

HELEN BROWN

TALKS TO
FRESHMAN
GIRLS

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Talks to Freshman Girls

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Helen Dawes Brown

Talks to Freshman Girls

I – “STUDIES SERVE FOR DELIGHT, FOR ORNAMENT, AND FOR ABILITY”

No man could have written this sentence with more authority than Francis Bacon, for no man ever loved Studies better. In his youth he had declared passionately that he took all knowledge for his province, and it was his lifelong teaching that “the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge.”

“Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability.” I imagine Bacon writing these words with fervor, out of his own happy experience. At the age of thirty-five, he could determine what Studies had been worth to him. They had been his delight, his ornament, and the means to his usefulness.

For “delight” he wrote in his first edition “pastimes,” as he wrote “ornaments” and “abilities,” then wisely changed his sentence. His beautiful old word “delight” means, I take it, a heightened pleasure, a pleasure touched with imagination, full of suggestion and invitation.

I have a far glimpse of its meaning when I hear a young person say that she is going to college “to have a good time”; a good time for the rest of her life is what, I believe, Studies will secure to her. You are so young, I may speak to you of age. There is a new old age for women, with enlightened care of health and increasing intellectual interests. As for you freshmen, I have a vision of your erect forms and of your bright faces at seventy-five, – of your health and your gayety and your wisdom, you charming old ladies of 1970! Age cannot wither you, nor custom stale your infinite variety, you women whom Studies have served for delight.

And you are so happy that I may speak to you of unhappiness. We need three things to meet life with: a religion, an education, and a sense of humor. The pursuit of Studies is a refuge as well as a delight. Studies will fortify one to encounter loneliness, or ill-health, or losses of any kind soever. The chances of life are such that I believe a woman suffers from lack of an education more than a man does. He has a wider world to draw from; she has need of more within herself. When Bacon writes of the care of the body, he says that for our very health, we should “entertain studies that fill the mind with splendid and illustrious objects.”

In order that knowledge should be a delight, I submit that knowledge should be remembered. A certain man George Eliot describes, who had a sense of having had a liberal education until he tried to remember something! The “culture” of some people seems to consist in having heard a large number of proper names. “Oh, yes, I’ve *heard* of him” – the rest a blank. In our day, “mental training” has neglected the training of the memory. I even urge a considerable amount of old-fashioned memorizing. Lay up for yourselves treasure: possess for your own a sonnet of Shakespeare, a poem of Wordsworth, a passage of Bacon. Lay up also a good store of facts, such facts as will make the reading of the daily paper profitable. There is no surer test of your outfit of information. Shall we say that an educated person should be able to spell, pronounce, and reasonably explain about two thousand proper nouns?

When I dwell on the delight of Studies, I take no thought of ease. Let us have no royal road to learning, but meet valiantly all the hardships of the way. No girl of stamina is looking for “soft courses.” I trust that in your freshman year you are having just what Schiller meant when he talked of “sport in art”; I hope you are having sport in education, the spirited conquest of difficulty! Do you not feel the great adventure of education, the romance of the quest of knowledge?

You should know the keen delight of competition, not so much with one another as with yourselves. The determination to equal yourself, to surpass yourself, is a fine incitement. “Set before thee thine own example,” says Bacon again.

On the other hand, you have not discovered all the delight of Studies unless you have secured repose as well as excitement in your intellectual life. It is “the world’s sweet inn from pain and wearisome turmoil.” Only in quiet can you practice the abstraction and concentration that give you power as a thinker. I dare to say that education goes on with far too much chatter and sociability in all our colleges. True enough, you are not getting the complete delight of your studies unless you have the intellectual stimulus of companionship, – the friendship “that maketh daylight in the understanding.” (Bacon again!) But you must have also the silence and the solitude in which to brood, and in which to give your imagination its chance for flight. Have you freshmen any long, dreaming twilights? Or have we all grown too busy – or too frivolous – to pause “between the dark and the daylight”? Sane, strong minds we want, but beautiful, poetic minds as well. The final delight of education is in that culture of the imagination that makes an idealist of every fine college girl.

Bacon himself said of Studies, “Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring.” When he caused his essays to be translated into Latin, to get them safely out of perishable English, delight was there rendered “*meditationum voluptas*.” That our twentieth-century girl should know an harmonious, well-balanced life, I would see her delighting in her joyous athletics, but acquiring also the *meditationum voluptas*, for which Studies have furnished her mind.

In my youth the word “ornament” was the word of dread in education. We earliest college girls scoffed at “accomplishments.” Ornament stood to us for all that was smattering and frivolous in education. We were of the new order!

Since the day when ornament was the bugbear of woman’s education, we have grown somewhat wiser. “Studies should serve for delight and for ornament,” we now say gladly; education should make you a delight to yourself and it should make you a delight to other people. Said Poor Richard: “Hast thou virtue? Acquire also the graces and beauties of virtue.” “Hast thou education? Acquire also the graces and beauties of education. Your common sense will save you from pedantry.” You will not “make your knowledge a discomfort to your families,” as Mr. Taft once gently expressed it in talking to college girls.

Shall ornament mean “accomplishments”? Why not? If I were you, I would do some one interesting, amusing, agreeable thing so well as to make a small art of it. Have some accomplishment that will render you interesting in your own home, entertaining to children and to grandmothers, and that will make you welcome in your own set.

I take ornament as including all the externals of education, and I ask, where does education show on the outside? One of its most exposed points is the letter that a woman writes. “A good address,” in the old-fashioned phrase, is about the most valuable of worldly possessions. It should include a good address – a good manner and presence – upon paper. As for the letter, all your education leads up to it: its clearness, brevity, point, and grace. “Good sense brightly delivered,” should describe a college girl’s letter as well as one by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.

In Bacon’s opinion, the chief ornament bestowed by Studies was that of conversation (*orationis ornamentum*). In the matter and manner of discourse, education achieves its utmost. It tells upon conversation in obvious ways. Studies furnish the mind with matter worth talking about, and they give an appetite for ideas. It may be hoped that they give the sense of proportion in conversation, and prevent the educated woman from ever becoming that object of dread, “a talker.” Most American women talk too much, perhaps because they are so bright, and think of so many things to say! One hears the criticism: “She is a brilliant woman; she talks well; but she doesn’t give the other person a chance.” Does this pauseless talker forget what a delight is the educated listener, quick, responsive, eager for the other’s thought? One of the finest ornaments education can bestow is the social grace of good listening.

Alas that it so often fails to bestow the ornament of good speech! The failure of the colleges in this matter is lamentable. Its importance is not brought home to individuals with sufficient severity. They are left in their carelessness and laziness, with the social stigma of bad speech upon them for life. The colleges should help to make ladies and gentlemen as well as scholars. “What a bright girl!” said the woman who sat next a college freshman at dinner, “but can the college do nothing to cure her abominable speech?”

I believe that whatever his early associations, the speech of an educated person lies within his choice. If he be a person of will, and of the right energy and ambition, he can conquer provincialism or inherited faults of speech. It means *caring* and *trying*. It takes character, in short. One of the best instances of achievement of cultivated speech is that of George Eliot, who by birth would have spoken a rich dialect.

Perhaps the subtlest ornament that education may confer is that which we call distinction. After the refining process of the four years in close association with noble things, “commonness” ought to be impossible. The beginning of distinction is simplicity and sincerity, all absence of affectation, pedantry, or the desire to make an impression. Education is an immense simplifier; it does away with so many unnecessary pretences.

Bacon sent a copy of the “Advancement of Learning” to a man whom he addressed thus: “Since you are one that was excellently bred in all learning, which I have ever noted to shine in all your speeches and behaviors.” Such is Bacon’s way of saying, “Abeunt studia in mores.” Educated perceptions and a quickened imagination should make for intelligence in conduct, and for beauty in all human relations. The reasonableness of goodness appeals to one’s intellect, while, on the other hand, one must have character to make his intellect tell.

When they praised Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond, the great lady of her time, they said of her, “Every one that knew her loved her, and everything that she said or did became her.” That is the woman of distinction, whether countess or college girl. “Every one that knew her loved her.” Distinction is of a poor, cold quality which has not sympathy for its final charm.

If Studies give us delight within ourselves, and add to us, we fondly hope, such ornament without, what more may we expect from them? They fit us to take our share in the day’s work. Studies serve us for ability. Says Kipling, “Knowledge gives us control of life, as the fish controls the water he swims in.” The utilitarian view of education is very well, if kept in its proper place; but education, we all know, is for the making of a life as well as of a living. Some mothers used to say, “But my daughter isn’t going to support herself; why should she go to college?” “For delight, for ornament, madam”; and I would add, “for ability and usefulness in any sphere whatever.”

Bacon’s exposition of his own text shows that he means by “ability” much what our New England aunts meant by “judgment.” He says education is of use in “the plotting and marshalling of affairs.” How does this planning and organizing go on? How does business move? By constant wise decisions. Good judgment, you say, is a matter of inborn common sense, and you don’t get common sense by going to college. I am not so sure of that, though I grant it is better to inherit it from a grandmother. But certainly you are learning all the time at college “sense of proportion,” “the fitness of things,” “sweet reasonableness,” which come near to being names for refined common sense.

Life is lived by innumerable decisions, great and small; and a person’s happiness and success will depend much on making these decisions quickly, firmly, and wisely. The helpfulness and comfort that a woman may give to others will consist more in her love and wisdom than in any material benefits she may be able to confer.

One field for the ability of the educated woman of our day is the making of a good home on a small income. She is the woman who will not, consciously or unconsciously, goad her husband to money-making. I should like a fresh sermon preached upon the text, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” This time it should be of those blessed peacemakers who create the harmony, calm, and love of a happy home. That is the great task, the first task of women.

She has no doubt her civic duties, and again her education puts the edge on her abilities: she is a more valuable helper in the world's work. She may be a bread-winner, for herself and for others; and herein, perhaps, is the most simple and popular argument for a woman's pursuit of Studies, one so self-evident that I need not dwell upon it.

I have been speaking of an ideal education and of an ideal woman, but where should we consider them both if not in this very place? A college like yours aims at nothing less!

II – REAL READERS

“Do we make real readers of our students?” was the anxious question of a college president. I remembered his phrase when I read his annual report. “Most of these young people,” he said, “are to go out into ordinary life, into general pursuits, where the one chance of their maintaining their intellectual growth will come through stimulating them in these years to interest in some particular line which they may continue, in the midst of the general pressure of social, domestic, or professional life. Unless a student learn to read and love books, she will, in a large majority of cases, be thrown out of all relation to resources that are in any fair sense of the word intellectual.” He pleaded that to make a girl a real reader is to safeguard her intellectual life.

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