THE MOST VALUABLE OF ALL ARTS: BY GUSTAV STICKLEY

"I should regard the most valuable of all arts to be the deriving of a comfortable substance from the smallest area of soil."—Abraham Lincoln.

THINK it is worth while occasionally to ask ourselves just what education is for. Is it a decoration—or is it something we strive for because it illumines life, enables us to accomplish more clearly, wisely and completely our destiny?

Haven't we all let ourselves confuse education with books? To me the confusion lies mainly in books. I think education should partly at least be what we learn through our own experiences, through our contact and conflict with Nature and our gradual understanding of her ways. Whereas in books, we are studying all the while to find out about other people's experiences. I find it of course a good thing to know what other people have thought and worked over and achieved, but this of itself is not enough. Every man has got to develop his own muscle. He cannot live through the strength of others.

For instance, the painter is a valuable man in our civilization. He stimulates our imagination by revealing to us his vision of life. But it is not satisfactory to me merely to get another man's point of view of beauty. I want to express my own vision, whatever it may be, in my own way, and through it to grow more fully and happily. And I firmly believe today, as I have so often said in the last fifteen years, that the great school teacher for all people is Nature, because Nature alone teaches you through your own experiences.

Someone once asked Lincoln what art he thought most important. He hesitated for a moment, then replied with his whimsical smile, "I should regard the most valuable of all 'arts' to be the deriving of a comfortable substance from the smallest area of soil." He did not stop to think about music or painting or sculpture, but of the art of living. He was always thinking of that.

It is because we have forgotten this art of living, its relation to Nature, its simple outlines, that we are in the midst of the terrific conditions that exist all over the world. If each man regarded his
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life as the development of an art, if he insisted upon getting from the soil what was essential for his own livelihood and happiness, we would have widespread contentment.

It is when science and Nature are harnessed for the sole sake of money making, when production is increased away beyond reasonable human needs, when in order to make large sums we force enormous manufacture, exploiting our business through competition, that we develop commercial warfare. It is a very short distance between business warfare and the battlefield. We passed it in twenty-four hours a year ago last August.

I find myself in talking to young people constantly reverting to the importance of the art of living, that is, the importance of some association with Nature in the development of childhood. I learned when I was a very young lad that I could never fool Nature; that when I worked in the fields with her, in rain or sunshine or in wind, I was coping with the eternal elements, that I could not fake anything or talk back; that she was inexorable, that in order to achieve anything I must work with her; for I could never battle with her without being the sufferer. I believe that this early association with Nature, this learning the art of living, is bound to develop in young people sincerity and a profound recognition of the fact that only absolute truth is worth taking into consideration in life.

In the country, how early a boy learns that when it is time to get hay in, it is time to get it in; that when a storm comes up, your hay is either in the barn or spoiled; that when springtime comes, if you are going to have a garden, you have got to plant your seed; you can’t argue with your parents about it or convince yourself that another week will do; and you can’t plant vegetable seed and get a flower garden. You early wake up to the fact that you work right along Nature’s rules without any theories, if you want success. Nature is far more ruthless than schoolmasters or parents. She never makes excuses herself, and she never accepts apologies.

And so it seems to me that Lincoln was thinking very straight and very true when he said that it was the most valuable of all arts to get a comfortable substance from a small area of soil. He did not mean just the material things that you can take out of the soil, just the flowers, fruit and vegetables. He was too wise for that. He meant that it was doubly valuable, because besides your livelihood, you learn all of Nature’s lessons. You grow to estimate life from her standards; you realize that her unflinching ways are good ways and her friendly moods wonderful to share.

When I spoke of international warfare as the culmination of
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business productivity in the wrong channel and of Lincoln’s outlook as furnishing the solution for conditions which at their worst might breed war, I did not forget that Lincoln himself had been instrumental in his day in bringing about war. But in the midst of destruction and sorrow he was never destructive. We should stop to think about the reason men go to war. Battling for commercial prosperity, for material advancement, for territorial expansion, is disintegrating beyond the power of man to conceive. This is not the sort of warfare that Abraham Lincoln took part in. His was a conflict for an ideal, and even when he was overwhelmed with the horror of the whole situation, when he was suffering profoundly as a man and a citizen, he was always looking ahead, always planning for reconstruction, always dreaming of the creation of a new republic. Even those who were not on his side in the past never attributed to him a desire for power, ruthlessness, aggrandizement or self-interest.

AND so I feel confident that I am right in saying that you cannot battle for merchandise or its equivalents and make great ethical strides. I do not wish to be understood as speaking in a derogatory way of business or commerce, but I think it should never be taken out of the hands of the people. It should belong to them just as the land should. No one group of people can do the work for another. You would not expect a trust to make all the money in the world, instead of each man making his own living; you would not be satisfied to have someone do your eating or your sleeping for you; you do not want other people to plan your home and bring up your children. Each man wants his individual life, and it is only when the people are working for themselves, for their own interests, when they are building their own homes, planning their home life, cultivating their gardens and farms, developing their own music, painting their own pictures, that they are getting the kind of creative exercise that will stimulate them and will mean real national progress.

You have got to exercise your own faculties mentally, physically and spiritually. Business, which today has become essential, should be a sort of social exercise. It should be the exercise of making for the people what they need, what they want, making it in such a way that it is beautiful and durable. That indeed would be a fine commercial achievement. Thus all art, all agriculture, all business activity, would be the result of individual discipline, and people would be the better for their work, stronger and more intelligent.

But the moment business is used to increase revenue without regard to the value of the product, or the world’s need of it and how it can be honestly disposed of, then are we exploiting our business,
and destroying it. To use enormous business activities for selfish purposes is one way of atrophying commercial enterprises. Naturally you cannot make progress through atrophy, and a thing that is not progressing is slipping back, in business as well as in character. The longer I live the more I know that nothing really matters, if we consider life in the large, except that a community should make progress.

Progress for the individual must always depend upon creative development. The community moves with the individual, and of course the nation with the community. And so to revert to Lincoln’s point of view once more, the greater the development of man in his intimate relation with Nature, the more each man realizes that he should have his own acre of Nature for help, instruction, and livelihood if it may be, the better we shall be as a nation, the finer we shall be in our character and the further we shall be from all warfare, national and international.

In writing I always like best to use the simplest illustrations. Men speak best, I believe, out of their own experiences. The most far-reaching experiences of my life I gained during my boyhood days on a farm. It was there that I really got my first insight into house building and there too that my interest in cabinet work began. In my young days you did not get a catalogue of farm implements in every mail. When we wanted a new wheel for the cart, we made it and we learned many things in its making. Mathematics and philosophy and other important college courses I took as an amateur wheelwright. My first carpenter work was an ox yoke and I discovered a great deal in the making of that yoke which has been important to me all my life. It was a proud moment when I made my first successful axe helve, for a great deal indeed depends upon how an axe helve is hung. And when I had made the kind of helve that was satisfactory, I had enlarged my understanding of life considerably.

A farm boy can extend his wisdom by meeting emergencies far more than the average boy can by reading a book. I doubt if a lad could ever get sufficient printed instruction to know exactly how to handle an obstreperous calf, but the boy who succeeds in teaching a calf what a halter means has solved a variety of problems in his own way before they get into the barn door together. And so I feel it immensely important for Nature to have a hand in our training. I believe for instance that a course of farming would be a good thing for a boy even who was planning to be an architect or a furniture maker, I am not sure but what it would be worth while for a painter or a poet.
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I have always liked to study Colonial furniture. I never tire of it. No one does, I believe. It is not a fad one day and forgotten the next. We never quarrel with it. What has ever been made more permanently good and worth while than a Windsor chair? It belongs to and expresses well-regulated life and its influence is for simplicity and sincerity. Colonial furniture was born at a time when living in America was a serious matter, a dignified and formal matter, too. The furniture in those days, the painting, the homes, all have gone on record as a tribute to the fineness of the people who designed them and lived with them.

It seems to me that when we look at it we see the kind of people who made it, plain, hardworking, sincere-thinking, simple folk—what I mean by the "common people," men who put their conscience, as well as their science and their art into their cabinet work, who worked with water power and hand-turning lathes; in other words, they worked hard to accomplish anything, and I have no doubt whatever that most of them were farmers too in off hours, or had been. For best results and most achievement in the world, we cannot separate farming from other industries. Cabinet-making and farming go hand in hand. Craft work and agriculture belong together. Lincoln knew this, and this is what he really meant in the quotation we have used at the beginning of this article.

And I believe so far as possible it is a good thing to originate the thing you are going to make, just as the Colonial cabinet makers did. There is no doubt in the world that you can get inspiration and knowledge too in imitating old masterpieces, whether the work of painters or cabinet makers, but I am sure that in the long run the best plan is to study the good old things historically. Let them enlarge your appreciation and sympathy, then go ahead and create something that seems good to you in your own way. Learn all you can of the art of other worlds and times as a background. You need it. But the best copy that you can make of another piece of furniture cannot do for you personally what your own creation can.

Indeed how can any man hope to really imitate say, for instance, a Heppelwhite chair? Who can know in what mood Heppelwhite was when he designed the chair, for whom he was making it, just what entered into the environment of his life when he was working on it? We can't get into Heppelwhite's frame of mind and so we can't produce what he did. Thus when we are imitating Heppelwhite or Sheraton or Adam, we are really making an American chair along antique lines, and the better it is the less it expresses ourselves.

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