

# The Birthright of an American Teacher

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*This statement of heritage and responsibility of the American teacher came to Educational Leadership with the notation, "submitted in the desire to help teachers to realize their privilege, opportunity, and responsibility in these critical days when the need for educational leadership is acute." The author is Professor of Education at Birmingham-Southern College, Birmingham, Ala.*

☆ THIS IS MY COUNTRY

Beautiful for spacious skies, under which I may still walk unafraid; into which I may still look without terror or despair. My free land, beautiful for amber waves of grain, growing for the feeding of the nations; for joyful sharing with hungry children everywhere. Her forests stand guard. Her streams bear cargoes. Her fruited plains yield their stores. Her purple mountains give wealth. It is a wide land, of diverse treasures, beauty and wondrous possibilities. There is so much to learn about it.

☆ THIS IS MY LIBERTY

I may walk the *thoroughfare to freedom* which still echoes those *pilgrim feet* of long ago, of the men and women who crossed a hostile ocean bringing their household gods, their brave ideals of free nationality. They struggled, dreamed, built. And now I may enjoy the protection of benignant law; inquire; assemble with my neighbors for any desired conferring; exchange ideas with free people through free printing presses. I may choose my life work and place of abode, my friends, my rulers, my movements. I may express opinions and choices through vote, speech, or petition, safe from terrorism. Recognizing this liberty as the achievement of a long human struggle, inspired by ideals of justice and friendliness, I am called upon to remember that it will live only as generation after generation enters into and poignantly feels its meaning. This liberty, protecting each citizen, places upon each the responsibility to produce, not depend; to lift, not lean.

☆ THESE ARE MY CHARTERS, MY DEEDS OF ESTATE

The documents of democracy. That declaration, born of proud self-direction, the triumphant assertion, sounding through the years the rights with which men are endowed by their Creator. That constitution, born of travail of spirit and unquenchable longing for government based upon social justice.

That dramatically given charter, confidently prophesying sane self-government in all continents and islands.

These and all such undying declarations of equitable conditions of living are the deeds and proofs of my heritage. It is my privilege to revere them and keep them fine and clean and to display them proudly, remembering that they deny the dangerous doctrine of superiority of race and class and demand and decree that government of the people shall not perish from the earth.

☆ *THIS IS MY FLAG*

The banner of my freedom and of the freedom of all who reach to it. The symbol of the dawn of democracy in a world of oppression. The banner of *heroes proved in liberating strife*. If loving it, telling children of its deep meaning, if this be "flag-waving," then my birthright gives me the right to wave my flag.

☆ *THESE ARE MY FORBEARS*

The well-known and the unknown thinkers of all ages who taught mankind. Plato, who said that the gifted should be teachers, directing the state with the leadership of intellect and loyalty. Socrates, who showed the fascination of helping minds to unfold into fine judging. Comenius, with his triumphant certainty. Horace Mann, telling his generation that education is the only political safety. And Barnard and Sheldon and Parker and Emma Willard and Mary Lyon and all that goodly company, called to teach. Distinguished and nameless in many ages and lands. Pioneers in America, building schools in woods and wilderness, helping to carve a state and give it permanence. Country teachers, sending forth civic leaders from little one-room schoolhouses. Circuit riders, preaching and teaching as they rode forth to place shrines and halls of learning in a new land. Not alone for the tools of learning, but for the humanities, as well.

☆ *THIS IS MY PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE*

Gained largely through admirations of teachers who glimpsed the good life. Through the pages of history and great literature, the words of sages and prophets, poets and dreamers, brought to me in free schools. Through the fine living and noble thinking of many whose lives have touched mine in commonplace life about me and in books. This philosophy will be enriched by the simple heroic living of many around me, fearless loyal people. It can strengthen me and show me that I must try to help to bring about a transformed society. It is hard to walk in these days of uncertainty and questioning. But the greatness of the past which flows in to me and the greatness of thoughts which have been shared with me will surely help to bring certainty.

☆ THIS IS MY RELIGIOUS BELIEF

It is not that of my friends and neighbors; yet it is mine to hold sacred because of the price which was paid for that right, mine to practice without fear of reproach or punishment. I can go to church when and where I please. The minister who teaches me may speak forth fearlessly his belief. The place of worship need not be hidden and secret. While we have religious freedom in this land, it is mine to uphold.

☆ THIS IS MY FIELD OF SERVICE

My schools, the crystallization of determination that children and apprentices might learn. The crystallization of desires and dreams . . . that all the children of all the people might be taught. The salary is not so high as that of many other fields. But I have not yet been called upon to endure hardships, as have the Norwegian teachers because they dared to teach honesty and justice and freedom of conscience. I may plan and create as I please, without dread of the "new order." Here are my pupils with their questioning eyes and their individual peculiarities and possibilities, their worrying ways and their rewarding love. My people, from all lands sprung, asking for the keys to their culture, uniting all lands and races. They are my power, for they can multiply my two hands by the labor of many hands; my thinking by the thoughts of many minds; my work by countless deeds.

☆ THIS IS MY PROFESSIONAL SELF-RESPECT

Made possible through evolution. For out of the days of despised bond servant teachers and down through the years of public neglect of public education there were always some who saw teaching as a call to a splendid task and who did a fine job. Entering this field and making it fruitful and fine has been an ever-increasing number of those who have brought dignity and honor to their calling.

☆ THIS IS MY OPPORTUNITY

To enter confidently into the fullness of my heritage, all these blessings and countless others, earned for me through great endeavor.

To have courage, to have kindness, to have belief. To set goals of struggle and mastery; of knowledge and culture; of faith and vision.

The opportunity to live generously. To paint a stroke or two in the growing mural which shall picture the complete pattern of effective education. Believing in democracy, to strive to guide its practice away from past mistakes and failures. The opportunity to become forever a part of the new world which is being born. To keep alive through the persevering guidance of education that *patriot dream* which sees *alabaster cities* rise undimmed and nations crowned with *brotherhood from sea to shining sea*.

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