WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS OF MOST WORTH:

A PAPER FOR DISCUSSION IN CRAFT LODGE

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NOTES:
INTRODUCTION

“It has been truly remarked that decoration precedes dress.”

Herbert Spencer

From the beginning of time and since records have been kept concerning the civilization of Man on this planet, the idea of ornament predominates over that of usefulness. The facts of aboriginal life indicate that dress is developed out of decorations. And when we think that even among ourselves most think more about the fineness of the fabric than its warmth, more about the cut than the convenience and that the function is still in great measure subordinated to the appearance.

It is not then a little curious that the like relations hold with our minds. Among mental as among bodily acquisitions, the ornamental comes before the useful. Not only in times past, but almost as much in our own era, that knowledge which conduces to personal well-being has been postponed to that which brings applause.

If we enquire what is then the real motive for a classical education, we find it to be simple conformity to public opinion. We often dress our children’s minds as we do their bodies; in the prevailing fashion and not for any direct benefit, not for their intrinsic value, but that they may not be disgraced by being found ignorant of them. In other words, “that they may have the education of a ladies and gentlemen; the badge marking a certain social position bringing a consequent respect.
The births, deaths and marriages of kings, and other like historic trivialities, are committed to memory not because of any direct benefits that can possibly result from knowing them; but because society considers them parts of a good education and because the absence of such knowledge may bring the contempt of others.

To get above some and be reverenced by them, and to propitiate those above us, is the universal struggle in which the chief energies of life are expended. By the accumulation of wealth, by style of living, by beauty of dress, by display of knowledge or intellect, each tries to subjugate others; and so aids in weaving that ramified network of restraints by which society is kept in order.

We are none of us content with quietly unfolding our own individualities to the full in all directions, but have a restless craving to impress our individualities upon others, and in some way subordinate them. And this is what determines the character of our education; not what knowledge is of most real worth, but what will bring most applause, honor and respect, what will most conduce to social position and influence.

As throughout life, not what we are, but what we shall be thought, is the question; so in education the question is not then intrinsic value of knowledge, so much as its extrinsic effects on others.
PRESENTATION

Education may be subordinated in a rational order;

1. that education which prepares one for direct self-preservation,
2. that which prepares for indirect self-preservation,
3. that which prepares for parenthood,
4. that which prepares for citizenship, and,
5. that which prepares for the miscellaneous refinements of life.

The ideal of education is the complete preparation in all of these. Failing this ideal the aim should be to maintain a due proportion between the degrees of preparation in each; an attention to all, greatest where the value is greatest and least where the value is least. For the average man, we say, the desideratum, or the lack of something needed but desired, is a training that approaches nearest to perfection. This ideal of perfection is portrayed as it wends its way like a silver thread in a darker fabric throughout the teachings of Freemasonry and is exemplified in the fourteenth degree, the Degree of Perfection, in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry and likewise in the Degree of the Holy Royal Arch, in the York Rite of Freemasonry.

There is knowledge of intrinsic value, quasi-intrinsic value and knowledge of conventional value. Such facts as that the resistance of water to a body moving through it varies as the square of the velocity and the truths of Science in general, are of intrinsic value. The extra knowledge of our own or another language may be considered to have a value that is quasi-intrinsic as
languages will last only as long as races last. History or the names and dates of dead unmeaning events has a conventional value only, but the acquirement of knowledge of every kind has two principal values; those being the value of the knowledge for itself and the value of the knowledge as discipline, or the guidance in our daily conduct and mental exercise.

Hence, knowledge which subserves direct self-preservation by preventing loss of health is of primary importance for it is clear that in our present phase of civilization men’s necessities often compel them to transgress. And it is further clear that, even in the absence of such compulsion, their inclinations would frequently lead them to sacrifice future good for present gratification.

We are all employed in the production, preparation and distribution of ‘commodities.’ The efficiency of this production, preparation and distribution depends upon the use of methods fitted to the respective natures of these commodities; on an adequate knowledge of their physical, chemical or vital properties; that is, it depends upon Science. This order of knowledge is the order of knowledge underlying the right performance of all those processes by which civilized life is made possible.

To give due weight to our argument, we must therefore, realize this truth to the reader by a rapid review of the facts. For all the higher arts of construction, Mathematics is indispensable. The village carpenter lays out his work by empirical rules learnt in his apprenticeship; the builder makes hourly references to the laws of quantitative relations. The surveyor on whose survey the land is purchased; the architect in designing the mansion to be built upon it; the builder in
preparing his estimates; his foreman in laying out the foundations; the masons in cutting the stones; the various artisans who put up the fittings, are all guided by geometrical truths. Even the ability of a nation to hold its own against other nations depends upon the skilled activity of its units. Judge, then the worth of Mathematics.

Pass next on to Physics. That section of Physics which deals with the laws of heat, has taught us how to economize fuel in our various industries; how to prevent explosions by using the safety lamp and, through the thermometer, how to regulate innumerable processes. The phenomena of light, gives eyes to the old and the myopic and aids through the microscope in detecting disease. Researches in electricity and magnetism have saved incalculable life and property by the compass. Indoors the applications of advanced Physics underlie our comforts and gratifications.

Still more numerous are the bearings of Chemistry. Sugar refining, gas making, soap and gunpowder manufacturing are all operations partly chemical. Glance through any work on technology and it becomes at once apparent that there is now scarcely any process of which chemistry does not preside.

And then onto the science of life; Biology; bearing fundamentally upon the processes of indirect self-preservation. As agriculture must conform its methods to the phenomena of vegetable and animal life, it follows necessarily that the science of those phenomena is the rational basis for agriculture, yet there has been no conception of them as Science.
There remains one more science to note as bearing directly on our industrial success; the Science of Society. We look daily at the state of the markets and glance over prices to decide upon their mercantile operations, and, as such, are students of Social Science.

Yet none of these prepare us for living. Some acquaintance with the first principles of physiology and the elementary truths of psychology is indispensable for our development. Parents in general should be expected to acquire a knowledge of subjects so abstruse, it would seem to us an absurdity.

Let us now pass on to the functions of the citizen. We have to enquire what knowledge best fits a man for the discharge of these duties. History, the accounting of the ecclesiastical government, the customs which regulate the popular life indoors and out, a delineation of the industrial system, the degrees of aesthetic culture, as displayed in architecture, sculpture, painting, dress, music and poetry should be described. And lastly, to connect the whole, should be exhibited the morals, theoretical and practical, of all classes; as indicated in their laws, habits, proverbs and deeds.

The aim should be so to present them that we may readily trace the consensus subsisting among them with the view of learning what social phenomena co-exists with what others. Such alone is the kind of information respecting past times, which can be of service to the citizen for the regulation of his conduct. And the highest office which the historian can discharge is that of so narrating the lives of nations, as to furnish materials for a comparative sociology; for the
subsequent determination of the ultimate laws to which social phenomena conform. And yet, even this is of comparatively little use without the key; and that key is only to be found in Science. Only in proportion as men obtain a certain rude empirical knowledge of human nature are they enabled to understand even the simplest facts of social life.

Thus: Society is made up of individuals. All that is done is society is done by the combined actions of individuals; but then actions of individuals depends upon the laws of their natures and their actions cannot be understood until their laws are understood.

To state the conclusions more simply; all social phenomena are phenomena of life, and the most complex manifestations of life, are ultimately dependent upon the laws of life, and can be understood only when the laws of life are understood. Thus, we see that for the regulation of human activities, we are, as before, dependent upon Science.

And we now come to that remaining division of human life which includes the relaxations, pleasures and amusements filling our leisure hours. After considering what training and knowledge best fits for self-preservation, for the obtainment of sustenance, for the discharge of parental duties and for the regulation of social and political conduct, we have now to consider what training best fits for the enjoyment of Nature, Literature and the Fine Arts in all their forms; the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences.
We are often inclined to slight these less essential things. No greater mistake could be made, however. Without these liberal arts, life would lose half of its charm for they may be truly called the efflorescence of civilized life. As they occupy the leisure part of life, so should they occupy the leisure part of education.

We have now to enquire what knowledge is of most use to this end. Unexpected as the assertion may be, it is nevertheless true that the highest Art of every kind is based upon Science and that without Science, there can be neither perfect production nor full appreciation.

As we have asserted, Science is necessary not only for the most successful production, but also for the full appreciation of the fine arts. The fact is, that every additional truth gives an additional pleasure to the percipient mind; a pleasure that is missed by those ignorant of this truth. The more realities an artist indicates, the more faculties does he appeal to; the more numerous associated ideas does he suggest, the more gratification does he afford. But to receive this gratification the spectator, listener or reader, must know the realities which the artist has indicated; and to know these realities is to know so much Science.

Thus far our question has been the worth of knowledge of this or that kind for purposes of guidance. We have now to judge the relative values of different kinds of knowledge for purposes of discipline.
Surely learning a language forms the most rudimentary step in civilization and strengthens the memory. In the acquirement of a language, the connections of the ideas to be established in the mind correspond to facts that are in a great measure accidental; whereas in the acquirement of Science, the connections of ideas to be established in the mind correspond to facts that are mostly necessary. In other words, Science cultivates judgment. Correct judgment with regard to all surrounding things, events and consequences, becomes possible only through knowledge of the way in which surrounding phenomena depend upon each other. No acquaintance with the meanings of words can give the power of forming correct inferences respecting causes and effects. The constant of drawing conclusions from data and then verifying those conclusions by observation and experiment can alone give the power of judging correctly.

Not only for intellectual discipline is Science the best, but it is also the best for moral discipline. By Science, constant appeal is made to individual reason. Its truths are not accepted upon authority alone, but all are at liberty to test them. Every step in a scientific investigation is submitted for judgment. We are not asked to admit it without seeing it to be true. From all of this there flows that independence which is a most valuable element in character and when carried on, it exercises perseverance and sincerity.

Lastly we have to assert that the discipline of Science is superior to that of our ordinary education because of the religious culture inculcated. Here we must use the widest and highest acceptations of the meanings of Science and Religion.
True Science is essentially religious inasmuch as it generates a profound respect for and an implicit faith in those uniform laws which underlie all things. These laws to which we must submit are not only inexorable, but are beneficent. We see in the virtue of these laws the process of things is ever toward a greater perfection and higher happiness. And thus do we, by asserting the eternal principles of things and the necessity of conforming to them, prove ourselves intrinsically religious giving us a true conception of ourselves and our relation to the mysteries of our own existence.

We conclude, then, that for discipline as well as for guidance, Science is of chiefest value, for in all effects, learning the meanings of things is better than learning the meaning of words.

And yet this knowledge, which is of such transcendent value, is that which in our age of boasted education receives the least attention. While this, which we call civilization, could never have arisen had it not been for Science, Science forms scarcely an appreciable element in what men consider civilized training. To the slowly growing acquaintance with the uniform co-existences and sequences of phenomena, to the establishment of invariable laws, we owe our emancipation from the grossest superstitions.

And yet again, this Science which has given us an insight into the grandeurs of creation, is written against in our theologies and frowned upon from our pulpits.
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CONCLUSION

Thus to the question with which we set out: ‘What knowledge is of most worth?’

The uniform reply is Science. This is the verdict on all counts.

For direct self-preservation or the maintenance of life and health, the all important knowledge is Science.

For that indirect self-preservation which we call gaining a livelihood, the knowledge of greatest value is Science.

For the due discharge of parental functions, the proper guidance is found only in Science.

For that interpretation of national life, past and present, without which the citizen cannot rightly regulate his conduct, the indispensable key is Science.

Alike for the most perfect production and highest enjoyment of art in all its forms, the needful preparation is still Science.

And for purposes of discipline; intellectual, moral and religious, the most efficient study is once again Science.

Is not Science a system of institutions and understanding based upon the nature of all things?
I now ask you to simply replace the word ‘Science’ with the word ‘Freemasonry’…

‘Is not Freemasonry a system of institutions and understanding based upon the nature of all things?’

Because,

‘Was it not explained to you in the Entered Apprentice Degree that Freemasonry is a beautiful and peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols?’

And,

‘Were you not led in the Fellow Craft Degree to contemplate the study of intellectual truths by researching the hidden mysteries of Nature and Science?’

And,

‘Is not the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason dedicated to learning how to live your life, the subject which involves all other subjects and therefore, the subject in which the education of every man should culminate?’

Therefore and finally, I ask you…

‘Is not the willful study of Freemasonry the knowledge that is of most worth?’