

THE PUBLIC HAPPINESS: THOMAS JEFFERSON'S CRUSADE AGAINST IGNORANCE

Adapted for the stage
by Warren Kliewer*

(It is an evening in March, 1819, the common room of a tavern in Washington. Music under. THOMAS JEFFERSON enters, and he is visible during the introduction. He is drinking coffee in the eighteenth century style--first pouring it into the saucer to cool it, then drinking from the saucer.)

THOMAS JEFFERSON

I was gratified with the receipt of your letters of the past few months, inviting me to visit you here briefly while on my way back to the farm. It gives me pleasure that the citizens of your communities have chosen to educate the youth of our new country, and that they have been wise enough to enlist your talents into this service. I am much obliged by the kind wishes you express of seeing me here in Washington--in this commodious tavern--and that you are pleased to ask my opinions concerning the higher degrees of education.

(He takes another sip of coffee and takes the time to glance around the room.)

This is a sumptuous tavern indeed! There may be some hope for civilization in Washington, after all.

(He takes out a packet of letters.)

To some of the questions which you put to me in your letters, I cannot readily supply answers. How can one know what the citizens and the youth of some other community require of an university? The citizens of my state, Virginia, have asked Commissioners, including me, to report to the Governor about a proposed University of Virginia. We met in August in Rockfish Gap--at another tavern--to deliberate, and I have completed the report. We shall soon see what the citizens of Virginia expect of an university.

*Copyright(c) 1987 by Warren Kliewer. All rights reserved. No part of this stage adaptation may be performed without the written permission of the adaptor.

To some of your questions I do have ready answers--even strong answers. You ask:

(Referring to one of the letters)

"What are the objects of a useful American education?"

Classical knowledge, modern languages and chiefly French, Spanish, and Italian; Civil History; Ethics.

Why, then, send an American youth to Europe for education? Let us view the disadvantages. If he goes to England he learns drinking, horse-racing, and boxing.

These are the peculiarities of English education. In that and the other countries of Europe, he acquires a fondness for European luxury and dissipation, is fascinated with the privileges of the European aristocrats, and contracts a partiality for aristocracy or monarchy.

He returns to his own country a foreigner, speaking and writing his native tongue as a foreigner. I would observe to you that what is called style in writing or speaking is formed very early in life while the imagination is warm, and impressions are permanent. There never was an instance of a man's writing or speaking his native tongue with elegance who passed from fifteen to twenty years of age out of the country where it was spoken. It appears to me, then, that an American going to Europe for education loses in his knowledge, in his morals, in his health, in his habits, and in his happiness.

Did you expect by so short a question to draw such a sermon on yourselves? I dare say you did not. But the consequences of foreign education are alarming to me as an American. I sin therefore through zeal whenever I enter on the subject. Cast your eye over America: who are the men of most learning, of most eloquence, most beloved by their country and most trusted and promoted by them? They are those who have been educated among them, and whose manners, morals and habits are perfectly homogeneous with those of the country. Don't you agree?

(Referring to another letter)

Ah, yes, the plan of a college. I consider the common one followed

in this country, but not in others, of making one large and expensive building, as unfortunately erroneous. It is infinitely better to erect a small and separate lodge for each separate professorship, with only a hall below for his class, and two chambers above for himself; joining these lodges by barracks for a certain portion of the students, opening into a covered way to give a dry communication between all the schools.

(He uses his cup, saucer, and letters to illustrate the plan.)

The whole of these arranged around an open square of grass and trees, would make it, what it should be in fact, an academical village. It would afford that quiet retirement so friendly to study. Much observation and reflection on these institutions have long convinced me that the large and crowded buildings in which youths are pent up, are equally unfriendly to health, to study, to manners, morals and order.

(He reflects for a moment.)

Yes, that is it. An academical village. A sequestered place where the highest degrees of education are given to the highest degrees of genius, and to all degrees of it, so much as may enable them to read and understand what is going on in the world, and to keep their part of it going on right: nothing can keep it right but their own vigilant and distrustful superintendence.

The best mode of government for youth, in large collections, lies in just that--the youths' own superintendence. "Should not," this same letter asks, "should not an university and its tutors be given the necessary powers of discipline over the misbehavior of students?" An interesting question. It may be well questioned whether fear after a certain age, is a motive to which we should have ordinary recourse. The human character is susceptible of other incitements to correct conduct, more worthy of employ, and of better effect. Pride of character, laudable ambition, and moral dispositions are innate correctives of the indiscretions of that age. The affectionate deportment between father and son, offers in truth the best example for that of tutor and pupil. A proper system of government should be devised which, founded in reason and comity, will be likely to nourish in the minds of our youth the combined spirit of order and self-respect, so congenial with our political institutions, and so important to be woven into the American character.

Next question.

(Referring to another letter.)

I have been much squibbed for some of my recommendations regarding religious views represented in the university. May I respond--not intemperately, I hope. Believing that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.

It is not, however, to be understood that instruction in religious opinions and duties is meant to be precluded by the public authorities, as indifferent to the interests of society. On the contrary, the relations which exist between man and his Maker, and the duties resulting from those relations are the most interesting and important to every human being, and the most incumbent on his study and investigation. But I think it proper to leave every sect to provide, as they think fittest, the means of further instruction in their own peculiar tenets. The want of instruction in the various creeds of religious faith existing among our citizens is an evil, but it is of less danger than a permission to the public authorities to dictate modes or principles of religious instruction--or than opportunities furnished them of giving countenance or ascendancy to any one sect over another.

A remedy has been suggested of promising aspect. It has been in contemplation to establish religious schools on the confines of the University, so as to give to their students convenient access to the scientific lectures of the University, and to maintain by that means those destined for the religious professions on as high a standing of science and of personal weight and respectability, as may be obtained by others from the benefits of the University. It would always be with the understanding that these schools shall be independent of the University and of each other. Such an arrangement would complete the circle of the useful sciences embraced by this institution--on principles which would leave

violate the constitutional freedom of religion, the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights.

(He chuckles as he refers to another letter.)

Not all of your questions were so grave. "What can be done about the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed?" It is true. When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reading and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life, as this gentleman has suggested. For a like reason, too, much poetry should not be indulged.

And yet, a view of the books which I myself read would I suppose extort a smile from the face of gravity. Peace to its wisdom! A little attention to the nature of the human mind evinces that the entertainments of fiction are useful as well as pleasant. That they are pleasant when well written, every person feels who reads. But wherein is its utility, asks the reverend sage? Everything is useful which contributes to fix us in the principles and practice of virtue. When any signal act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity and conceive an abhorrence of vice. The exercise of the moral feelings produces a habit of thinking and acting virtuously.

We never reflect whether the story we read be truth or fiction. I appeal to every reader of feeling and sentiment whether the fictitious murder of Duncan by Macbeth in Shakespeare does not excite in him as great horror of villainy, as the real one of Henry IV by Ravallac as related by Davila? We neither know nor care whether Lawrence Sterne really went to France, whether he was there accosted by the poor Franciscan, at first rebuked him unkindly, and then gave him a peace offering; or whether the whole be not a fiction. In either case we are equally sorrowful at the rebuke, and secretly resolve we will never do so: we are pleased with the subsequent atonement, and view with emulation a soul candidly acknowledging its fault, and making a just reparation. We are wisely framed to be as warmly interested for a fictitious as for

a real personage. The spacious field of imagination is thus laid open to our use, and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the mind every moral rule of life.

Several of you have queried about the objects of the higher branches of education, and I thank you. In my view, these are:

First, to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend;

Second, to expound a sound spirit of legislation, which, banishing all arbitrary and unnecessary restraint on individual action, shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another;

Next, to harmonize and promote the interests of agriculture, manufactures and commerce, all three equally, and by well-informed views of political economy to give a free scope to the public industry;

Then, to develop the reasoning faculties of our youth, enlarge their minds, cultivate their morals, and instill into them precepts of virtue and order;

In addition, to enlighten them with mathematical and physical sciences, which administer to the health, the subsistence, and comfort of human life;

And, generally, to form them to habits of reflection and correct action, rendering them examples of virtue to others, and of happiness within themselves.

These are the objects of that higher grade of education, the benefits and blessings of which you now propose to provide for the good and ornament of your country, the gratification and happiness of your fellow citizens.

Let us be sensible that the advantages of well-directed education, moral, political and economical, are truly above all estimate. Education generates habits of application, or order, and the love of virtue; and controls by the force of habit, any innate obliquities in our moral organization.

We should be far, too, from the discouraging persuasion that man is

ed, by the law of his nature, at a given point; that his improvement is a chimera, and that the hope is delusive of rendering ourselves wiser, happier or better than our forefathers were. As well might it be urged that the wild and uncultivated tree, hitherto yielding sour and bitter fruit only, can never be made to yield better; yet we know that the grafting art implants a new tree on the savage stock, producing what is most estimable both in kind and degree. Education, in like manner, engrafts a new man on the native stock, and improves what in his nature was vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth.

sincerely believe in the general existence of a moral instinct, the brightest gem with which the human character is studded. In most of us nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses. But when the moral sense is wanting, we endeavor to supply the defect by education, by appeals to reason and calculation, by presenting to the being so unhappily conformed, other motives to do good and to shew evil.

self-love is the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others. But take from man his selfish propensities or subdue those propensities by education, instruction or restraint, and virtue remains without a competitor. In this exercise reason is the only oracle given by heaven, and we are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision.

(Referring to another letter.)

A query, which came to me from the mother of a poor farm boy, touched me deeply. "What can be done about the education of the poor?" I do most anxiously wish to see the highest degrees of education given to the highest degrees of genius, and to all degrees of it. For I believe that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. Formerly, bodily powers have place among the *aristoi*, and there is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents. But the natural aristocracy--this I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed, it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have

provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say, that that form of government is the best, which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?

At the first session of our legislature after the Declaration of Independence, we passed a law abolishing entails. And this was followed by one abolishing the privilege of primogeniture, and dividing the lands of intestates equally among all their children, or other representatives. These laws, drawn by myself, laid the axe to the foot of pseudo-aristocracy. And had another which I prepared been adopted by the legislature, our work would have been complete. It was a bill for the more general diffusion of learning, in this manner: this proposed to divide every county into wards of five or six miles square; to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools, who might receive, at the public expense, a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects, to be completed at an university, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.

This bill on education would have raised the mass of the people to the high ground of moral respectability necessary to their own safety, and to orderly government; and would have completed the great object of qualifying them to select the veritable *aristoi*, for the trusts of government. Although this law has not yet been acted on but in a small and inefficient degree, it is still considered as before the legislature, with other bills of the revised code, not yet taken up, and I have great hope that some patriotic spirit will, at a favorable moment, call it up, and make it the keystone of the arch of our government.

Such oratory. Forgive me.

I have long been sensible, that while I was endeavoring to render our country the greatest of all services, that of regenerating the public education, I was discharging the odious function of a physician pouring medicine down the throat of a patient insensible of needing it. But I am so sure of the future approbation of

posterity, and of the inestimable effect we shall have produced in the elevation of our country by what we have done, as that I cannot repent of the part I have borne in cooperation with my colleagues. For I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power. Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day. Although I do not, with some enthusiasts, believe that the human condition will ever advance to a state of perfection as that there shall no longer be pain or vice in the world, yet I believe it susceptible of much improvement. And the diffusion of knowledge among the people is to be the instrument by which it is to be effected.

If all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves to work to emancipate the minds of their subjects from their present ignorance and prejudices, and that as zealously as they now endeavor the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground on which our common people are now setting out. Ours have been fairly put into the hands of their own common sense.

Thus, of all the bills proposed for our code of laws, I think by far the most important is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness. If anybody thinks that kings, nobles, or priests are good conservators of the public happiness, send them to Europe. It is the best school in the universe to cure them of that folly. There they will see with their own eyes that these descriptions of men are an abandoned confederacy against the happiness of the mass of people.

Tell me, finally, whether peace is best preserved by giving energy to the government, or information to the people. Well? This last is the most certain, and most legitimate engine of government. Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them.

Preach, my dear Colleagues, a crusade against ignorance; establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our

countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.

I thank you for your kind attention.

(He starts to bundle up the letters and leave, but he catches himself as he remembers the last point he had wanted to make.)

Oh, I had almost forgot. Music! Music is the favorite passion of my soul, and fortune has cast my lot in a country where it is in a state of deplorable barbarism. In your school, do not neglect music!

(Exit.)

Sources in Jefferson's letters of the
dialogue in THE PUBLIC HAPPINESS

Letter to John Banister, Jr., October 15, 1785.

Letter to the Trustees for the Lottery of East Tennessee College, May 6, 1810.

Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, August 4, 1818.

Letter to Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut, January 1, 1802.

Report as Rector to the President and Directors of the Literary Fund, October 7, 1822.

Letters to N. Burwell, March 14, 1818, and to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771.

Letter to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814.

Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813.

Letters to Joseph Cabell, February 7, 1826; to William Charles Jarvis, September 28, 1820; and to P. S DuPont de Nemours, April 24, 1816.

Letter to George Wythe, August 13, 1786.

Letter to Giovanni Fabbroni, June 8, 1778.

THE PUBLIC HAPPINESS was produced by the East Lynne Company, Inc., Warren Kliever, Artistic Director. The East Lynne Company gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Harriet Sheridan, Dean of the College, Brown University; and of the American Association for Higher Education, which commissioned the original production on March 12, 1986. Thomas Rindge played the role of Thomas Jefferson. William J. Plachy was the Production Manager.