LOWELL

Liberty and Disciple.

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A Talk to Freshmen

by

A. LAWRENCE LOWELL

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WE are living in the midst of a terrific war in which each side casts upon the other the blame for causing the struggle; but in which each gives the same reason for continuing it to the bitter end—that reason being the preservation from destruction of the essential principle of its own civilization. One side claims to be fighting for the liberty of man; the other for a social system based on efficiency and maintained by discipline. Of course the difference is one of degree. No one believes in permitting every man to do whatever he pleases, no matter how it may injure his neighbor or endanger the community; and no country refuses all freedom of action to the individual. But although the difference is only of degree and of emphasis, it is none the less real. Our own people have always asserted their devotion to the principle of personal liberty, and in some ways they have carried it farther than any other nation. It is not, therefore, useless to compare the two principles that we may understand their relative advantages, and perceive the dangers of liberty and the conditions of its fruitfulness.

Americans are more familiar with the benefits of discipline in fact, than conscious of them in theory. Anyone who should try to manage a factory, a bank, a railroad, a ship, a military company, or an athletic team, on the principle of having every employee or member of the organization take whatever part in the work, and do it in whatever way seemed best in his own eyes, would come to sudden grief and be mercilessly laughed at. We all know that any enterprise can be successful only if there is co-ordination of effort, or what for short we call team play; and that this can happen only if the nature of each man's work, and the way he is to perform

it, is arranged with a view to the whole, so that each part fitting into its place contributes its proper share to the total result. Experience has taught us that the maximum efficiency is attained where the team play is most nearly perfect, and therefore the subordination of the individual to the combined action is most nearly complete. Then there is the greatest harmony of action, and the least waste by friction or working at cross purposes. But everyone is aware that such a condition does not come about of itself. Men do not fit into their places in a team or organization spontaneously. Until they have become experts they do not appreciate the relation of their particular work to the plan as a whole; and even when they have become familiar with the game or the industry, they are apt to overestimate their own part in it, or disagree about the best method of attaining the result. Everyone likes to rule, and when Artemus Ward suggested that all the men in a regiment should be made Brigadier Generals at once to avoid jealousy, he touched a familiar weakness in human nature. He was not obliged to explain the joke, because no one fails to see the absurdity of having everybody in command. But that would be exactly the situation if nobody were in command. If there is to be a plan for combined action, somebody must have power to decide what that plan shall be; and if the part of every performer is to be subordinated to the common plan, somebody must have authority to direct the action of each in conformity with the plan. Moreover, that authority must have some means of carrying its directions into effect. It must be maintained by discipline; either by forcing those who do not play their parts rightly to conform to the general plan, or by eliminating them from the organization.

This principle of co-ordinated effort maintained by discipline applies to every combination of men where the maximum efficiency for a concrete object is desired, be it a business, a charity, or a whole state. It is a vitally important principle which no people can afford to lose from sight, but

it is not everything. Whether it conduces to the greatest happiness or not is a question I leave on one side, for I am now discussing only effectiveness. Yet even from that standpoint we have left something out of account. The principle would be absolutely true if men were machines, or if the thing desired were always a concrete object to be attained by co-operation, such as the building of a railroad, the production of wealth, the winning of victory in war or on a playing field. But men are human beings and the progress of civilization is a thing far too complex to be comprised within any one concrete object or any number of such objects depending on combined effort. This is where the advantages of liberty come in.

Pasteur, one of the greatest explorers of nature and benefactors of the age, remarked that the value of liberty lay in its enabling every man to put forth his utmost effort. In France under the ancient monarchy men were very nearly born to trades and professions, or at least large portions of the people were virtually excluded from many occupations. The posts of officers in the army were generally reserved for men of noble rank. The places of judges were purchased, and were in fact largely hereditary, and so on through much of the higher grade of employments. The Revolution broke this system down, and Napoleon insisted that the true principle of the French Revolution was the opening of all careers to talent; not so much equality as freedom of opportunity. Under any system of compulsion or restraint a man may be limited to duties unsuited to his qualities, so that he cannot use the best talents he possesses. The opportunities in a complex modern civilization are of infinite variety, subtle, elastic, incapable of being compassed by fixed regulations for attaining definite objects. The best plan for perfecting the post office, if strictly followed, would not have produced the telegraph; the most excellent organization of the telegraph would not have created the telephone; the most elaborate system of telephone wires and switchboards would not have

included the wireless. The greatest contributions to knowledge, to the industrial arts, and to the comforts of life have been unforeseen, and have often come in unexpected directions. The production of these required something more than a highly efficient organization maintained by discipline.

Moreover—what is nearer to our present purpose—believers in the principle of liberty assert that a man will put forth more effort, and more intelligent effort, if he chooses his own field, and works in his own way, than if he labors under the constant direction of others. The mere sense of freedom is stimulating in a high degree to vigorous natures. The man who directs himself is responsible for the consequences. He guarantees the result, and stakes his character and reputation on it. If after selecting his own career he finds that he has chosen wrongly, he writes himself down a fool. The theory of liberty, then, is based upon the belief that a man is usually a better judge of his own aptitudes than anyone else can be, and that he will put forth more and better effort if he is free than if he is not.

Both these principles, of discipline and of liberty, contain much truth. Neither is absolutely true, nor can be carried to its logical extreme, for one by subjecting all a man's actions to the control of a master would lead to slavery, the other by leaving every man free to disregard the common welfare would lead to anarchy. In America we are committed, as it were, to err on the side of liberty; and it is my purpose to consider here what are the dangers and conditions of liberty in the American college. It is in college that young men first enjoy the pleasure of liberty and assume its responsibilities. They sometimes think themselves still under no little restriction, because they cannot leave the college during term time without permission, and must attend the lectures, examinations, and other duties; but these are slight compared with the restraints which will surround any busy man in after life. There is no better place than college to learn to use freedom without abusing it. This is one of the greatest

opportunities of college life, the thing that makes strong men stronger and sometimes weak men weaker than before.

Liberty means a freedom of choice in regulating one's conduct. If you are free to attend a lecture, but not free to stay away from it, then it is compulsory. You have no liberty whatever in the matter. A man of wealth has no freedom about paying taxes. He is obliged to pay them. But he has freedom about giving money away to relieve distress, or for other charitable purposes, because he may give or not as he pleases. A man is at liberty to be generous or mean, to be kindly or selfish, to be truthful or tricky, to be industrious or lazy. In all these things his duty may be clear, but he is free to disregard it. In short, liberty means freedom to do wrong as well as to do right, else it is no freedom at all. It means freedom to be foolish as well as to be wise, to prefer immediate self-indulgence to future benefit for oneself or others, liberty to neglect as well as to perform the duties of the passing hour that never comes again. But if liberty were used exclusively to do wrong, it would be intolerable, and good sense would sweep it from the earth. The supposition on which liberty is based, the condition on which it exists, is that men will use it for right more than for wrong; that in the long run they will do right more often, and do more that is good, than under a system of restraint.

Mark this, liberty and discipline are not mutually exclusive. Liberty does not mean that good results can ever be attained without discipline. If rightly used it means only that regulation by others is replaced by self-discipline no less severe and inexorable. The man who does not force himself to work when he is disinclined to do so will never achieve anything worth doing. Some really industrious men affect to do only what they like, never working save when the spirit moves them; and occasionally such men deceive themselves in trying to deceive others. If not, they have usually schooled themselves to want what they ought to want. Self-

discipline has brought their inclinations as well as their conduct into a happy subjection to their will. But, in fact, labor carried anywhere near the point of maximum productivity, the point where a man puts forth his utmost effort, is never wholly pleasurable, although the moral force required to drive oneself at top speed varies much in different people. An idle disposition, however, is no sufficient excuse for shirking. Many years ago a stingy old merchant in Boston lay dying. The old miser turned to the brother sitting by his bedside and said: "John, I wish I had been more generous in giving away money in my life. But it has been harder for me than for most men to give money; and, John, I think the Lord will make allowance for differences in temperament." Thus do we excuse ourselves for self-indulgence.

How many men in every American college make an effort to get through with little to spare, win a degree, and evade an education? Not an insignificant number. How many strive earnestly to put forth their utmost effort to obtain an education that will develop their intellectual powers to the fullest extent, and fit them in the highest possible degree to cope with the problems they will face as men and as citizens? Again not an insignificant number, but are they enough to satisfy Pasteur's aspirations, or even to justify his idea of the object of liberty?

Everywhere in the higher education of Europe, whether the system is one of freedom or restraint, whether as in Germany a degree is conferred only on men who have real proficiency, or as in Oxford and Cambridge a mere pass degree is given for very little real work, everywhere the principle of competition is dominant for those who propose to make a marked success in life. Let us take the countries which claim to be fighting in this war for liberty. A student at Oxford or Cambridge knows that his prospects, not only of a position in the university, but at the bar, in permanent public employment and political life, are deeply influenced by, and in many cases almost dependent upon, his winning a

place in the first group of scholars at graduation. The man who gets it plays thereafter with loaded dice. It gives him a marked advantage at the start, and to some extent follows him ever afterwards. Of course, there are exceptional men who by ability come to the front rank without it, but on the whole they are surprisingly few. Mr. Balfour is sometimes referred to as a man who did not distinguish himself at Cambridge, and Sir Edward Grey is said to have been an incorrigibly poor scholar at Balliol in Oxford, yet both of them won third-class honors, which is not far from what we should consider Φ B K rank. To mention only men who have been prominent in public life, Peel, Cardwell, Sherbrooke, Gladstone, Harcourt, Bryce, Trevelyan, Asquith, Haldane, Milner, Simon, Ambassador Spring-Rice, and many more won honors of the first class at one of the two great English universities; while a number of other men distinguished in public life, such as Disraeli, Chamberlain, and Lloyd-George, did not go to Oxford or Cambridge. It would not be difficult to add a long list of judges, and in fact, as an Oxford man once remarked to me, high honors at the university have been almost a necessity for reaching the bench. No doubt the fact that men have achieved distinction at their universities is a test of their ability; but also the fact that they have done so is a direct help at the outset of their careers.

If we turn to France we find the same principle of competition in a direct form though working in other channels. The *Ecole Centrale,* the great school of engineering, and the *Beaux Arts,* the great school of architecture and art, admit only a limited number of students by competitive examination; and the men who obtain the highest prizes at graduation are guaranteed public employment for life. Europeans believe that pre-eminence in those things for which higher education exists is a measure of intellectual and moral qualities; and the fact that it is recognized as such tends to make it so, for the rewards attached to it make

ambitious and capable young men strive for it, and put forth their utmost effort in the competition. Let us hope that some day our colleges, and the public at large, will recognize more fully than they do to-day the value of excellence in college work as a measure of capacity, as a promise of future achievement, and thereby draw out more effort among the undergraduates. It is already the case to a large extent in our professional schools, and ought to be the case in our colleges, if a college education is really worth the money and labor expended on it.

At present the college is scholastically democratic. The world rarely asks how a man got in, or how he graduated. It is enough that he did graduate somehow. Bachelor degrees, whether indicating high scholarship or a minimum of work, are treated by the public as free and equal; and what is worse they are far too much so treated by the colleges and universities themselves. Now, the requirement for a college degree cannot be more than a minimum, and in the nature of things a rather low minimum, requiring on the part of men with more than ordinary ability a very small amount of work; far less than is needed to call forth their utmost effort.

This is one of many illustrations of the well-known fact that education moves slowly, and follows rather than leads the spirit of the time. We live in a strenuous age, a time of activity and energy. I think it was Bagehot who remarked that the change of habits was evident even in the casual greeting of friends. He says that we ask a man whom we have not met for some time, "What have you been doing since I saw you last?" as if we expected him to have been doing something. I remember some time ago reading a story in a magazine about travellers in a railroad train, who were stopped at a custom house to have their baggage examined, and found that, instead of holding clothes, their bags and trunks contained the works they had done in life. It was the last judgment, and several well-meaning persons

found their many pieces of luggage sadly empty. A gentleman among the number came forward to explain that they had supposed their duty to consist in avoiding sin, and they had done so; that their lives had been spent in pleasures, for the most part wholly innocent, and that this was all they had understood to be required of them.

The story illustrates a change of attitude which has come over the world, and men who have passed fifty have seen it come in, comparing the generation that went before them with that which has followed them. Thou shalt is quite as important as thou shalt not. Professor Munro in speaking in a college chapel some time ago on the importance of positive as well as negative morality remarked that most people if asked the meaning of the fourth commandment would think only of its forbidding work on Sunday; whereas its opening words are "Six days shalt thou labor." We live not only in a strenuous world, but in the most strenuous part of the world. Innocent leisure is no longer quite respectable here, except in college; and it is getting not to be respectable there—except in study.

Most of us feel that the American college is a very precious thing. It is a clean and healthy place, morally, intellectually, and physically. I believe that no large body of young men anywhere in the world live on the whole such clean lives, or are cleaner or more honorable in thought. The college is a place where a man may, and where many a man does, develop his character and his mental force to an almost indefinite extent; where he may, and often does, acquire an inspiration that sustains him through life; where he is surrounded by influences that fit him, if he will follow them, for all that is best in the citizen of a republic. The chief defect in the American college to-day is that it has not yet been stirred by the strenuous spirit of the age, the spirit that dignifies the principle of liberty; or at least it has been stirred mainly in the line of what are called student activities. These are excellent things in themselves, to be encouraged in

full measure, but they do not make up for indolence and lack of effort in the studies which are, after all, the justification for the existence of the college. Let us put this matter perfectly plainly. The good sense of the community would never approve of having young men devote the whole of their best four years to the playing field, or to those other accessories of college life, the management of athletic or other organizations, or writing for college papers. These, as I have said, are excellent as accessories, but if they were the whole thing, if instruction and study were abolished, the college would soon be abolished also. What, then, in a land of restless activity and energy is likely to be the future of a college in which a large part of the undergraduates regard extra-curriculum activities as the main interest, and education as an accessory; and where a smaller, but not inconsiderable fraction regard all activity as irksome? If our young men cannot answer that question themselves, let them ask some man who is not himself a college graduate but has worked his way up in the world by his diligence, perseverance, pluck, and force of character.

The danger that under a system of liberty men will fail to put forth their utmost effort lies not merely, or perhaps mainly, in a lack of moral force. It is due quite as much to a lack of moral and intellectual vision, an inability to see any valuable result to be accomplished by the effort. This is particularly true in college. Many a man who intends to work hard thereafter in his profession or business, tries to get through college with a small amount of study. He is fully aware that in his future career he will make no use of a knowledge of the force of the Greek aorist, of the properties of a regular parallelepipedon, or of the effect of the reign of Edward the First on English constitutional history; and hence he is inclined to think these things of no great practical consequence to him. In no form of human productivity of far-reaching importance is the direct practical utility of every step in the process visible to the man who takes it.

The workman in a factory may not know why he mixes certain ingredients in prescribed proportions, why he heats the mixture to a certain temperature, or why he cools it slowly. It might be difficult to explain it to him; and he does these things because they are ordered by the boss.

The difficulty of perceiving the connection between the means and the end is greater in the case of education, as distinguished from mechanical training, than in almost anything else, because the processes are more subtle, more intangible, less capable of accurate analysis. In fact the raw material that is being worked up is not the subject matter of the work but the mind of the worker himself; and the effect on his mind is not from day to day perceptible. His immediate task is to learn something, and he asks himself whether it is really worth learning; whereas the knowledge he acquires is not of the first importance, the vital question being how much he has improved in the ability to acquire and use it. At school the process is equally obscure, but the boy learns his lessons because he is obliged to do so. If he is a good boy he learns them well, because, although blind to the meaning of it all, he knows it is his duty. He does not seek to understand the process; and I recall now with amusement the ridiculous attempts we sometimes made in our school days to explain to our girl friends why it was worth while to study Latin. Many a boy who has ranked high at school, without asking himself the use of studying at all, does little work in college, because he asks himself why he should make the effort and cannot answer the question. The contrast illustrates the difference between a system of discipline and one of liberty. In both the relation of the work of the day and the result to be attained is invisible, but the motive power is not the same.

Under a system of external discipline the motive power is supplied by the habit of obedience, enforced where necessary by penalties. For the good man the habit or duty of blind obedience is enough. As Colonel Mudge expressed it when

he received a mistaken order to charge and sprang forward to lead his regiment at Gettysburg, "It is murder, but it is the order." Some of the greatest examples of heroism in human history have been given in this way. But blind obedience cannot be the motive power where liberty applies, and a man must determine his own conduct for himself. In the vast number of actions where the direct utility of each step cannot be seen, he must act on general principles, on a conviction that the particular step is part of a long process which leads forward to the end. The motive power of liberty is faith. All great enterprises, all great lives, are built upon and sustained by an overmastering faith in something.

Faith is based upon imagination which can conceive things the eye cannot behold. Young people are prone to think of imagination as fantastic, the creation by the mind of impossible forms and events, distortions of nature, or caricatures of man. But it is a higher imagination which pictures invisible things as they are, or as they might really be. Historic imagination does not people the past with impossible beings doing senseless acts, but with living men who thought and acted as men do not think and act to-day, but actually did under conditions that have long passed away. The true reformer is not he who portrays an ideal commonwealth which could never be made to work, but the man whose imagination has such a grasp on the springs of human nature that he can foresee how people would really conduct themselves in conditions yet untried, and whose plans work out as he designed them.

If faith is thus based upon imagination, its fruition requires a steadfastness of purpose that is not weakened by discouragements or turned aside by obstacles that shut out the view and cast dark shadows across the path. The doubter, who asks himself at every stage whether the immediate effort is really worth while, is lost. Prophesy confidently of him that he will never reach his goal.

President Pritchett in a walking tour in Switzerland asked a mountaineer about the road to the place whither he was bound. The man replied that he had never been there, but he knew that was the path which led to it. Such is the pathway to the ventures of life. None of us has ever been over the road we intend to travel in the world. If we believe that the way we take leads to our destination we must follow it, not stopping or turning back because a curve in the mountain trail obscures the distant scene, or does not at the moment seem to lead in the right direction. We must go on in faith that every step along the road brings us nearer, and that the faster we walk the farther we shall go before night falls upon us. The man who does not feel any reason for effort because he cannot see the direct utility of the things he learns has no faith in a college education; and if he has no faith in it he had better not waste time on it, but take up something else that he has faith in, or that is better suited to men of little faith.

Every form of civilization is, not only at its inception and in critical times, but always and forever, on trial. If it proves less effective than others it will be eliminated, peacefully or forcibly, by a gradual process of change or by a catastrophe. Now the test of a civilization based on liberty is the use men make of the liberty they enjoy, and it is a failure not only if men use it to do wrong, but also if they use it to do nothing, or as little as is possible to maintain themselves in personal comfort. This is true of our institutions as a whole and of the American college in particular. A student who has no sustaining faith in the education he can get there; who will not practise the self-discipline needed to obtain it; who uses his liberty to put forth not his utmost, but the least possible, effort; who uses it not to acquire, but to evade, a thorough education, fails to that extent in his duty to himself, to his college, to his country, and to the civilization he inherits. The man who uses his liberty to put forth his utmost effort in college and throughout his life, not

only does his duty, but is helping to make freedom itself successful. He is working for a great principle of human progress. He is fighting the battle of liberty and securing its victory in the civilization of mankind.

Never have I been able to understand—and even less than ever in these terrible days, when young men, on whom the future shone bright with hope, sacrifice from a sense of duty their lives, the welfare of those dearest to them, and everything they care for—less than ever can I understand how any man can stand in safety on a hillside and watch the struggle of life in the plain below without longing to take part therein; how he can see the world pass by without a craving to make his mark, however small, on his day and generation. Many a man who would be eager to join a deadly charge if his country were at war, lacks the insight or imagination to perceive that the warfare of civilization is waged not more upon the battlefield than in the workshop, at the desk, in the laboratory, and the library. We have learned in this stress of nations that men cannot fight without ammunition well made in abundance; but we do not see that the crucial matter in civilization is the preparedness of young men for the work of the world; not only an ample supply of the best material, but a product moulded on the best pattern, tempered and finished to the highest point of perfection. Is this the ideal of a dreamer that cannot be realized; or is it a vision which young men will see and turn to a virile faith?

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