

The True Value of a Classical Education

SINCE the beginnings of civilization, man's primary endeavor has ever been to educate himself. The purpose of education is to make ourselves conscious of our vast heritage and to train our powers so as most effectively to appropriate and use our divine endowment.

We wish to bring ourselves into harmony with our intellectual surroundings, to raise ourselves to the present average of the intelligence of our fellows, or, better yet, to lift ourselves above the average, so that we may be fitted to be leaders, not followers, in the race; so that we may learn through the mastery of our own powers and inclinations, through the discipline of our nature, through long association with the best that the world has thought and wrought, to have some adequate conception of life; so that we may come to see life in its true sense, if not quite that, so that we may attain some aspiration to enjoy that high and worthy power.

How then can we better gain these aims than by what experience has taught us is the only real means to this end, a classical education? Some have been inclined in recent years to lay great stress on what is termed a practical education. The people of our nation are temperamentally inclined to look for short cuts. In education this desire for the practical side emphasizes itself in the early desire for specialization at the necessary sacrifice of a training in the humanities. Specialization requires as a primary factor, maturity. Maturity of mind is not reached generally until a person has completed his secondary education. Then, if he has the firm foundation of the classics behind him, he is fully equipped to specialize.

To the young person looking forward anxiously to his career, the patient and thorough drill of the classics is seemingly a waste of time. He is forgetful of the mental gymnastics whose prototype in physical development he so readily recognizes. He fails to realize that the day is coming when for the solution of some important problem, he will need an elastic thinking power, qualified to hold fast to essentials and to cast aside non-essentials.

The education prevailing in our schools at present has tended toward materialism. It has come more and more to exalt the immediately utilitarian side of instruction. The old school of education had at least an ideal of culture. It began with a definite object. It proceeded by orderly sequence of courses, through clearly defined territory toward its ultimate goal. That goal was disciplined manhood, a mind stored with much knowledge of the sources of our culture; a mind with all its powers at least somewhat tested; a mind that had been made conscious of its capacities and of its ignorance, that had been disciplined in the ways of obtaining knowledge; a mind brought into some relation to the great and obstinate questionings of the soul. That was the old ideal. Surely it was a very noble one.



PETER FRANCIS SULLIVAN, JR.