

**A LECTURE ON THE USEFULNESS
OF LYCEUMS: CONSIDERED IN
CONNEXION WITH THE
INFLUENCE OF THE COUNTRY
AND AGE IN WHICH WE LIVE**

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A Lecture on the Usefulness of Lyceums: Considered in Connexion with the Influence of the country and age in which we live by S. C. Phillips

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S. C. PHILLIPS

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CONNEXION WITH THE
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AND AGE IN WHICH WE LIVE**

*Ms Doughty - Charles L. Stephens to
With the respects of her friends,
S. Phillips*

LECTURE
ON THE
USEFULNESS OF LYCEUMS;

CONSIDERED IN CONNECTION WITH THE
INFLUENCE OF THE COUNTRY AND AGE
IN WHICH WE LIVE,
ON THE CONDITION OF MAN, AS AN INDIVIDUAL,
A MEMBER OF SOCIETY, A POLITICAL AGENT,
AND AN INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL BEING,

DELIVERED IN BOSTON,
BEFORE THE
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF INSTRUCTION,
AUGUST, 1831.

BY S. C. PHILLIPS.

BOSTON:
HILLIARD, GRAY, LITTLE AND WILKINS.
1831.

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1855 Jan 23

Life of William Dwight

of class 1853

This Lecture was originally delivered as introductory to the second course of lectures before the Salem Lyceum, on the occasion of opening their new Hall. It was afterwards delivered before the Lyceums in Charlestown, Newburyport and Danvers. It may be proper to add that it has been altered and enlarged since it was first prepared.

USEFULNESS OF LYCEUMS.

GENTLEMEN,

I HAVE been honored by an invitation from your Directors to repeat a lecture which was prepared for another occasion, and a different audience. The occasion was one with which most of you have been elsewhere familiar; and the audience was a portion of that intelligent and virtuous community, who honor you as their guides, while you rely upon them as your patrons. The subject of the lecture is not foreign to the design of the Institute; and I state the circumstance to which I have alluded for the purpose of explaining my mode of treating it, if that shall seem more appropriate to a popular discussion, than to the form of address to which you have here been accustomed.

My design is to suggest for your consideration some of the opportunities and means of usefulness, which are placed within the reach of an association constituted and conducted like the Lyceum. Addressing common sense, and appealing to the observation and experience of every one who hears me, I hope to show that here has been opened a field of mutual instruction, where labor cannot lose its reward, and where judicious, persevering, and combined exertions will contribute to the great ends of personal, social, political, intellectual and moral improvement, to an extent commensurate with all proper wishes and reasonable expectations.

The Lyceum seeks to adapt itself to the circumstances of

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the community in which it is established. It is an institution designed for this country and for the present age. It is our good fortune to live in a country and an age, in which the condition of man *as an individual, as a member of society, as a political agent, and as an intellectual and moral being* is exhibited in a striking aspect—involving new relations, conferring new trusts, and consequently implying singular responsibility and important duties. In reference to the object which has been stated, I propose to illustrate this view of the situation of each and all of us.

I. The condition of an individual in this country is peculiar, inasmuch as from the moment of his birth, there is no positive authority, not even the force of external circumstances, to compel him to confine himself to any particular pursuit, to cultivate any particular habits, or to assent to any particular opinions. In other words, the liberty of thinking and acting as an individual is as much his birth-right as his political liberty as a citizen. He opens his eyes to the light of Heaven, and while his consciousness assures him that he is a free-agent, he looks abroad upon the scene of good and evil which the world presents to his earliest gaze, and thanks God for the power that he feels within him to choose the one and refuse the other. He will soon perceive, that, as certainly as he possesses a mind and a heart, the regulation of his thoughts and feelings must depend upon himself; and that while he may derive benefit from the advice and example of others, it is not their office to mould his character and guide his course through life. He will learn, too, as soon as he acquires any practical wisdom, that the circumstances of his infancy bear no fixed relation to the destiny of his manhood; that he is in a community of equals, where the means of education are afforded to all, where the paths of industry and honor are alike open to all, where none can plead any other apology for ignominy than crime, or any better excuse for crime than folly. He will soon prove by his experience that whatever befalls him of success or misfortune, of happiness or misery, of honor or

disgrace, is, in a most important sense, the consequence of his own conduct. Born a pauper, he may thus die the possessor of millions—a farmer's boy, he may reach the highest station in the republic—with no external title to consideration, the treasures of his mind may be the richest legacy of the present age to posterity. On the other hand, with a fortune for his patrimony, he may sink to the level of the poorest day-laborer—graceful and accomplished, the pride of a proud family, the favorite of beauty, and the idol of fashion, he may perish without a friend, on a pallet of straw, in the garret of an almshouse; still more, blessed with the best gifts of nature, the best opportunities of education, the fairest prospects of usefulness—"bearing his blushing honors thick upon him"—he may live to see himself a reprobate and an outcast.

It is in this perfect liberty of making himself what he chooses to become, that our institutions confer upon the individual, or, rather, do not wrest from the individual, the highest prerogative of his nature—what may be rendered the greatest blessing of his existence, or will prove, by his own fault, the cause of his misery and ruin. An arbitrary government, on the contrary, prescribes not only an unequal distribution of political power, but, for most practical purposes, its effect is to counteract the influence of moral distinctions, to repress the tendencies of nature, and to doom individuals to penury or affluence, to offices of dependence or to elevated stations, not according to their merit, as tested by fair competition, but solely with reference to accidental circumstances. Thus the heir of a throne may be a profligate spendthrift and an abandoned libertine; and yet a mitred bishop shall place the crown upon his head, the laureate shall hymn his praises, and all ranks and classes implore blessings on his reign; while the poorest subject of his realm, however meritorious, is suffered to pass his life in wretchedness, and to end it in despair. Thus, too, talents combined with learning and integrity, may only render a plebeian odious and suspicious, while a moderate share of these distinctions will raise a patrician to the pinnacle of fame,

or, perhaps, the utter want of them will constitute the chief qualification of a prime minister or a pensioned favorite.

Examples of such moral outrage are becoming rare. The spirit of our institutions, already diffused far and wide, has aroused individuals to a perception of what is due to talents and character, as well as nations to a sense of their political rights; so that now merit is every where emerging from obscurity, and worthlessness retreating from the stations, where it had so long withstood the public frown. But it is still easy to perceive, that, wherever absolute establishments, whether civil or religious, exist, the individual may struggle in vain to acquire the influence and estimation, which amongst us to deserve is to possess.

The age, too, as well as the country in which we live, is propitious to self-improvement. So far as public opinion does not cringe to the power that would overawe, nor is seduced by the flattery that would debase it, there is nothing more honorable or more honored than individual exertion, in any and every department of usefulness. There never was a period in the history of human improvement, when so much was attempted or effected by the labors of individuals. In science, in literature, and in the arts, conspicuous examples of arduous efforts and encouraging success adorn the present age. Many an individual of our times, believing with Sir William Jones that whatever had been attained was attainable by him, has burst the chains of prejudice, has conquered difficulties, has withstood temptations, has acquired habits of self-control and self-application, and has persevered to the accomplishment of all that ambition could virtuously desire, and earned a fame which posterity will venerate.

Individual competition is the most powerful incentive to exertion; at the present day how vastly enlarged is the field of its exercise! From the extension of commerce, and by means of the press, every event, every discovery, every experiment, every plausible undertaking of every individual in any one civilized country is speedily published in every other. Inquiry

is excited—criticism becomes active—every thing is brought to the test of philosophical analysis and practical proof—defects are exposed—improvements are suggested—ignorance is rebuked—sophistry is refuted—useful inventions are scattered—useful knowledge is diffused—discovery treads on the heels of discovery—and while each individual scarcely finds himself without a rival, he perceives the wisdom of converting rivalry into a source of encouragement and confidence.

It is thus that individuals throughout the world, are at the present moment stimulating each other forward in the race of true glory. It is by this wide-spread emulation that they are brought to realize their various powers, and the unprecedented means of influence which are placed within their reach. The striking events, fresh in the memory of the present generation, what are they but the efforts of individuals, roused to action by powerful motives within and without them, and exhibiting throughout their career of wild ambition or virtuous self-devotion, in their merits and in their faults, the indelible impression alike of the times and of the men? I do not mean to say that it is the only praise of Napoleon that he was the great man of great occasions; but it is to hazard little to assert that he did homage to the spirit of the age in his institutions—that whatever is laudable in his taste, his ambition, his designs, and his achievements, bears the character of the age—and that it is the severest censure of his errors to pronounce them a libel on the age. Elevated by extraordinary events to the height of military glory—possessing as an individual the greatest power for good or evil which was ever allotted to a mortal—he seemed, as if incapable of moral perception, to shut his eyes to the prospect of brilliant usefulness which the world saw spread before him, and rushed in madness and in folly to the consummation of his earthly destiny, leaving it for biography to unveil his motives, and for history to record his crimes.

"He left the name, at which the world grew pale
"To point a moral, and adorn a tale."