

## SOME INSTRUCTORS OF CONSCIENCE: NATURE, SCIENCE, ART

Nature- The Debts of Recognition, Appreciation, and Preservation.- People are beginning to know that it is a shameful ignorance to live in this rich and beautiful world and not know the things about us even by name. The inheritors of precious collections recognise it as a duty to know, and to know about, the things they own : not to do so would be boorish ignorance. Here is a duty that lies upon us all ; for we all enter on the inheritance of the heavens and the earth, the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. These are things to which we have right, no one can take them from us ; but, until we get as much as a nodding and naming acquaintance with the things of Nature, they are a cause rather of irritation and depression than of joy.

Let us believe it, ignorance is a vice that never goes unpunished, and,

“The loud laugh that speaks the vacant mind,”

startling us in the midst of a quiet scene of natural beauty, speaks not only of vacuity, but of the resentment and soreness of ignorance. We owe debts to things as well as to persons-the debts of recognition, appreciation, and preservation.

In this matter of instruction in the things of Nature, we owe yet more to ourselves : for,

“Nature never did betray the heart that loved her”;-

and, in return for our discriminating and loving observation, she gives us the joy of a beautiful and delightful intimacy, a thrill of pleasure in the greeting of every old friend in field or hedgerow or starry sky, of delightful excitement in making a new acquaintance.

Nature gives us certain dispositions of mind which we can get from no other source, and it is through these right dispositions that we get life into focus, as it were; learn to distinguish between small matters and great, to see that we ourselves are not of very great importance, that the world is wide, that things are sweet, that people are sweet, too; that, indeed, we are compassed about by an atmosphere of sweetness, airs of heaven coming from our God. Of all this we become aware in “the silence and the calm of mute, insensate things.” Our hearts are inclined to love and worship; and we become prepared by the quiet schooling of Nature to walk softly and do our duty towards man and towards God. In the chief duty of man, his duty towards God, Nature is an exquisite instructor.

But it is not only as she helps us in our own spiritual life that Nature instructs us in our duty to God. Some people have the grace to be tenderly and reverently thankful to the author of a great book, the painter of a great picture-thankful, if less reverently so, to the discoverer of a great invention. What daily and hourly thanks and praise, then, do we owe to the Maker and designer of the beauty, glory, and fitness above our heads and about our feet and surrounding us on every side! From the flower in the crannied wall to the glorious firmament on high, all the things of Nature proclaim without ceasing, “Great and

marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty.”

The advancement of Science in late years, and the preoccupation of men’s minds with structural details of the various members of the natural world, have produced a thick mist to hide the Creator ; and we have been content to receive the beauty that delights us and the fitness that astonishes us as self-produced and self-conceived. In this matter, Science has behaved like a child so much occupied with a new toy that to be reminded either of the maker or the giver of the toy is tiresome and vexatious. He does not deny either maker or giver, but the toy itself is all he cares about. This state of preoccupation, which has, no doubt, done good service to the cause of knowledge, is passing by, and the scientific mind is becoming more and more aware of the higher Power than Nature herself which is behind all the workings of Nature.

With this recognition will come gratitude ; and the thankful heart is the glad heart. Truly, a joyful and a pleasant thing it is to be thankful!

Science herself, whose business it is to discover to us what we call the laws of Nature, is a teacher upon whom the conscience, seeking for instruction, must wait sedulously. The rash conclusions and reckless statements of the person who has had no scientific training make him mischievous in society—a source of superstition and prejudice. Scientific training is not the same thing as information about certain scientific subjects. No one in these days can escape random information; but windfalls of this sort do not train the mind in exact observation, impartial record, great and humble expectation, patience, reverence, and humility, the sense that any minute natural object enfolds immense secrets—laws after which we are still only feeling our way.

This scientific attitude of mind should fit us to behave ourselves quietly, think justly, and walk humbly with our God. But we may not confound a glib knowledge of scientific text-books with the patient investigation carried on by ourselves of some one order of natural objects ; and it is this sort of investigation, in one direction or another, that is due from each of us. The attitude of mind we get in our own little bit of work helps us to the understanding of what is being done elsewhere, and we no longer conduct ourselves in this world of wonders like a gaping rustic at a fair.

Let me again say that this is *due* from us, and is not a thing we may take up or leave alone as we think fit. Let each of us undertake the patient, unflagging, day-by-day observation of the behaviour of sparrow, spider, teasel, of clouds or winds, recording what we ourselves have seen, correcting our records as we learn to be more accurate, and being very chary of conclusions. All we find out may be old knowledge, and is more likely already recorded in books ; but, for us, it is new, our own discovery, our personal knowledge, a little bit of the world’s real work which we have attempted and done. However little work we do in this kind, we gain by it some of the power to appreciate, not merely beauty, but fitness, adaptation, processes. Reverence and awe grow upon us, and we are brought into a truer relation with the Almighty Worker.

A great promise has been given to the world-that its teachers shall not any more be removed. There are always those present with us whom God whispers in the ear, through whom He sends a direct message to the rest. Among these messengers are the great painters who interpret to us some of the meanings of life. To read their messages aright is a thing due from us. But this, like other good gifts, does not come by nature. It is the reward of humble, patient study.

The artist-                   “Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,  
  Above and through his art,”-

has indispensable lessons to give us, whether he convey them through the brush of the painter, the vast parables of the architect, or through such another cathedral built of sound as ‘Abt Vogler’ produced : the outward and visible sign is of less moment than the inward and spiritual grace.

That we may be in a condition to receive this grace of teaching from all great Art, we must learn to appreciate and to discriminate, to separate between the meretricious and the essential, between technique (the mere power of expression) and the thing to be expressed-though the thing be no more than the grace and majesty of a tree. Here, again, I would urge that appreciation is not a voluntary offering, but a debt we owe, and a debt we must acquire the means to pay by patient and humble study. In this, as in all the labours of the conscience seeking for instruction, we are enriched by our efforts ; but self-culture should not be our object. Let us approach Art with the modest intention to pay a debt that we owe in learning to appreciate. So shall we escape the irritating ways of the connoisseur!

*by Charlotte Mason, Vol. 4 Ourselves Pages 97-103*