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Modern Education

Josiah Warren

December 1861

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This is essentially an advertising brochure for a school — the Mechanical College — at Modern Times, no doubt printed by Warren, dated December 1861. It's a vision of education for self-reliance and community building. If Thoreau had written an essay on teaching, he would have said much the same, and he did much the same as a schoolmaster. Warren's is a quintessentially American statement, connecting Ben Franklin and John Dewey. One feature of Warren's critique of the apprenticeship system was that specialized knowledge should not be held in secret by craftsmen or guilds. The almost incredible range of practical and impractical knowledge that Warren evokes in this rather fantastical curriculum is almost certainly one throughout which he felt personally qualified to teach. There is something beautiful about the same man offering to teach you how to make bricks, how to dance the schotthische and how to bring about a golden age of peace and prosperity (no doubt, by making, selling, using these same bricks). The school was evidently meant not only to teach people useful crafts but to build Modern Times and yield recruits. The almost touching honesty and extreme prolixity in this advertisement clearly display Warren's limitations as a self-promoter, though there is a strange sort of poetry or music in his words. And it

should also be said that a quite serious and systematic philosophy of education underlies this material.

Volumes might be written upon the narrowness, the imbecility, injustice, and cruelty of the prevailing modes of education; but these are now common themes, and volumes are not necessary to portray their defects and deformities. Every newspaper displays to us scarcely any thing but war, fraud, violence, falsehood, crime, and suffering, and the rapid approach toward general confusion.

If the human race is destined to any true civilization, the means of attaining it have yet to be learned by old and young. The problem rests in education.

The knowledge of the philosophy of governments, of laws, of money, being no part of general education, the masses become mere dupes and helpless victims of ignorant and unprincipled politicians, speculators, and impostors of all kinds, who, from deficiency of education are tempted into such modes of preserving their worthless existence.

The present modes of education are generally confined within some one narrow circle of ideas or prejudices, directly or indirectly at war with every other and with human nature. They train the young in and for a life of uselessness, and leave them dependent on trickery, fraud, or violence for a living, or confine them to the knowledge of one particular business, which, when it fails in after life, exposes them to poverty, despair, crime, and ruin.

It has been customary for youths to give up two or three, five or seven years of their time and labor to learn a single art or a part of an art or business which might have been learned with the loss of as many days or weeks: and no opportunities are opened to them in adult life for the acquisition of a new business when their old one fails to sustain them, and they are driven to float about upon the sea of accidents or sink.

Probably nowhere, as in the village of Modern Times can be found so much diversity in the above respects, accompanied with that practical toleration, which ensures peace, while each becomes instructive to all, and where so many persons are so well qualified and so ready to assist in educating the young.

The world has suffered more from narrow, crude, and ill-digested theories, than from any other cause; and probably nowhere is this crudity so harmless as in the village of Modern Times, Long Island, New York. And perhaps nowhere else is the remark frequently heard from adults, that the town in which they live "is the greatest school they were ever in."

It is widely known that the atmosphere is exceedingly healthy, and the climate remarkably agreeable.

While reading the foregoing general statements, it should be mentioned, they are not all entirely completed, but the design is to make the preparations keep pace with the sustaining demand for these and any other branches of useful knowledge.

It is well, also, to bear in mind that some branches, such as brick-laying, cistern building, lathing and plastering, framing, ploughing and planting, are more or less favored or retarded by seasons and circumstances, and for this and for other reasons it would be best for persons desirous of securing any of these advantages for themselves or their children, to write and ascertain precisely the facts bearing on their particular wishes existing at the time of application. For this purpose they may address the subscriber at Thompson P.O., Long Island, N.Y., who is alone responsible for any and all the foregoing statements.

Dec., 1861 Josiah Warren

Those who have not had experience would be surprised at the facility with which adults can acquire a new business; and more so, at the efficiency and productive powers of children when opportunities are opened to them, and when justice is done them. Children can learn five, ten, or a dozen different kinds of business before they are twenty years old, in a sufficiently competent manner for all necessary purposes, besides many more than the ordinary branches of learning and personal accomplishments; and, land being secured from speculation, none need suffer for food, clothing, or shelter, nor to feel through life the privation and mortification resulting from the want of accomplishments which can now easily be acquired and which would qualify them for the pursuits and the society they prefer.

To be sure, it is not always the best economy to attempt to carry on more than one business at a time; but it is good economy to be qualified, when that one fails, to turn to another: and to be able to do for one's self that which is indispensable, yet may be inconvenient or impracticable to obtain from others.

It is good economy to attend, first, to that which is first wanted; but not to waste time with satiated, sickly diletanteism that would insist on a certain polish or color to the soles of the shoes while feet are bare and freezing.

There is a vulgar old saying that "Jacks of all trades are good at none." The sentiment is worthy of the barbarous age in which it originated. It favors the concealment of necessary knowledge, and discourages, and no doubt has prevented the proper development and resulted in the despair and death of many a sensitive nature, which otherwise would have proved the saying to be false, as is already proved by hundreds who can excel in a dozen or twenty different trades, when excellence is a sufficient object to stimulate their powers. He or she who can fill twenty useful departments may prove twenty times as valuable as a citizen who can fill only one.

Opportunities are now being opened at the village of “Modern Times” by which adults or children can acquire practical knowledge of the following branches of education.

The use of carpenters’ and cabinet makers’ tools; forging and filing of iron; turning of iron; wood turning; brick laying; lathing and plastering; white and color washing; paper hanging; cistern building; concrete brick making; type setting; proof reading; printing; tin soldering; shoe and boot making; tailoring and cutting; use of sewing machine; painting and glazing; dress making; ladies’ cloak, mantilla, and collar making; ploughing and planting; grafting and budding; culture of fruits, vegetables, and flowers; physiology; gymnastics, geometry; drawing; superior penmanship; reading; arithmetic; grammar; geography.

Dancing. — contra dances, quadrilles, polkas, schotthisches, waltzing.

History, and the customs, religions, morals fashions, governments, and experiences of different nations. The philosophy of languages, and those portions of French and Latin most useful in this country.

Music: The philosophy or science of the most finished and exact performance, by a simple and expeditious method. Lessons on the violin, clarionette, flute, flageolette, violincello, bassoon, trombones, french horn, guitar, melodian and piano forte; extempore accompaniment; musical composition

Criticism, public speaking, how to conduct public meetings.

A mode of securing individual homesteads for the homeless without waiting for legislation.

The philosophy of governments, of laws, of morals, of social deportment or manners, of money and its true functions, of a system of commerce and a kind of money which do not degrade human nature and ruin nations.

A military drill with a mental discipline for the sole purpose of preventing all unnecessary violence to any persons or property.

A mode of securing to all labor its just reward (the great problem of the age), and of universal justice, and consequent peace and prosperity.

Instruction in all the foregoing branches are to be obtained (when preparations are complete) at prices so low as to bring them within the reach of adults or children generally; but no uniform or permanent prices can be fixed to all branches, or for all persons alike — some require more instruction and others less; but, as a general rule, the price will be merely that which moderately compensates for the labor actually bestowed in teaching and for contingent expenses of rent of room and tools, firewood, etc., the learners having the whole products of their labor to dispose of at will.

In wood and iron working, bricklaying, lathing and plastering, and several other branches, the products of the pupil will generally pay all expenses, board included.

Those branches which can be taught in classes will be less in price as the number of pupils is large, and the same principle would affect the price of board.

No person is properly educated within the walls of any building, nor under the prescriptions of any theory whatever.

Whatever surrounds, educates us. The university in which we are really and inevitable educated is the town, the city, the circle in which we live and move. The greater our scope of experience in business, the more we mix with different people, the greater the diversity of habits, fashions, tastes, and opinions within the scope of our observation while young, and the more we are called upon to compare the results of all, and to judge each tree by its fruit, to select some and reject others, the more the faculty of discrimination is exercised, the mind expanded, the hands and the judgment strengthened and the better are we prepared for self-government, self-preservation, for citizenship, and for all the contingencies and relations of after life.