

Youth, According to Dr. Franklin

Who is the future of America? Who will lead America in thirty, forty, and fifty years from now? These questions have been asked since the earliest foundations of our great country in hope that every future leader will exhibit the responsibility, reliability, and competence required to provide for the welfare of his or her people. The answer to these questions: children. The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow, and the teachings of their youth will directly affect the way that they impact their lives, as well as the world, in the future. Benjamin Franklin, philosopher, inventor, and revolutionary of the eighteenth century, knew this, and expressed his beliefs in his "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania" of 1749¹:

The idea of what is true merit should also be often presented to youth, explained and impressed on their minds, as consisting in an inclination joined with an ability to serve mankind, one's country, friends and family; which ability is to be acquired or greatly increased by true learning; and should indeed be the great aim and end of all learning.

In this pamphlet, as elucidated in the title, Dr. Franklin proposes several ideas regarding the best interests involving childhood education in Pennsylvania. While he includes the necessary and obvious, such as frequent exercise and the learning of English and arithmetic, he concludes with the proposal of the teaching of "true merit." But what exactly is "true merit," and why does it need to be instilled in the minds of youth at such an early age?

Today, children are subject to many influences, good and bad, that affect the way they perceive the world. The media, one of the most prominent influences, has always been condemned for the way it presents violence, exploits privacy, and reveres celebrities as the epitomes of humankind. Peers pose another pressure, creating the idea that everyone must act and do the same to be accepted in society. There is no doubt that today's youth will be exposed to the media or peer pressure, but the way that a child acts upon these forces is the reflection of the virtues that they possess.

This "true merit" starts with parents. Parents teach their children first words, walk them through first steps, and are responsible for instilling in their children the values that they will carry for the rest of their lives. Respectfulness, ambition, responsibility, and honesty are only some of the infinite amount of traits that a child learns from those who raise him or her. Not only will a child who exhibits these characteristics appeal to others, but he will also hold himself to the high standards of maintaining this dignified persona. Those who strive to do this will have the "ability to serve mankind, one's country, friends and family" in a noble and virtuous manner.

Serving one's country, friends, and family is commendable as well as esteemed, but, as Benjamin Franklin expressed in the last line of "Proposals,"¹ there is a higher goal in life: true learning. With these words, Franklin is not implying that the aim of life is to attend school and acquire erudition in reading, writing, and arithmetic. "True learning" is gaining the knowledge of life's lessons and morals, applying them to every aspect of life, and acting on them to the best of one's ability. One cannot truly learn everything there is to discover, though; the vastness of acquirable information is too great for one person to fathom. However, a child starting early and striving to fill his or her life with the

maximum capacity of constructive experiences will inevitably be put on the track of “true learning.”

Each of the components of Dr. Franklin’s last lines of his pamphlet¹: true merit, the ability to serve, and true learning, lead to the all encompassing “end of all learning.” How, though, is “all learning” defined? Does it have a value or a measurement? No – all learning is different for every human being. All learning is achieved when one knows that they have succeeded in their life’s endeavors, lived life to the fullest extent, and are content with the accomplishments that they have made throughout the course of their existence.

For what is the “great aim” of life if not to succeed in oneself? Only in this way can one follow Benjamin Franklin’s words and strive to reach the “great aim and end of all learning.”

Endnotes

¹ “Benjamin Franklin, ‘Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania,’ Philadelphia, 1749” ExplorePAHistory WITF, Inc. 2010 12 October 2010 <<http://explorepahistory.com/odocument.php?docId=578>>.

Works Cited

“Benjamin Franklin, ‘Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania,’ Philadelphia, 1749.” ExplorePAHistory. WITF, Inc. 2010. 12 October 2010 <<http://explorepahistory.com/odocument.php?docId=578>>.