

Errors in Education
Written by Lavinia Goodell
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Under the present mode of education, nobody is fitted for a low place, and everybody is taught to look for a high one. If we go into a school exhibition, our ears are deafened by declamation, addressed by ambition. The boys have sought out from literature every extravagant promise of reward. The compositions of the girls are of the same general tone. We hear of “infinite yearnings” from the lips of girls who do not know enough to make a pudding, and of being published “after the similitude of a palace” from those who do not comprehend the commonest duties of life. Everything is on the high-pressure principle. The boys, all of them, have the general idea that everything that is necessary to become great men is to try for it; and each one supposes it possible for him to become Governor of the State, or President of the Union. The idea of being educated to fill a humble office in life is hardly thought of, and every bumpkin who has a memory sufficient for the words repeats the stanza –

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.”

There is a fine ring to the familiar quatrain of Mr. Longfellow, but it is nothing more than a musical cheat. It sounds like truth, but it is a lie. The lives of great men remind us that they have made their own memory sublime but they do not assure us at all that we can leave footprints like theirs, behind us.

What we greatly need in this country is the inculcation of soberer views of life. Boys and girls are bred to discontent. Everybody is after a high place, and nearly everybody fails to get one; and failing loses heart, temper, and content. The multitude dress beyond their means, and live beyond their necessities, to keep up a show of being what they are not. Farmers’ daughters do not love to become farmers’ wives, and even their fathers and mothers stimulate their ambition to exchange their station for one which stands higher in the world’s estimation. Humble employments are held in contempt, and humble powers are everywhere making high employment contemptible. Our children need to be educated to fill in Christian humility the subordinate offices in life which they must fill and taught to respect humble callings, and to beautify and glorify them by lives of contented and glad industry. When public schools accomplish an end so desirable as this, they will fulfil(?) their mission, and they will not before. I seriously doubt whether one school in a hundred, public or private, comprehends its duty in this particular. They fail to inculcate the idea that the majority of the offices of life are humble, that the powers of the majority of the youth which they contain have relation to those offices, that no man is respectable when he is out of his place, and that half of the unhappiness of the world grows out of the fact that, from distorted views of life, men are in places where they do not belong. Let us have this thing altogether reformed. – *Timothy Titcomb’s Lessons in Life.*

We like uncle Timothy, pretty well on the whole – his views of life, generally, are quite rational, clear, and common-sense, and he has a faculty of presenting them in a sprightly, and attractive manner; but *sometimes* – begging his pardon! They smack a little too much of the bread and butter. Now bread

and butter are admirable articles, and so are “puddings” and potatoes when prepared scientifically, but after all there *is something* in life beyond even these valuable accessories.

In one view of the case, an education in the bread-and-butter branch of human affairs is of the first importance since without due respect to said branch, man could proceed but very little way, either intellectually or spiritually – at least on this earthly sphere, and in this fleshy tabernacle. Man has a material nature the demands of which should be met, because upon it depends in so great a degree the spiritual, and for that reason only. The means is too often mistaken for the end. Life is too often spent in blind devotion to material interests. The spiritual nature too often bends its neck to the yoke of the animal. Mind and soul are too frequently immolated on the shrine of Bread-and-Butter.

The time has not yet come when the rising generation need be taught to prize the material more, the spiritual less. The material, practical element may be guided into different channels. Boys may be taught that it is better, nobler, to be an honest, upright, working farmer, and walk every year hand in hand with nature, than to hang around Washington on the advent of a new administration, begging for an office, and regulating their principles as merchants do their prices “to suit the times.” Girls may be taught that it is far better to spend their time in churning and baking than in studying to make a show, and gratify vanity. But both should be taught that all this “practical,” “common-sense,” “every-day-life” business is about a humble means to a high and noble end. The beautiful dreams, the earnest aspirations of youth should be nourished, strengthened, encouraged. The ideal element should be more fully developed, that when the tide of realism sets in – as all too soon it will – heart and soul may not be overwhelmed and crushed.

But O, uncle Timothy, did we read aright? *Have you* really said – “it sounds like truth, but it is a lie” – of the noblest poem of one of the noblest of poets? Do you say we cannot all “make our lives sublime?”

That we cannot all make ourselves “Governor of the States, or President of the Union” is self-evident, and if the idea of sublimity is inseparably connected with gubernatorial honors, then indeed it is all over with most of us! Well, many do think (so “practical” are they, in their views of life) that to become “great” and a “sublime” they must become “Governor” or “President,” and in their eagerness to attain the goal they usually out-do the matter, cross the border-line, and succeed in “making their lives” – ridiculous!

A truly sublime life lives he who turns his back upon the alluring fascinations of rank and power and fame, and perchance amid the reproach and scorn of his fellows, toils humbly, patiently, for truth and right. A truly sublime life lives many a man and woman whom the world praises not, and of whom no poet sings. A truly sublime life may we each live: Longfellow forever!

L.G.