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The Value of an Educated Woman

Julie Earl

Julie M. Earl, author of the following article, was raised in Tempe, Arizona, but has called Southern Utah "home" for the last ten years. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Biblical Studies and Health Sciences and Masters and Doctorate degrees in Education. Dr. Earl has taught in primary, secondary and post-secondary institutions and has lectured in many different forums. Currently she is a Professor of Liberal Arts at George Wythe College. Dr. Earl is presently publishing a series of books to assist educators in mentoring students in classical literature. She enjoys many hobbies among which are reading, music, restoring her 1920's home, and most recently, playing with her new little nephew.

An older woman approached Dr. Louis Agassiz, a distinguished American naturalist, after a lecture he gave in London. She complained that she had never really had a chance to learn because of her lot in life. She and her sister ran a boardinghouse and she simply didn't have time for anything else. After listening to the woman's story, Dr. Agassiz responded, "Do you say, madam, you never had a chance? What do you do?" She replied, "I skin potatoes and chop onions." He then inquired, "Madam, where do you sit during these interesting but homely duties?"

"On the bottom step of the kitchen stairs."

"Where do your feet rest?"

"On the glazed brick."

"What is glazed brick?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How long have you been sitting there?"

"Fifteen years."

Dr. Agassiz then handed her his business card saying, "Madam, here is my personal card. Would you kindly write me a letter concerning the nature of a glazed brick?"

An odd request indeed, especially from someone so highly esteemed in the scientific world. The woman took the request seriously. She looked up "brick" in the dictionary, which stated that it was a piece of baked clay. This definition was far too simple to send to a famous scientist, so she continued her search moving on to the encyclopedia. As she read about bricks, she came to words that were unfamiliar to her, so she looked them up in the dictionary. She became more and more intrigued. She studied geology to understand how clay beds were created. She visited museums and libraries to obtain more in-depth articles. She even visited a local brickyard. When she felt her

studies were complete on the matter, she sat down and wrote Dr. Agassiz a 36-page letter on the subject of glazed brick and tile.

In time, a reply came from Dr. Agassiz in which he informed her that it was the best article he had ever seen on the subject and then asked, "If you will kindly change the three words marked with asterisks, I will have it published and pay you for it." Soon a letter was received by the old spinster containing \$250, quite a large sum in that day. Accompanying the payment was another question, "What is under those bricks?"

She looked under the bricks and discovered ants. Thus she began an in-depth study of ants. She found there were as many as 2,500 different kinds. In order to understand the ant family she needed to study other subjects as well. After extensive reading and careful study, she wrote 360 pages on the subject to Dr. Agassiz. This time he published it as a book and sent her a large sum of money which she used to travel and visit all the lands of her dreams.

Some women will choose formal, traditional routes of education, and will contribute to discoveries in science, medicine, industry, and business that will change a part of society; others will write books or create art that will challenge souls for generations. But some will make just as significant an impact on humanity by their educated influence on their own sons and daughters at their own hearths. Author Edith Hunter describes the important influence of an educated woman in the home: "Educated women in the home? What an odd thing to deplore! What better place to have us 'end up'. . . What more important job is there than sharing the values we are learning to cherish with the next generation of adults? What more strategic place could there be for the educated woman?"

So often when we speak about education in terms of "going to school" or that it is something you do when you're young involving attendance in classes on some large and overbearing campus. Some of us may wonder if we somehow "missed out" because we didn't get a degree or diploma, or that education is related to acquiring knowledge or skills necessary for some type of job or career. As women, so often it seems as if our families must suffer if we are to be educated-and for what end?

These questions all stem from a misunderstanding as to what education truly is. It is true that a woman may become "educated" in a number of ways, from candidacy for an advanced degree to personal study in her own home. But in the eternal scheme of things, the method of education is irrelevant to the "degree" of education. True education is a process of life, and not merely a means to an end. As Robert M. Hutchins, former President of the University of Chicago states:

I am afraid we shall have to admit that the educational process in America is either a rather pleasant way of passing the time until we are ready to go to work, or a way of getting ready for some occupation, or a combination of the two. What is missing is education to be human beings, education to make the most of our

human powers, education for our responsibilities as members of a democratic society, education for freedom.

This scenario may sound familiar to some of you. I know a woman who has two boys, ages three and four, and a third at twenty-two months. She says there are days when "my most educational experience is trying to find three pairs of socks that match. Other times my most pressing objective is to separate the breakfast cereal from the dining-room floor. Just to have us all dressed, in anything near appropriate, before 10:00 A.M. is sometimes a major academic achievement. So often we get caught up in the business of life, and think that all we can take care of are the bare essentials. We think that there is no time for extra reading or learning. Although it may seem impossible, if we carefully look at our lives, we will find that there is time for education.

Allow me to share a personal example. My mother taught my four younger brothers and myself at home. She began when home schooling was very little heard of in Arizona. She didn't have any of the boundless resources available to parents today. She didn't have support groups, role models or books explaining how to home school. Along side taking care of our home and "mothering us," she was extremely busy trying to make sure that we got the basics such as making sure my brothers could read, that we had a social life, and most importantly, that we didn't look too weird to everyone else. Yet amid all the chaos of trying something she had never seen done before, she took time for personal education. Some might say, "what a selfish thing to do, you're children need all your time!" But she instinctively felt that somehow this personal education would benefit her children. I remember watching my mother studying about ancient Egypt, archeology, American government, dancing, piano, house design and construction, etc. I remember thinking, "Wow, no matter what I do, I'll never catch up to her." What she unknowingly did, was inspire her children to study. Watching my mother's excitement of discovery, planted a seed of desire in me. And I wasn't the only one; my brothers had a similar spark implanted. Even today as adults, my brothers and I are constantly seeking more education aside from the rigors of work or other academic schooling. My mother could have helped us, I'm sure, by using the time she spent in her personal studies, to sit with us and teach us from the books we were reading. But I know she did far more by inspiring us to a life-long habit and passion of self education. This follows the thoughts expressed by the great philosopher Plutarch when he stated:

. . . [V]irtue by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the thing done and the desire to imitate the doers of them. The goods of fortune we would possess and would enjoy; those of virtue we long to practice and exercise . . . moral good is a practical stimulus: it is no sooner seen, than it inspires an impulse to practice and influence the mind and character.

Our time is often so limited that we must be careful to spend it wisely on only those things that will benefit us and our families. There has never been a time in the history of the world when we have been so bombarded with opportunities, with the internet, radio, television including cable and satellite, magazines and newspapers, books,

courses on video, computer, and cassette tape, and the list goes on and on. This may have been alluded to in Timothy 2:16: But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. How many things do we spend our precious time participating in that are vain-having no real value. We must judge, and judge carefully, spending our time studying the worthwhile things of this world and the world to come.

With such warnings in mind, we still have many "safe" educational avenues left open to us. I could suggest numerous ways to begin, but instead I will share one that has changed my life that anyone can partake in, regardless of the amount of formal education possessed. The education process in uplifting reading can be revitalizing and fortifying; and I for one, subscribe to the same philosophy of learning that Somerset Maugham suggests:

In a great library, you get into society in the widest sense ... From that great crowd you can choose what companions you please, for in these silent gatherings ... the highest is at the service of the lowest, with a grand humility. ... In a library you become a true citizen of the world.

There are certain types of books that I feel are more effective than others, this group is referred to as the Classics. Allow me to clarify the term a bit more. Being old is not the primary qualification; instead a classical text is one that can be studied time and time again, giving new insight and understanding with each visit. (Incidentally classics aren't just books, they can be anything: art pieces, music, nature, poetry, dance, and even people) Because of this, many old books are classics, for they have withstood the test of time and have proven their worth in countless readings. But there are modern day classics as well, although sometimes harder to discern from everything else. Classical literature is not just contained to fiction, but can be found in any field, political science, philosophy, mathematics, science, etc. Classics are powerful because they bring us closer to human excellence because they cause the mind to think-to expand. They spur us on to great thoughts, to new understanding. They inspire us to go deeper-to search further. Hutchins again explains:

There is, too, the infinite suggestiveness of great books. They lead us to other books, other thoughts, other questions. They enlarge the fund of ideas we have and relate themselves to those we possess. Since the suggestiveness of great books is infinite, we cannot get to the end of them. We cannot say we understand these books in the sense that we are finished with them and what they have to teach us.

You may say that you read a particular book as a youth and therefore needn't read it again. If so you would be cheating yourself out of a great education. Remember a classic is something that can be read time and time again, gaining new and deeper insights. Hutchings said, "Think what it means, for instance, to read Macbeth at sixteen in contrast to reading it at thirty-five. We can understand Macbeth as Shakespeare meant us

to understand it only when we have had some experience, vicarious or otherwise, of marriage and ambition. To read great books, if we read them at all, in childhood and youth and never read them again is never to understand them." As you spend time reading the classics, you will find greater insights into every aspect of your life. You will be amazed how reading Bronte's Jane Eyre will help you with raising your teenagers, or how some of your budgeting problems were solved after reading Newton's Principia. But it must be remembered that reading the classics is difficult. They are usually written using language that isn't spoken in everyday America-this is good. They will ask hard, thought provoking questions that you will have to grapple with, possibly for many days-this is also good. They will point out glaring flaws in your own human nature and inspire you to change-this is wonderful. In essence, Classics cause you to think. Unfortunately it is because of this that we shy away from the classics and from education in general. We look for the easy way out, but there is no easy road to true education. Mortimer Adler pinpoints the cause precisely when he says that thinking "is hard work-in fact the very hardest that human beings are ever called upon to do. It is fatiguing, not refreshing. If allowed to follow the path of least resistance, no one would ever think." What kind of world would we live in if everyone followed the easy road, simply listen to the nightly news and you may catch a glimpse. Thus education, which in turn inspires human excellence, has a benefit on society, on the family. For as Josiah Bunting states:

We cannot measure the effects of a lifetime's quiet reading of such literatures upon the sensibilities and judgments of public men and women, men and women who must act, direct, lead, decide. Yet it seems irrefutable that their judgments are bound to be more complete, less solipsistic, more compassionate, and ultimately more accurate than those who do not read the literature of the imagination.

Learning is contagious, and more and more people would struggle through the pain of learning if they had an example-be that example. Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." Women especially have much to do with change. We affect so many around us. It is our challenge to realize that our influence on our peers, our families, and our posterity can be limitless. Dr. Charles D. McIver spoke on this point in addressing the students at North Carolina College for Women, he said, "When you educate a man you educate an individual; when you educate a woman you educate a whole family." Further, that educated family will then change the world.