

Let us keep in mind the distinction between opposites which exclude each other, and opposites which can coexist, while we glance at the contradictions of all society, ancient as well as modern...



Julia Ward Howe. *From Modern Society*

... We sometimes find it hard to believe the saying that God hath made of one blood all the nations of the earth, in view of the contrast between nations whose habits and beliefs differ one from the other. In the same race, in the same family also, we shall find the unlikeness which seems to set the bond of nature at defiance...

The opposite extremes of human nature embrace, between them, a wonderful breadth and scope. The correlation and co-action of this multitude of opposing forces on the wide arena of the world naturally give rise to a series of manifestations, voluntary and involuntary, changeful in form and color as a phantasmagoria, fitful as a fever-dream, but steadfast and substantial in the infinite science, out of which all things come. The unity in this web of contradictions is its great wonder. ... How if the perfect unity were only attainable through the freedom of the natural diversity?

... One feature of modern society is that everything is everywhere. The Zulus are in London, the Londoners in Zululand. The star of French fashion in its highest supremacy visits Cape Town. The stars and stripes protect American professors on the shores of the Bosphorus, within view of Mount Lebanon. ... There should be a place for everything...

... The oppositions of humanity have undergone many changes. Paul characterized them in his day as "Greek and Barbarian, bond and free, male and female." Christianity effaced old oppositions and created new ones. The old oppositions were national, personal, selfish. The new opposition is moral... In spite of lapses and relapses, mankind slowly creeps towards the great unification which will make the savage and the selfish passions the only enemies of the human race. Modern society rests upon this unification as its basis of action.

Comparison should be a strong point in modern society. When travelling was laborious and difficult, the masses of one country knew little concerning those of another. When learning was rare, and instruction costly and insufficient, the few knew the secrets of thought and science, the many not even knowing that such things were to be known... When distinctions were absolute, low life knew nothing of high life but what the novelist could invent, or the servant reveal. How changed is all this to-day! Competence, travel, tuition, and intelligent company are within the reach of all who will give themselves the trouble to attain them.

What is the problem of modern society? How to use its vast resources. Here is where the office of true ethic comes in. No gift can make rich those who are poor in wisdom. The wealth which should build up society will pull it down if its possession leads to fatal luxury and indulgence. ... Modern society, then, is chiefly occupied with a vast assimilation of novelties... While the New World has to digest races and traditions, the Old World has to digest ideas.

... The French republic and the English monarchy succeed best in the altering of old habits to suit new emergencies. But where extremes are greatest, the contest is naturally fiercest. ...The throne of the Russian autocrat is over the deadly mine of the Nihilist. German vanity ... brings

back the shadow of the medieval muddle. The living heart's blood of humanity comes to us out of these struggles, an immeasurable gift, for good or for evil. Can we be quick enough with our schools, just enough in our government, sincere and devout enough in our churches? What will Europe do with the ideas? What will America do with the people? These are the questions of the present time.

1881.

Julia Ward Howe. *From Reminiscences, 1819-1899*

Let me say at the very beginning that I esteem this century ... to have eminently deserved a record among those which have been great landmarks in human history. ... To attain instantaneous communication with our friends across oceans and through every continent; to command locomotion whose swiftness changes the relations of space and time; to steal from Nature her deepest secrets, and to make disease itself the minister of cure... - these are some of the achievements of our century.

... I was born on May 27, 1819, in the city of New York ... I lived, indeed, much in my books, and my sphere of thought was a good deal enlarged by the foreign literatures, German, French, and Italian, with which I became familiar...

... The example of Lord Byron had had, no doubt, some part in my husband's determination [when he was young], to cast in his lot with the Greeks in the memorable struggle which restored to them their national life. ... When the liberation of Greece had become an assured fact, Dr. Howe returned to America to find and take up his life-work. The education of the blind presented a worthy field for his tireless activity. He founded, built up, and directed the first institution for their benefit known in this country... A new lustre was added to his name by the wonderful series of experiments which brought the gifts of speech and knowledge to a blind deaf mute.

... In 1844, when we came to live in Boston, the city of the teachers, of the reformers, of the cranks, and also -- of the apostles, the transcendentalists and the abolitionists ... were features of the new movement. ... The lightning flash which illuminated the heaven of the poets and philosophers fell also on the fetters of the slave, and showed them to the thinking world as a disgrace no longer to be tolerated by civilized peoples.

I recall my first years of life in Boston as nearly touched by the sense of the unresolved discords which existed in its society.... Woman's rights convention was held in October of the year 1850, before the claims of women to political efficiency had begun to occupy the attention and divide the feeling of the American public.

... Mrs. Seba Smith was, I believe, the first woman minister regularly ordained in the United States. She was a graduate of Oberlin, in that day the only college in our country which received among its pupils women... I am almost certain that Theodore Parker was the first minister who in public prayer to God addressed him as "Father and Mother of us all."

... The decade preceding the civil war was indeed a period of much agitation. The anomalous position of a slave system in a democratic republic was beginning to make itself keenly felt. The political preponderance of the slaveholding States, fostered and upheld by the immense money power of the North, had led their inhabitants to believe that they needed to endure no limits. Recent legislation, devised and accomplished by their leaders, had succeeded in enforcing upon Northern communities a tame compliance with their most extravagant demands. The extension of the slave system to the new territories... became the avowed purpose of Southern politicians. The conscience of the North, lulled by financial prosperity, awoke but slowly to an understanding of the situation. To enlighten this conscience was evidently the most important task of public-spirited men. Among other devices to this end, a newspaper was started in Boston ... My husband took an active interest in the management of this paper, and indeed assumed its editorship. In this task I had great pleasure in assisting him...

... What can I say of the civil war that has not already been said? Its cruel fangs fastened upon the very heart of Boston, and took from us our best and bravest. From many a stately mansion father or son went forth, followed by weeping, to be brought back for bitterer sorrow. The work of the women in providing comforts for the soldiers was unremitting...

... Among my recollections of this period I especially cherish that of an interview with President Abraham Lincoln... The President was laboring at this time under a terrible pressure of doubt and anxiety. ... I remember well the sad expression of Mr. Lincoln's deep blue eyes... At the moment few people praised or trusted him. "Why did he not do this, or that, or the other? He a President, indeed! Look at this war, dragging on so slowly! Look at our many defeats and rare victories!" Such was the talk that one constantly heard regarding him.

... The circumstances under which I wrote the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." ... I thought of the women whose sons or husbands were fighting our great battle; the women themselves serving in the hospitals, or busying themselves with the work of the Sanitary Commission. My husband was beyond the age of military service, my eldest son but a stripling; my youngest was a child of not more than two years. I could not leave my nursery... Yet, because of my sincere desire, a word was given me to say, which did strengthen the hearts of those who fought in the field and of those who languished in the prison... The poem soon found its way to the camps, as I heard from time to time of its being sung in chorus by the soldiers.

... When the civil war came to an end, leaving the slave not only emancipated, but endowed with the dignity of citizenship, the women of the North had greatly helped to open the door which admitted him to freedom... Was this door to be shut in their face? ... While I followed this train of thought, the plan of the New England Woman's Club was gradually developed, a strong and stately association... leaving behind it, at this time of my writing, a record of three decades of happy and acceptable service... The impression made by our meetings was such that we soon began to receive letters from distant parts of the country, inviting us to journey hither and thither, and to hold our congresses east, west, north, and south. Our work was arranged by committees, which had reference severally to science, art, education, industrial training, reforms, and statistics. Our association certainly seemed to have answered an existing need. Women from many States joined us...

... As I take account of my long life, ... what may I chronicle as its successes?.. I have been for many years the president of the New England Woman's Club, and of the Association for the Advancement of Women. I have been heard at the great Prison Congress in England, at conventions in Geneva, Switzerland, and in Paris... I have written a poem which, although composed in the stress and strain of the civil war, is now sung South and North by the champions of a free government. I have been accounted worthy to listen and to speak at the Boston Radical Club and at the Concord School of Philosophy. .. Lastly and chiefly, I have had the honor of pleading for the slave when he was a slave, of helping to initiate the woman's movement in many States of the Union, and of standing with the illustrious champions of justice and freedom, for woman suffrage, when to do so was a thankless office, involving public ridicule and private avoidance.

I have made a voyage upon a golden river,
'Neath clouds of opal and of amethyst.
Along its banks bright shapes were moving ever,
And threatening shadows melted into mist.

The eye, unpracticed, sometimes lost the current,
When some wild rapid of the tide did whirl,
While yet a master hand beyond the torrent
Freed my frail shallop from the perilous swirl.

Music went with me, fairy flute and viol,
The utterance of fancies half expressed,
And with these, steadfast, beyond pause or trial,
The deep, majestic throb of Nature's breast.

My journey nears its close -- in some still haven
My bark shall find its anchorage of rest,
When the kind hand, which every good has given,
Opening with wider grace, shall give the best.