

INCENTIVES TO MENTAL CULTURE AMONG TEACHERS

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Incentives to Mental Culture Among Teachers by James Davie Butler

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JAMES DAVIE BUTLER

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MENTAL CULTURE
AMONG TEACHERS**

LECTURE.

WHILE listening to the lecturers, who have so often, in these last days, fed us with the various food of sweetly uttered knowledge, I have said to myself more than once, "What shall the man do that cometh after the king?"* Nor can I doubt but that those who assigned to us speakers the order of our appearance, revered the oriental custom, according to which, "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine, and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse." Or perhaps as classical scholars, they may have imitated Prometheus, who began to make man of finer clay, as it were of porcelain, but lacking materials, was compelled to eke out his work with baser matter, at first intended for composing creatures of a lower race. My own apology for trespassing at all on your attention, now you have been feasted to the full, is, that after many who were rich had cast in much money into the Jewish temple-treasury, then, and not before, there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. Yet small as may be the *value* of the coin I contribute, its superscription, CULTURE, need not shrink from a comparison with the legend on guineas, napoleons, or double eagles.

Culture is clearly one great end of our being. God, indeed, "hath made all nations of men that

* This lecture was the last in the course before the Institute.

been feasted to the full, is, that after many who were rich had cast in much money into the Jewish temple-treasury, then, and not before, there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. Yet small as may be the *value* of the coin I contribute, its superscription, CULTURE, need not shrink from a comparison with the legend on guineas, napoleons, or double eagles.

Culture is clearly one great end of our being. God, indeed, "hath made all nations of men that they should seek the Lord."* How shall they seek him? One answer to this question is, "By doing good." But as the fountain must precede the stream, so he, who would do good, must first *be* good. And what is it to be good? Is it not to use our faculties as just views of their nature show they were intended to be used? Culture, then, moral, mental and physical, is one great purpose of our existence. I mention moral culture first, since it is not only our clearest duty, but is the best basis for all other culture; while physical culture alone would leave man a mere animal, and mental culture alone might only raise him to the bad eminence of the prince of Pandemonium. Holding, as I do, the laws of hygiene in such esteem as to think sickness more often a fault, than a calamity, and persuaded, as I am, that the darkest day the land of the Puritan ever saw, was that, when the phrase "New England Primer" ceased to be synonymous with "Westminster Catechism," (since many of her children have been hence common-schooled out of earth as well as heaven,) I trust

* Acts xvii. 27.

I shall not be thought neglectful either of the body or the soul, although in the present address, I say nothing more about them, but confine myself to the culture of the *mind*.

My subject, then, is, SOME OF THE INCENTIVES, WHICH SHOULD URGE TEACHERS TO MENTAL ADVANCEMENT.

I seem to myself to follow a natural order of thought, by speaking first of those incentives which appeal to teachers in common with other men, and afterwards, of such as address themselves peculiarly to teachers.

The ends of all our actions, so far as they respect ourselves, are two, Culture and Condition. It is better to aim at culture, for many reasons. Thus it is more in our POWER to gain culture. Who can be sure of riches, when not one man in ten thousand, even among calculating Yankees, ever became a millionaire; or of office, seeing the worthiest and the wiliest of statesmen, pronounced alike unavailable; or of popularity, now that men change their opinions as often and as willingly as their linen? External advancement is dependent on the favor of associates, or on accidents as unforeseen and surprising, as if there were no fixed laws of nature. Mental advancement is at the mercy of no fraudulent partner, no fall of stocks, no wind or weather. It is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus. He that will, may learn to read, and then, may so read as to investigate, and may then, by reflection, classify his facts, and by observation, illustrate his principles. Thus laboring, he secures culture. *Vires*

acquirit eundo. In confirmation of this doctrine, I need cite no other proof-text than the fact, that there are no circumstances in which men of the most enviable development, have not appeared, flashing out of thick darkness, as lightning out of the black cloud. If, then, culture were of only equal value with condition, it would yet be more worthy of our pursuit, because it is more within our reach. If the delight afforded us in every swamp and pasture, by a modicum of botanical knowledge, be no greater than is forced upon an ignoramus, in the gardens of Louis XIV., it is still wiser to study botany, than to essay reaching the paradise of Versailles; because we are more sure to succeed in the inward, than in the outward pilgrimage.

Again, mental advancement is more *our own*, than material. The one must be acquired, the other may be conferred. You take your father's outward estate according to law, but you would no more think of thus inheriting his inward wealth, than of assuming his military titles. In addition to this, outward resources are as hard to keep as to get, so that to the wisest of men, they seemed always ready to take the wings of the eagle; but, with regard to internal resources, it has always been proverbial,* that they cannot be lost, that they bear transportation, remain in solitude, aye, when friends fall off; that

* Nam cætera neque temporum sunt neque ætatum omnium neque locorum; hæc studia adolescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfugium ac solatium præbent; delectant domi, nec impediunt foris, pernoctant nobiscum, peregrinantur, rusticantur. — Cic. *pro Archid.*, vii.

they are not, like porcelain and upholstery, at the mercy of moth and rust, or of fire and careless servants; that they solace sickness, infirmity, and age.

Moreover, all men should labor for intellectual improvement, that they may thus become better fitted for their respective stations. To do aught well, still craves a kind of wit. Everywhere, wisdom is profitable to direct, and labor that is educated is more eligible than that which is ignorant. Otherwise, veterans would not be superior to raw recruits, nor master-workmen to the youngest apprentices. But he whose accomplishments are such, that he seems to bestow more honor on his station than he takes from it, promotes his own advancement. A good thing is soon snatched up. Men may say to him, "Go up higher," in his own calling; as David, having bravely fought a bear, was bidden to fight the Philistine giant; or, as one of our contemporaries, who began his literary course by teaching a district school for six winters, has been promoted, step by step, till he is now the President of the oldest, richest, and most influential University on this continent. Or the man of culture may be called out of his own walk of life into a wider field; as Franklin was called from his printing-press to stand before kings, and as John Stuart, the schoolmaster of king George the Third, was exalted to be prime minister of the British empire. It is not often, however, that merit thus makes its way. Our President-making caucuses have, indeed, delighted to honor one man, whom no name but "accidency" befits, another because he was unknown, and a third because he knew nothing

of statesmanship. But what though ciphers, whom no position can make significant figures, hold offices they cannot fill, yet theirs is but the shadow of power; the substance belongs to men of mind behind the scenes, who mould the opinions and write the speeches of many a popular pageant, that neither speaks his own words, nor thinks his own thoughts:

“A thing of strings and wires by others played.”

Gibbon somewhere remarks, that almost all hereditary despots grow up so sensual and effeminate, as to be, in reality, the slaves of their own household slaves. This remark is only a generalization of the strong-minded Grecian philosopher's threat, when he was exposed for sale in the slave-market, that whoever bought him, would buy more than he bargained for,—not a slave, but a master.

Sometimes, also, power is accorded in form, as well as in fact, to those best able to sway its sceptre. I have seen a man whose life had been spent in a shop or store, dressed on a parade-day in the uniform of a military officer, with golden epaulets, and riding with great pomp. But when he neared the armed men, the thunder of the captains and the shouting, his war-horse, whose neck was clothed with thunder, and the glory of whose nostrils was terrible, as if smelling the battle afar off, pawed in the valley and swallowed the ground with fierceness and rage, till his affrighted and endangered rider resigned the stormy saddle to his horse-taming and more capable groom. Thus, in emergencies, the helm is given to the true pilot, and the Bucephalus of responsible

station, to him who can guide that steed by skilfulness of hand. How many of Napoleon's marshals rose from the ranks!

It behooves every man to cultivate his mind, because he can in no other way *commune* with the sons of genius.* You may stand by their sides, give them dinners, print their books in gold, fill your houses with their fairy creations, rear them statues or mausoleums, garner up their autographs and relics, and yet, without congenial culture, be no nearer to them than if divided from them in space, by oceans and continents, and in time, by milleniums; you are infinitely further from them than you might be even if thus divided. Your sympathies with them may be as imperfect as were those of Ulysses the earth-born, with Calypso, the celestial, when, as they sat at table, he ate beef and bread, while her food was ambrosia and nectar.†

Who is the *owner* of the statue that enchants the

* This idea is a favorite with Schiller. For illustrations see his poems and ballads. Thus at page 296, of Bulwer's translation, we read of the Antique at Paris:

"By him alone the muses are possessed,
Who warms them from the marble, at his breast;
Bright to the Greek, from stone each goddess grew —
Vandals, each goddess is but stone to you!"

Again, on page 315, the Italian Antique thus addresses a tourist from the North:

"And o'er the river hast thou passed, and o'er the mighty sea,
And o'er the Alps, the dizzy bridge hath borne thy steps to me;
To look all near upon the bloom my deathless beauty knows,
And, face to face, to front the pomp whose fame through ages goes —
Gaze on, and touch my relics now! At last thou standest here,
BUT ART THOU NEARER NOW TO ME, OR I TO THEM MORE NEAR?"

† *Odyssey*, v. 199.