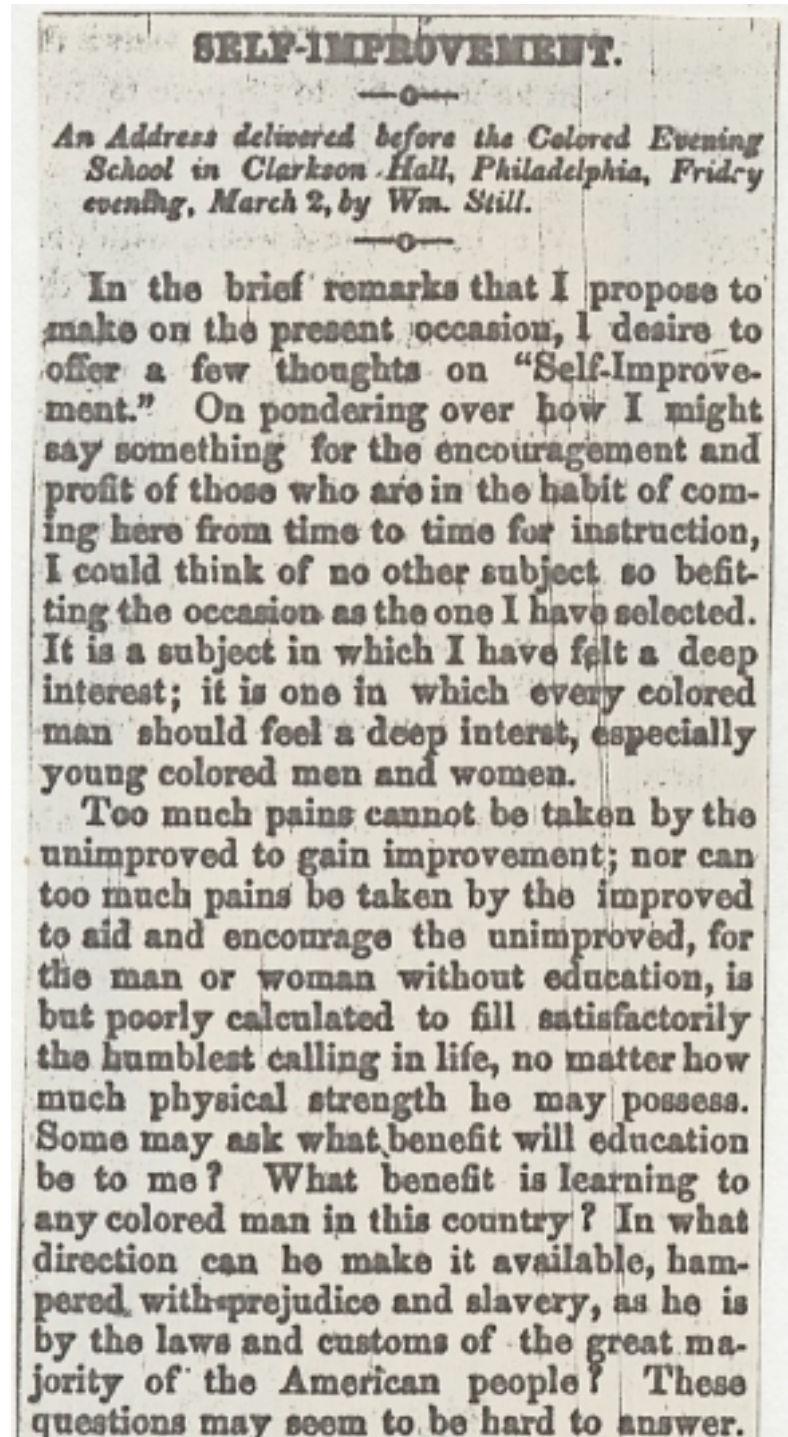


SELF-IMPROVEMENT.

[An Address delivered before the Colored Evening School in Clarkson Hall, Philadelphia, Friday evening, March 2, by Wm. Still.]

In brief remarks that I propose to make on the present occasion, I desire to offer a few thoughts on "Self-Improvement." On pondering over how I might say something for the encouragement and profit of those who are in the habit of coming here from time to time for instruction, I could think of no other subject to befitting the occasion as the one I have selected. It is a subject in which I have felt a deep interest; it is one in which every colored man should feel a deep interest, especially young colored men and women.

Too much pains cannot be taken by the unimproved to gain improvement; nor can too much pains be taken by the improved to aid and encourage the unimproved, for the man or woman without education, is but poorly calculated to fill satisfactorily the humblest calling in life, no matter how much physical strength he may possess. Some may ask what benefit will education be to me? What benefit is learning to any colored man in this country? In what direction can he make it available, hampered with prejudice and slavery, as he is by the laws and customs of the great majority of the American people? These questions may seem to be hard to answer.



In regarding the colored man's condition in this light, it is not wonderful that many are found sitting down with their minds made up to give themselves no trouble to seek learning under such discouragements; to remain in ignorance all their days: to be the "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the benefit of others. While aware of the many hindrances in the way of many, from infancy to mature years, for whom much allowance should be made, of course, nevertheless, reasonable excuses can hardly be found for those who live for years, unable to read or write, under the advantages offered in this state, especially when having access to an excellent evening school like this, conducted on philanthropic principles.

Hence, to prepare the mind for hungering and thirsting after learning, the idea must never be entertained that it will not be worth the pains required to secure it, in other words, that it will not pay. But let such rather reflect frequently upon the great value of education. Let them think how necessary it is simply to know how to count their hard-earned wages, how to purchase in the market, store, &c., to the best advantage, to meet their every day wants. Perhaps with a very large majority among the ignorant, in purchasing clothing[,] &c., if they could reckon as readily as the tailor with whom they deal, twenty dollars would

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go as far as thirty; in the family requirements a half year's wages would go equally as far as a whole year's. Instead of working hard all the year round without saving a dollar, though they may have lived stintedly, they might have had many comforts, and something laid up, besides, towards procuring a home, to aid their cause or to meet the wants of old age. Many times, instead of being refused even a poor situation at starvation wages, a good situation might be embraced at fair wages. Instead of having to remain in ignorance without regard to almost everything in the world, past, present, or to come, how much gratification and pleasure, profit and good, might be shared from innumerable sources. Indeed, it requires no extraordinary discernment to perceive the *countless* blessings of education, to make it a matter of no marvel why so many may be found who have determinedly acquired it almost entirely by their own efforts; the only wonder is that so many can be found who treat the subject indifferently and content themselves to know nothing, when so little time and pains is actually required to procure knowledge. When once a man or woman heartily craves improvement, the labor of learning is not so difficult as many suppose—when the actual need of it is felt half the work is accomplished. He need only to apply his mind faithfully to his task dur-

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ing his leisure hours, weekly—gaining here a little and there a little, to convince him that no great sacrifice of any kind is required—to make him, if not a scholar, an intelligent man—to make him capable of taking an interest in the things of the world around him, whether pertaining to religion or politics, to nature or art.

In view of having to suffer so many hardships at the hands of the dominant race, every colored man should be ambitious to place himself in an attitude of defense, where he could successfully repel the oft-repeated taunt, that the negro is naturally inferior to the other races of men. Every colored man is made to feel this reproach. Every colored man, therefore, should use all diligence to find the remedy. Nothing but a higher intelligence, greater decision of character, a keener sense of the manifold wrongs to be endured, an unswerving love of truth, with a single eye to the all-important object to be gained, on the part of colored men, will ever so effect the prejudice of the white race in this country as to cause the rights of the black man to be fully respected. However indisputable his claims, and however faithfully his cause may be advocated on the score of sympathy and philanthropy by white men, nevertheless, *it cannot be denied that the main part of elevation must be performed by colored men them-*

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selves, and that by self-improvement. By adopting this plan, he is sure to rise—by neglecting it, he is sure to remain degraded. How should every colored man in the free States, in the midst of these thrilling times of excitement, be moved to improve himself. The [ch...] to make intelligence available in a thousand ways, forbid the idea that any should be indifferent, for in no direction can he turn, but he is assaulted with slavery or prejudice. With the spirit of liberty that pervades the breasts of many, of the opposite color, at the present day, no listlessness with regard to any important interest, bearing on the welfare of his race, should be indulged in for a moment, by colored men. To prove, would time admit, that I have not marked out duties and labors too difficult to be performed, hundreds of cases might be referred to in different parts of the United States and Canada, who were raised under bondage up to manhood and womanhood, without an hour's schooling, actually prohibited from learning their A B C, who have not only struggled from under the yoke, but are now to be found among our most successful business men, most intelligent and eloquent speakers, best writers, &c., having acquired all their book learning after passing their 21st year, mainly through their own exertions. Also, in this connection, in support of my position, I would

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take the liberty to introduce the name of a noble-minded black man, who is justly entitled to the love and admiration of every man and woman, identified with his race, on this continent. His upright character and manly perseverance after knowledge, succeeded as he did, reflects imperishable credit on the race. He emphatically made his name historical. I allude to Benjamin Bannecker. He was born poor, and, though free himself, his parents were slaves. With slavery he was in every sense surrounded, of course with but poor opportunities for self-improvement. Nevertheless, he valued information, and was bound to struggle to obtain it. The secret of his success may be found in one brief paragraph alone, in his ever memorable letter to the Hon. Thomas Jefferson, respecting an almanac he had just finished, and was about forwarding with the letter to that dignitary—it reads as follows: “This calculation is the production of my arduous study, in my advanced stage of life; for having long had unbounded desires to become acquainted with the secrets of nature, I have had to gratify my curiosity herein through my own assiduous application to astronomical study, in which I need not recount to you the many difficulties and disadvantages I have had to encounter.”

What a lesson! In calling your attention to him, I wish particularly to impress

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you with the fact that the same "arduous study and unbounded desire to become acquainted with the secrets of nature," &c., if struggled for by any of you, the same happy results may be experienced in your case as in his. Certainly no colored man in a free State ought to remain without a knowledge of reading and writing; for, to my mind, the necessity thereof forces itself upon him as upon no other class in the country. Some colored men say, "If we are ignorant, the white man has so mercilessly wronged us, that he is responsible for all our shortcomings." It must readily be admitted that there is great force in this view; nevertheless, our indifference on this plea is not justifiable; we should rather double our diligence, that we might have more power and force to make the white man see his indebtedness, his enormous injustice towards us. We may wait as long in the future as we have in the past for the race who have oppressed us to remove the yoke, to elevate us to a footing with themselves, but so long as we remain in ignorance, or in a state of indifference, we shall be hoping for more from that quarter than we shall get; we may fancy that some wonderful streak of good luck may suddenly overtake us, and in all these things be woefully disappointed. Some of the opposite race have always sympathized with us—at the present day we know that

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noble and self-sacrificing hearts daily feel with those in bonds as bound with them; that they are willing to spend their money in the cause, or peril their lives even for the freedom of the blackman; abundant testimony on this point could be gained from every State in the Union, from prisons and court-houses, from presses and pulpits, from underground railroads and fugitive slave trials, from day schools and night schools, showing that there are warm and earnest hearts engaged in our behalf, to whom we should feel grateful, by whom we should feel cheered; still I repeat, our great business should be to look to self-improvement—“*self-reliance is the sure road to independence.*” Without this main spring it is an easy matter to make shipwreck of hope, and to turn away the habits of intemperance and dissipation.

To fairly start in this upward course of self-improvement, an individual needs to sit-down and think very seriously, as did a certain man described in “Foster’s Essays.” This man had lost his property by “imprudence,” and was reduced to almost destitute want, so much so that he wandered about for some time almost in a state of despair, meditating self-destruction, till he at last sat down upon a hill which overlooked the fertile fields that he once called his own. “He remained,” says the narrative, “fixed in thought a number of hours,

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at the end of which he sprang to the ground with a vehement, exulting emotion. He had formed his resolution, which was, that all these estates should be his again;" he had formed his plan, too, which he instantly began to execute. The result of his intense thought brought him to the conclusion that "there was no other way for him but hard labor," to take the very first job that might offer, however low the wages might be, and to save a part of it in spite of everything. I am not sure, but I am under the impression that the first job he got was to put in some coal for a gentleman; however, he continued faithful to his resolution, laboring assiduously at first at one thing and then another, "until he gained back all he had lost." It is this kind of decision of character that succeeds. Many of the heroic fugitives, before escaping, sit down and think, and decide to be slaves no longer, and execute their designs accordingly, precisely as this man acted in requiring his lost possessions.

When once the colored man in this country can be brought duly to think how he may improve himself, how important his time is, and what vast results might be wrought by his own decision, the result will, I doubt not, be everything that the most ardent friend of humanity could desire. With these commendable traits of character, like the noble minded Benjamin

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