the existence of the beings that people his myth world than he does the forms that belong to the world that we adults call fact. Further than this, his images are often so distinct, vivid, and persistent that he readily confuses them with objects actually present to the senses. The extreme suggestibility of little folks makes them subject to manifold delusions, such as come to grown-ups only in dreams, hypnosis, or pathological conditions. Who of us has not tried the experiment of making a bitter dose taste sweet or a pain vanish by suggesting to the child that the medicine was pleasant or the ache was gone; and we have often succeeded in our mild deception.

The fact, then, seems to be that children possess more than adults the creative imaginative faculty; that it shows itself at an early age; and that only by degrees does the child learn to distinguish between his image-world and the world of actuality. There naturally arises the question as to the value of this imaginary world, and the proper attitude of education toward it. Should imagination be cultivated in children, and, if so, in what direction; or should it be eliminated as rapidly as possible from the lives of the little ones, in order that they may be better prepared for the serious life that some day must come to them, if they survive the years of childhood and arrive at the development of adults?

There are not a few who would incline toward the second alternative. Fact is fact, and there can be no compromise with it and falsity. So the teacher of history hastens to banish all such delusions as the existence of William Tell, and the instructor in science urges the unreality of the nature-myth and fairy-tale as explanations of events in a world of orderly phenomena. Likewise, too, the professor of ethics may insist that truth is to be secured at all hazards, and that there can be no compromise with falsehood. Hence Cinderella, and Jack and the Beanstalk, and even Santa Claus must go; for the child must be made a moral being at all costs.

Doubtless people of this turn of mind are not in the majority, and their numbers are yearly growing less; however, they still are heard protesting against the mass of myth and fairy-tale which of late years have been especially prepared for the education of the child, and their point of view deserves consideration and an intelligent answer. If we believe in the cultivation of childish fancy, we should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in us, to satisfy our own legitimate questionings, if for no other purpose. It may be that in our emphasis of its value we have gone too far, if we have not erred in principle.

Seriously, what reply can we frame to the objection that myth is intellectually and morally wrong because it is not true? Our answer to this statement will be aided, if we consider again the point of view taken in the introduction to this paper; namely, that reality and truth depend upon the agreement of our present state of consciousness with our total experience and the experience of others. This is a position that today is being affirmed with ever-increasing vigor by such eminent students of the human mind as Professor James of Harvard and Dewey of Columbia. That which, on the whole, fits best into experience, which most uniformly satisfies the intelligence, is the truth; and since experience must ever change, there is no truth that is absolute and will stand the test of ages. For later antiquity and the Middle Ages the system of the universe evolved by the Greek-Egyptian astronomer Claudius Ptolemy was true because it fitted the then known fact; but the wider experience of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made its views unsatisfactory, and the Ptolemaic system gave place to the Copernican; but who will be so rash as to affirm that this is a final point of view? The individualism of the eighteenth century proved a sufficient philosophy for Rousseau and the doctrinaires of the French Revolution; is satisfied the framers of our own Declaration of Independence; but today it is giving way to a theory of social dependence that cannot find truth and satisfaction in what was once accepted as an ultimate statement in regard to the nature of man. So, too, the mechanical atomism of the science of yesterday is no longer able to hold its place in the newer conceptions of the physics of today. But

why multiply examples? On all sides we see a significance in the statement now so often heard that a thing is true as long as it proves satisfactory and no longer, and that quest for ultimate truth is an unending quest, a goal that always removes, the rim of the horizon to whose mystic borders we can never attain.

So myth which satisfied the intellectual and moral needs of the savage was true for him, but false for us, just as our science will be false for some future generation; so the fairy-tale of the child, which for him offers the most reasonable explanation of the world about him, is far more true for him than our adult conceptions could possibly be. Some day he will be an adult and will have put away childish things; but as long as he remains a child he must think as a child, if he thinks at all. As his experience extends, he will slowly cast aside the fancies of an earlier day, now grown inadequate, but not so suddenly that there will be a jar, or a break in the continuity of his reality. Think as I may, I cannot tell when Santa Claus became for me a reality of another order than that which my earlier imaginings had made the venerable saint; when I first learned that he had no place in this dull prosaic world, I cannot remember; I am sure, however, that the change was not in the twinkling of an eye. New truths come like the dawn: first the pale auroral tints that brighten and broaden, and before which the stars and the moon gradually grow dim and finally pass from view. But the stars and moon lit the night, and made the path clear. The myth-making period of childish imagination is necessary, because it best satisfies the childish conception of the world, and therefore is the true conception. It is good for the child as a child; and we must remember always the momentous thought of Rousseau, that the child is to live for itself. What has it to do with that great world of practical life that it may never attain? Its present enjoyment must not be unthinkingly sacrificed to a future that it may never know.

Further, even if the present of the child were of no value in itself, and the future were assured, it would not be wise to banish from his life those images of his creative fancy which the future will pronounce unreal. Child-study teaches us one fact at

least with sufficient certainty, and that is that each stage of development is necessary for that which follows. Just as the gill-slits in the human embryo—those worse than useless appendages for the child in its post-natal existence—serve a very necessary purpose in contributing to the organs yet to be formed, so the mythopoeic fancy of childhood at its proper time in development enters into the adult experience in many subtle ways, and enriches the life of the man. The fairy-story of childhood still counts in the healthful fancy of the grown-up. Can we enter into sympathy with the great imaginative writers of the ages, if our early training has found no place for Grimm and Andersen, and others of that noble company of myth-makers? The language that Homer and Virgil and Spenser and Shakespeare and Dante and scores of others of the past have spoken is jargon to him who has had no understanding of the simpler, obscure, and forgotten masters who in the folklore of the people of all times have left a world of rarest story for the children of ages yet unborn. In this humdrum world of ours how the heart yearns for these oases of fancy in the desert of the real, but to drink from the sparkling waters is a privilege given only to those who have discovered the hidden fountains in the days of childish simplicity.

My boy of nine who has outgrown his implicit faith in fairy-tale, but who still finds them a satisfaction to his emotional life, often says: "I wish they were true; I wish that when you opened your mouth gold would fall from it. Wouldn't it be fine if just by thinking you could make castles rise in the air? How nice it would be if there were real giants that brave boys could kill and beautiful princesses who could be rescued from wicked witches and watchful dragons! I must confess that I sympathize with the youngster, and I am not ashamed that I still have a love for fairy-tale and the supernatural. But this sympathy and love could not exist if at one time these tales had not been for me a satisfactory *Weltanschauung*; if they had not constituted for me a realm of reality, more satisfactory and as sufficient as my present view of the universe. And when some child, on hearing a story of wonder, asks, half believing and half doubting, "Is it true?" I cannot with a clear conscience reply "No;" for it is true in a sense that



the little questioner does not comprehend; perhaps not for the head, but for the heart. Indeed, as a mere intellectual proposition I am not at all convinced but what the myth-world of the child and the primitive man does not more exactly correspond to ultimate reality than the mechanical universe of the materialist, filled with whirling atoms, but without purpose or design.

Although the myth-making fancy of the child is very vigorous in the early years of its existence, it gradually loses its dominance, and the imagination tends to develop in other directions. Allen<sup>1</sup> found that school children showed a gradual loss of interest in myth and fairy-tale in the following ratio: third grade, 82 per cent.; fourth grade, 38 per cent.; fifth grade, 42 per cent.; sixth grade, 36 per cent.; seventh grade, 11 per cent.; eighth grade, 15 per cent. Other observations and studies seem to indicate that there is a gradual lessening of this type of imagination, and a development in the direction of interest in heroes and great deeds of courage and daring; while still later there is an accentuation of imagination along more practical and less fanciful lines.

In order to discover more exactly the course of this development, I collected several years ago compositions written by pupils in various schools of Illinois, and later three thousand of these were read and tabulated by Mr. I. F. Meyer, graduate student in psychology in the University of Illinois. The compositions studied were obtained from the four upper grades of the grammar school and from the entire four years of the high school, were prepared as a part of the regular school work, and were not revised or in any way corrected by the pupils after they had been submitted to the teacher. The aim was to make the work entirely spontaneous and as original as possible, with no suggestion as to content or treatment, and particularly with no hint that the compositions were intended as anything beyond a regular school exercise.

These compositions were carefully examined, and a record was kept of the visual, auditory, tactile, pain, olfactory, gustatory, organic, and muscular images among the more simple forms of imagination; while the more complex types, representing the

<sup>1</sup> *Pedagogical Seminary*, Vol. VIII, p. 259.

productive imagination, were studied under the heads of scientific, fairy-story, nature-myth, heroic, dramatic, religious, and melancholic.

The first eight types may be passed over with little explanation. All images reproduced from the sensations coming through the eye were termed visual; through the ear, auditory; through the skin, tactile and pain images; through the nose, olfactory; through the taste cells of the mouth, gustatory; from the contraction of the muscles and the working of the joints and tendons, muscular; and from the internal organs of the body, such as the heart, the lungs, and the alimentary canal, organic.

The remainder require further comment. Under scientific imagination were considered those images which related to invention, discovery, the construction of machines and devices, and the use of electricity and other natural forces. The fairy-story dealt with that class of imagery which had to do with elves, pixies, gnomes, goblins, etc., and the nature-myth with those mythopoeic fancies common to primitive races and to children. Under the heroic were treated those images that had to do with overtowering personalities, such as Alexander, Napoleon, George Washington, and with ideas of magnanimity, self-forgetfulness, and courage; under the dramatic, striking situations, stirring events, and climaxes, such as the slaughter of the suitors in the *Odyssey* of Homer; under the religious, the supernatural and devotional, ideas of God, angels, and the devil; under the melancholic, feelings of sadness and depression.

The most striking feature of the curves representing the first four types of imagination was their marked decline at about the outset of puberty, with the single exception of the visual type, which shows a steady rise for both boys and girls through the entire eight years studied. The tendency to fall at this crucial period in childlife is likewise to be noted in the four lower types of reproductive imagination, with the exception of the olfactory, which, however, runs so low for all the years that it may practically be ignored. In the case of the visual, auditory, tactile, and motor types there is a partial recovery during the years of the high school, but in the case of the pain, organic, and gustatory,

types the tendency is to grow less and less in the years following. The same general tendency of the curve to fall at the beginning of the adolescence is further to be noted in the fairy-story, nature-myth, heroic, dramatic, and religious types of imagination; while the scientific type, particularly with the boys, and the melancholic, which latter hardly exists before the adolescent years, alone shows a rise. Thus it is seen that out of the fifteen varieties of imagination dealt with in the study, all but four show the fall at about the beginning of adolescence, and of the four that show an opposite or neutral tendency, one is so slight for all grades as to be of little importance.

The cause of the fall I believe to be significant for psychology and pedagogy alike. It is probably to be explained by the general upheaval that accompanies the onset of puberty. The years roughly from eight to twelve are years of a low-grade stability a period of habituation and building up. The marked changes that come at the end of this period destroy this stability. Old brain-centers cease to function, or function in different directions. Thus images of earlier experiences tend to fade out and to be replaced as the adolescent years progress and renewed stability comes to others. The visual escapes this tendency, it seems reasonable to assume, in part at least, because it is not so deeply centered in the affective life of the child, and it is in the affective sphere that the greatest upheaval takes place. It is an interesting fact that the curves for formal correctness, which was also tabulated in the study, run practically parallel for the boys, and nearly so for the girls, during the entire eight years under consideration. This probably means that visual imagery is more objective and symbolic than the other types studied.

Another cause that may be operative in the fall of the curves is the increased reticence of expression which comes in early adolescence, especially in connection with the inhibiting influence of school environment in regard to spontaneity.

The explanation for the rise of the curve of scientific imagery is to be found in the immense interest that the American boy, in particular, takes in all forms of invention and discovery. This interest is so strong that it overcomes the tendency potent

for the most part toward the disintegration of the image at the outset of puberty.

We may turn to a more specific discussion of those types of images which are included under the head of the productive or creative imagination. Highest in this class stood the heroic. For both sexes it seems to be a more constant form of imagination than many of the others studied, and it stands the shock at the onset of puberty better. There is little difference in the average for the four years of high school and in the grades. This shows that the interest in the heroic is continued throughout the school years—a significant fact for education to consider. The girls show a slight superiority over the boys in this form of imagery. For the dramatic imagination the results are similar, the girls, however, showing a more marked superiority over the boys than in the heroic. This is doubtless to be accounted for by the greater intensity in girls of those feelings which center around these two types. In this connection may be mentioned a study by my colleague, Professor E. G. Dexter, who has shown that on the stage recognition is much earlier for women than for men.

As has already been said, the interest in scientific imagination shows an increase at puberty. The average for the boys is much greater than for the girls. The highest point reached by both sexes is in the last year of the high-school course, and indicates the increasing tendency toward the practical and away from the mythopoeic and fanciful. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse relation between the curves representing these two types; doubtless the increase of one means the falling off of the other. The fairy-story and nature-myth find their highest expression in compositions written in the grades, and the figures show that this type of imagination tends to disappear as the age of the pupil advances. The question might then be raised as to the result of emphasizing the mythopoeic type. Does it not tend to check the development of the scientific? As far as this latter type is concerned, would it not be better to banish from the home and the school all mention of fairies and like supernatural beings, so that, when the time for the growth of the scientific imagination

comes, the latter shall not be hindered in its development? I am not at all sure that such is the case, and I am still so far an adherent of the so-called dogma of formal discipline (a very serious psychological and pedagogical heresy in the minds of many) that I can conceive the possibility of the imaginative habit developed in fairy-stories being in part transferred to the construction of steam engines and flying-machines. The very rankness of the growth of the mythopoeic fancy may enrich the soil from which the scientific sprout is to develop.

Religious imagination is at its highest in the fifth grade for both boys and girls. In the case of the boys it falls off rapidly the last two years of the grades, and sinks to a still lower point in the high school. With the girls the curve shows a general tendency to fall, though it is not so pronounced. In the face of the well-known facts in regard to the religious emotions at adolescence, as set forth by Hall, Starbuck, James and others, this decline means, not that the high-school pupil is lacking in religious emotions, but that the school environment is hostile to the expression of such feelings. In the grades the expression is formal and conventional to a great degree, but in the high school there is a genuineness of emotion in relation to religion which precludes its expression in an environment which does not encourage it. The pedagogical influence here is so obvious that it need not be commented on.

Feelings of melancholy do not belong to the pre-adolescent years. In the grades such images are practically absent. In the high school they begin to appear, and are more than double in the case of the girls. Doubtless the compositions studied revealed but to a slight extent the actual intensity of the melancholic, which sometimes reaches the pathological in young people of a nervous temperament.

In connection with the development of the imagination a record was made of the sense of humor as revealed by the compositions. Here the boys show superiority over the girls, and the curve reaches its maximum in the seventh grade. A resemblance in the curve is to be noted for the boys between the pain images and humor. A connection here may be found in the fact that the

type of humor possessed by the boys is largely of the teasing and bullying variety, which takes pleasure in the torture of animals and persons. The curve for the organic images shows also a resemblance to the curve for humor, as does farther the curve for motor images. This all goes to emphasize the low type of humor possessed by school children, and is in entire accord with a previous study on the "Sense of Humor in Children" made three years ago by me and reported to this section of the Association.

The study shows that, on the whole, the imagination of school children tends to decline during the years considered, and from this it may be legitimately concluded that our present system of education does little to foster the imagination. Indeed it is not improbable that the school course tends to crush out certain elements of imagination. In the premium placed on the visual type of imagination by the school education emphasized the more external and formal to the exclusion of the spontaneous and vital, since the visual image, as it appears on the printed page, easily substitutes itself for the concrete image behind it.

The tendency manifested at the outset of puberty for neurones to become disassociated and for the old images to drop out, necessitates special effort on the part of the teacher to cause the new images formed to be of deep and vital character, and to stimulate the mind of the pupil along lines of higher creative endeavor. Hence all formality in education is to be particularly deplored at this age. It is not the time to appeal to desultory memory, and the period for formal logical drill has not arrived. Literature should be taught largely in its vital relation to the pupil's experience, and not as a grammatical, historical or philological cram. Descriptive prose and poetry to be enjoyed must call up vivid images in the mind of the reader or hearer. If a description appealing to the eye suggests no picture, if the words standing for sounds are mere dead symbols, if vivid narration arouses, among other things, no motor images, the whole subject is stale and profitless, if genuine interest is the goal aimed at in such teaching. Pain images, too, have their value, since without them genuine sympathy is dead, and a training in morals is then only formal. Even tactile, gustatory, and olfactory images

have certain value in our higher life, and their loss to any great extent would be a misfortune.

The fact that the heroic and dramatic imagination is still strong at this period throws a light on the teaching of history. As I have maintained elsewhere<sup>2</sup>, the attempt to make historical study in the early years of the high school an investigation in politics, or a training in methods of historical research, is dangerous. History should still be a narrative, a good story, an appeal to the love of the heroic and dramatic, and to the fundamental elements of morality based on human sympathy.

The school offers no training in the emotion of humor, the cruder types being the only ones that find expression to any considerable extent. Education thus ignores one of the most vital phases of human experience. The individual teacher should see to it that this emotion finds opportunity for legitimate expression in the school work, and that an appeal is made from the lower elements to the higher.

Education again ignores another fundamental element in the lives of all normal individuals by passing over the deep religious needs when they are most in evidence. It is a serious commentary on the character of our school work that just at the time when the spiritual universe comes closest to young natures there is practically no evidence of it in the schoolroom, which itself should be a very important part of the life of the boy and girl, and not something one-sided and particular. Of course, there can be no sectarian or dogmatic instruction in religion, but to those basal experiences of the human heart that constitute the essence of all true religion there should be a constant appeal. Hero-worship, sympathy, idealism, altruism, veneration, obedience, self-forgetfulness—all these are elements of religion. There should be a larger place for their cultivation in the schools than exists today.

The final conclusions of this paper may be stated as follows:

The imagination of children, both productive and reproductive, shows throughout the entire period of development, growth and change.

<sup>2</sup> "Teaching of History in the First Two Years of the High School Course," *Journal of Pedagogy*, December, 1901.

All of its forms are valuable and should be utilized at their proper time. The question of truth or falsity should not be raised as long as a certain form of imagination constitutes for the child the most satisfactory means of harmonizing his intellectual and emotional experiences.

Since there are no sharp breaks, under normal conditions, between one state of imagination and another, there will be no violent contradictions or struggles. Each stage of imagination is essential to the next, and no one stage can be left out, and no stage can be shortened or continue too long, without injuring the child.

Throughout the entire school course the attempt should be made to make the imagination as vivid and vital as possible. Images should not degenerate completely into mere visual or verbal-motor symbols of a reality behind them.

Above all, in the adolescent years a more effective appeal should be made to the religious elements in the young person's life, now manifesting themselves with an intensity that before was unknown, and that will never again be equaled.