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Memorial Day Address ("The American Code")

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Memorial Day Address (excerpt)

By William Graham Sumner

1872

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The war also taught this people what a nation is. A nation is not a certain extent of territory on the earth's surface; nor is it the mere aggregate of the persons who may live within a certain territory. A nation is a community of various ages, occupations, talents, and circumstances, but all united in a common interest. It is a unit which has organic life. It is enduring in its existence, spanning over individual lives and generations. It accumulates the contributions of various individuals and of various generations and it brings them all to the service and benefit of each. It is, therefore, in the strictest sense, a common-wealth, in which each participates in the prosperity of the whole and all suffer through the misfortune of one. It brings down from generation to generation the accumulation of art, science, and literature and its store of these treasures should be a steadily increasing one. It brings down the public buildings, the machinery of government, the stores of defensive means, the galleries of painting, the museums of art and science, the libraries, as a continually increasing endowment of posterity. Moreover it cherishes traditions which, if they become petrified, form a prisonhouse which must be broken, but which, if they are fresh, living, and flexible, are the framework of society. For instance, the rights of conscience, the equality of all men before the law, the separation of church and state, religious toleration, freedom of speech and of the press, popular education, are vital traditions of the American people. They are not brought in question; they form the stock of firm and universal convictions on which our national life is based; they are ingrained into the character of our people and you can assume, in any controversy, that an American will admit their truth. But they form the sum of traditions which we obtain as our birth-right. They are never explicitly taught to us, but we assimilate them in our earliest childhood from all our surroundings, at the fireside, at school, from the press, on the highways and streets. We never hear them disputed and it is only when we observe how difficult it is for some foreign nations to learn them that we perceive that they are not implanted by nature in the human mind. They are a part and the most valuable part of our national inheritance, and the obligation of love, labor, and protection which we owe to the nation rests upon these benefits which we receive from it.

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