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Title: Address after a Vacation by Charles Nisbet

Date: May 13, 1787

Location: SC Vault Nisbet 37

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Carlisle, May 13th 1787

Gentlemen,

It is to be expected that your late recess & intermission of your ordinary studies has been of some service to you. Rest qualifies & prepares for labor, & labor renders rest agreeable. A judicious & proper mixture of application & relaxation constitutes the wisdom as well as the happiness of life. *“Quod caret alternâ requie durabile non est,*

“Hoec reparate vires, fessaque membra novat. Ovid.

You have now enjoyed for a little the pleasures of relaxation among your friends & relations, but we hope that you have not at the same time been altogether unmindful of your studies. Several circumstances must have contributed to recal your attention to them. The recollection of your condition & characters as students, the inquiries of your parents & friends, after your progress in knowledge, & the observations they must have made on your behaviour, have no doubt excited your attention, & turned your thoughts to the objects of your studies.

It must have been extremely distressing to your minds if your parents & friends have not discerned any appearances of improvement in your behaviour, in consequence of your application to study. We do not suppose

that you have been accurately examined as to your progress in learning, but undoubtedly your carriage & conduct have been carefully observed. It is expected that youths attending a public seminary should have acquired a habit of attention, decency & propriety of Conduct, & that they should begin to exhibit some proofs of a cultivated understanding, & of a knowledge of the propriety ordinary duties of life, according to their years. These appearances are commonly considered as the effects of a successful & well conducted education, & the best pledges of their becoming good & useful members of society.

Such of you as have exhibited these fruits of rational study, & convinced your parents & friends, that the expence bestowed on your education has not been bestowed in vain, must feel the most sincere satisfaction at this time, & be disposed to prosecute your studies with alacrity, that you may continue to merit & to receive the approbation of your parents & friends, who sincerely wish for your improvement, & whose happiness you will contribute to encrease by progress in knowledge & virtue.

If any of you have been so unhappy as not to have been able to convince your parents & friends of

having made any improvement in useful knowledge, we would exhort you to a serious review of your conduct, that you may discover the reasons of a judgment so unfavorable to your characters, & to endeavor by a more vigorous application to your studies, & a constant attention to your behavior, to merit on another occasion, a more favorable opinion of your Characters from those whose favor is of so much consequence to you.

Perhaps it will not be in your power, not even in that of any human being, to realize & fulfil the fond expectations, that may be formed of your progress in learning. Even persons of good understanding are apt to err, in expecting the wisdom & experience of Age from early years, & the fondness of Parents, naturally partial to their offspring, renders them extremely sanguine in

their hopes of their improvement, & if they do not find those prognostics of eminence & ability realized in them, which their tenderness led them to anticipate in their infant years, they are apt to conclude that their education has been neglected, as they have no doubt of their capacity, & think that their Masters ought to oblige them to make due application.

But although you cannot make such progress in

knowledge, as to come up to the expectations of your friends, if you will examine your own conduct carefully, we are persuaded you will discover, that you might at least have done much more than you have actually done, & that by a more steady application & wise improvement of your time, you might have reached a much higher degree of knowledge than you can boast of at present.

Reflexion on past errors is one of the most common means of avoiding them in future, & aspiring to greater improvement. The wisest of men are not above the need of this, & it can be no shame to the youths to have it observed of them, that they are wiser to day than they were yesterday. If you are truly sorry for past neglect, & sincerely ashamed of having spent your time to no purpose, despair not of further improvement. Let the uneasiness you feel for past neglect or misbehaviour, stimulate you to diligence & activity. Some have risen to eminence by resentment of the contempt that their ignorance & idleness drew upon them. Every thing surely that can incite you to a diligent application to your studies may be said to be truly useful, & to tend to the happiness of your after life.

Although wisdom itself affords no infallible receipt for attaining the approbation of the public, yet progress in knowledge & attention to propriety of behaviour will certainly gain you the favor of all those whose judgment is worth regarding, & will especially recommend you to the favorable opinion of your Parents & friends, who will not fail to do justice to every appearance of wisdom & merit, which they discern in your Conduct.

In most cases, it is not so much the degree or quantity of knowledge, as the manner in which we use & display it, that gains us the character of successful scholars. A few ideas, clearly conceived, regularly digested, & expressed in a ready & intelligible manner, will impress others with a greater idea of our knowledge, than dark & confused expressions & torrents of technical & hard words, which however apt they are to make fools stare, will be little regarded by the intelligent. These indeed will naturally expect that your learning should enable you to make dark things clear, rather than to darken clear matters by words without knowledge.

A pretension to greater knowledge than we possess, or an anxious attempt to conceal our ignorance of any subject, has commonly the effect to discover it more plainly. All hypocrisy is disgraceful, whether it relate to knowledge or virtue, & when discovered, as it commonly is sooner or later, draws contempt on the hypocrite. It is much better

to avoid entirely the mention of things, which we know not, or candidly to own our ignorance, than by affecting to speak of things whereof we have no distinct ideas, to expose ourselves to the scorn of those that know them.

To bear even a little knowledge well, is not the talent of every one, but he must have learned little indeed, that has not learned to be humble, & not to value himself too much for the little he

knows. As a very small quantity of drink will render a weak head extremely giddy, so a very little knowledge may puff up weak minds with an high conceit of their attainments. If we know any thing to purpose, we will know that there are many things of which we are ignorant. St. Augustine observes, in the jingling style of his age, "*Maxima pars eorum quo scimus est minima pars eorum quo nescimus.*" And we are told that Socrates was declared the wisest man by the oracle, because he used to say that he knew only this, that he knew nothing. All the knowledge he possessed appeared to him to be nothing, when he reflected on the infinite number of things, whereof he was totally ignorant.

Vanity & an assuming behaviour in consequence of our learning, is one of those errors, which we will find the world least disposed to pardon. Men never bear to be

despised, & will try by all means to humble those whom they see endeavouring to depreciate others. Modesty is the most beautiful ornament of youth, & tends to raise the character of those who possess it, more than the most brilliant acquisitions & accomplishments. The more you humble yourselves by a decent & respectful behaviour to others, the more you will be exalted in their opinion & esteem, & the more you exalt yourselves by foolish boasting & contemptuous behaviour to others, the more you will be abased in their judgment. None are more ready to have less justice done them for the knowledge they have, than those who are proud of the little they possess.

The manner in which you behave to one another, will be another test of the improvement of your minds by study. A quarrelsome temper, & a proneness to insult & provoke others, is a sure sign of an ignorant & uncultivated mind, as well as of a malevolent heart. Trifling only indicates thoughtlessness & inattention, but a proneness to hostility & injury betrays a most hateful & abominable disposition, of which every virtuous youth ought to be ashamed of even being suspected. The prevailing habit of the mind is apt to manifest itself even in small matters. The pleasure, which the Emperor Domitian took in killing flies,

proclaimed him a tyrant even in his solitary amusements, & taught the Roman people what they had to expect from such a temper in the exercise of supreme authority.

A disposition to censure & complain of others is another species of ill behaviour, which you ought particularly to avoid, as it not only gives disturbance to others, but tends to draw contempt & hatred upon yourselves. To be incapable of living at peace with others, argues a defect of understanding & discernment, as well as an irritable & unsocial disposition. Equity, kindness & gentleness of manners are the great ornaments of well-educated youth. If your minds are in any degree enlightened or enlarged by your studies, you will have learned not to disturb yourselves or others with trifles, or with matters that do not belong to you. To be able to live peaceably with others on an equal footing, not only contributes to your present peace, but is an indication of wisdom & magnanimity & an earnest of success & reputation in mature life.

There is a meanness in envy, detraction & resentment, which it will be greatly for your interest to discern & avoid as much as possible. If you reflect only on the torment & uneasiness, which these dispositions give to your minds, you will scarce need to observe how disagreeable they

are to others, in order to avoid them with the greatest care, & to keep at the greatest distance from them.

Although gravity & profound attention are attainments not ordinarily to be expected from youth, yet there is a degree of recollection & sagacity to which the youngest of you ought certainly to aspire, & which all of you may attain, when you please, we mean, a habit of attending to what you do or say, & considering at least the objects that are in your view. Stupidity & absence of mind are fatal to improvement. To see distinctly what you see, & to hear exactly what you hear, is necessary to avoid the reproach of dulness, & to enable you to receive what instruction is offered you. It is renouncing your natural senses to deny attention to what is before you, & to occupy your mind with one thing, whatever it is, whenever is exposed to your senses & demands immediate notice. For want of this attention you may mumble over your tasks many times, without informing your understanding, or fixing them in your memory. To read them once with attention, is better than repeating them ever so often or ever so loud, while your minds are fixed on something else.

A strict regard to truth in every thing can never be too often or too anxiously recommended. Lying is the

resource of conscious guilt, & the vice of base & little minds. Nothing is more prejudicial to your character, or more fatal to all your hopes than the habit of saying the thing which is not. When a boy is once noted for a liar, his credit is gone for ever, & he will not be able to obtain belief, even when he tells the truth. It is painful to an ingenuous mind to have one's veracity called in question, but when one is once caught in a falsehood, no regard will be paid to any thing he says afterwards. Young people ought, therefore, to establish their credit by a strict & constant adherence to truth on all occasions, & in all matters whatever, on which they have occasion to speak. It will be to no purpose to allege that you were in jest, or that you meant no harm, if you have deviated from truth. The most habitual & abominable knavery & duplicity of conduct, arises from these lesser indulgences of lying, in which youth are apt to think that they have done no harm, & which they think that they can leave off when they please. It is the nature of all habits to grow by indulgence, & the greatest crimes have often proceeded from indulgences esteemed at first harmless & of little consequence.

But however uneasy you may feel when your

veracity is perhaps unjustly suspected, or called in question, never dream of confirming it, or mending the matter by swearing, which is an argument at once of ignorance & impiety; of ignorance, because the Swearer knows not, or at least thinks not of the majesty & power of that Divine Being whom he profanely invokes, & impiety in taking God's name in vain, in opposition to his express prohibition, by calling him to witness to a trifle, or to a falsehood.

The persons who can have so little reverence to the Deity, as to take his name in vain, may be justly suspected to be capable of uttering a falsehood, as the same depravity & callousness of soul that leads him to the one, may as naturally & easily influence him to the other. Whence it has been observed that great Swearers are likewise commonly great liars, & those who have been most attentive to human nature have affirmed that in many things & in most cases we may safely believe those that are given to lying, unless they swear to the truth of their assertions, their falsehood being often betrayed by their anxiety to gain credit.

Instead of establishing your credit by accompanying your assertions with oaths, you will find, abstracting

from the impiety of the practice, that your veracity will suffer on this account. Truth, though confident, is calm & modest, but conscious falsehood is full of suspicion, & takes such methods to conceal itself as in many cases most effectually discover it. Truth is great & will prevail. A man of truth & honor needs not be in pain for his character, as the more it is known, the more it will be respected; but falsehood is suspicious, passionate & outrageous. An honest man knows that if you do not believe his word, it will be worse for yourself, but can be of no consequence to him; but a knave is eager & stormy, & claims credit by impudence & noise, while he is conscious that he ought not to be believed.

To obey the commands of your Parents & Masters with cheerfulness & readiness, instead of disputing, repining, or endeavouring to evade them, you will find to be both pleasant & profitable to yourselves. Your tender age & immature understanding stand in need of instruction & direction. It is good for you to be subject for a time to those, who will regard your interest more than you are yet capable of doing yourselves. If you have reflected on what has happened to you already, you will remember that the neglect of the advice

of your Parents & Masters has led you into great inconveniences & evils, but that you have never had reason to repent of having obeyed their instructions. You will find difficulties enough even when your understandings are mature & improved, & you are left to your own disposal. Even then you will not be the worse for the instructions of those, who are wiser than yourselves, but at present it is a matter of absolute necessity.

Nothing can effectually preserve you from swearing, lying & all the vices of youth, except a deep & affecting sense of the presence, perfections & power of the Deity. We hope your parents have taught you that there is a God, who made them & you & all things; that he loves truth & hates falsehood, that he knows all that we think, speak & do, & that darkness cannot hide us from his knowledge, that he loves those, who speak truth, & that he will punish liars in a manner too awful for us to conceive at present. If you have believed & profited by their instructions, you will fear his displeasure much more than any evil that can happen to you in this life, & you will not, for the sake of concealing your faults, or avoiding present punishment, far less wantonly or to deceive your neighbors, speak

any thing that is not strictly truth. As God hears & carefully marks all your words, beware of provoking him to anger by lying, lest he punish you in a fearful manner, & make you warnings to other transgressors. If a pimple were to break out on your face, or a blister on your tongue as often as you tell a lie, how careful would you be to avoid it? Much more ought you to watch against it when the Word of God assures you that every liar shall be cast into the lake that burneth with fire & brimstone, where there shall be weeping & gnashing of teeth.

As God is the fountain of all blessings & the giver of all good, you ought from your most tender age to pray to him daily, & to ask of him what is necessary for your happiness. If your Parents would promise to give you money, or any thing that would gratify your inclinations, on condition of your asking it daily of them with due reverence & submission, you would not surely

neglect to ask it, but since God offers you Wisdom, grace, pardon, Peace & happiness of mind, which are more precious than all the things of this world, you ought certainly to ask them

as he has commanded, if you would not be wanting to yourselves. It is despising all that God has to give, when you will not be at the pains to ask him, but if you are sensible of your own wants, & of God's grace & goodness in offering you all good things in Christ Jesus, you will pray to him daily to bless you, & preserve you, & to make you wise unto salvation.

If you are careful to remember your Creator in the days of your Youth, this will restrain you from idle, indecent & provoking words as well as from quarrels & fighting with each other. God is displeased with those things, & will take his own time & way to punish those, who are guilty of them, except they repent & amend. Study to bridle your tongues, & to beware of exciting your own passions or those of others by indecent or reproachful words. "What man is he that desireth life, & loveth many days, that he may see good? Keep thy tongue from evil & thy lips from speaking guile." Innocence, quietness & gentleness preserve from offensive behaviour, & the hatred & mischief which it occasions to those that are guilty of it. Among boys as well as among men, the equitable, the peaceable & obliging are beloved & esteemed, & the proud, the quarrelsome & provoking are abhorred

& avoided. To be the occasion of noise, wrath or offence is what all well educated youth will avoid & be ashamed of. Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.

Weariness & absence of mind are great enemies to study as well as to happiness. If while your attention is called to the pursuit of Wisdom, you are dreaming of the pleasures of idleness & relaxation, you will neither enjoy the pleasures you think of, nor attain the possession of Wisdom, which you profess to be seeking. You will only feel pain without profit, & be guilty of tormenting yourselves without any profit here or hereafter. To endeavour to enjoy the present scene, to perform the present duty & to make the most of our time as it passes, is true Wisdom; but much of the unhappiness of early years arises from folly & impatience of our present situation. While your desires grasp at pleasures that are out of your reach, you are not aware that you are enduring pains, that you might easily have avoided, & forfeiting enjoyments which providence hath placed within your reach. What a pity that while the enjoyments of life are so few we should render them fewer by our own

folly & neglect? To attend to the duty of every time, & not distract our attention from present duty by the thoughts of absent or imagined enjoyment, is true Wisdom, & leads to the most genuine & lasting happiness.

Idleness ought above all things to be avoided by youth. We are made for action, & our minds acquire, instead of losing, strength by exertion & application. Idleness is not only an unnatural, but a disagreeable & painful state of mind. Every temptation succeeds when the mind is sunk in indolence, & the proverb, which asserts that when Children are doing nothing, they are doing mischief, is founded in truth & experience. When we are employed in some exercise suitable to our rational nature, we are in that state, which God designed for us, we are accomplishing his Will, & may expect his blessing; but when our active powers are buried in idleness, existence

becomes disagreeable, we find nothing to attract our attention or engage our affections. Displeased with ourselves & with every thing around us, we fall as it were upon the Rack, & experience the tortures of wicked Spirits, in seeking rest & finding none. Well chosen labor & exercise is the health of the Soul, but indolence, though no passion itself, extinguishes

every passion & spur to action, & leaves the Soul a prey to the most mortifying reflexions & dismal imaginations, to the temptations of vice, & the sense of the misery it occasions.

As action is the natural & proper state of Man, you will find it more agreeable than all the amusements you can substitute in place of it. To endeavour to combine application & amusement, or to think of your diversions in the time of business, is a sure way to lose the pleasure of both. In attending to your business you will find your minds most agreeably occupied, & the time of amusement can only be agreeable when your attention is not occupied by necessary business. Every thing is beautiful & pleasant in its proper time & place, but out of these can yield no satisfaction whatever.

In your diversions you ought not to think yourselves at liberty to do every thing, that strikes your fancy, or that may be suggested to you by those, who think as little as you do yourselves. Your amusements ought to be worthy of your nature, & to represent the laudable & excellent parts of real life, & the manner in which you conduct yourselves in these, will exhibit

your real characters, & is of more importance than you perhaps imagine.

Activity, ingenuity, emulation & ambition may be discovered in amusement, as well as in real life. Justice truth, magnanimity & fidelity may be the virtues of boys at their play, as well as of men engaged in the most important affairs of life, & the habit of these which is displayed & formed in your diversions, will probably continue during the rest of your lives.

On the contrary, Indolence, inattention, falsehood, revenge, injustice & meanness may be discerned at play as well as in business, & boys carry these habits into real life, which they have exhibited & contracted in the course of their youthful amusements.

Proud & litigious Spirits are likewise discovered in amusements, & perhaps that man will never be a good neighbor or a good citizen, who when a boy shows himself quarrelsome & unreasonable in his amusements. At least it is a change rarely to be expected that the habits, which have been cherished in childhood, should be perfectly laid aside, & contrary ones assumed in mature age.

Deceit & low cunning are qualities which you ought

to avoid with the greatest care, & these too are oft discovered in amusements as well as in business. As men are but Children of a larger growth, so Children are men of little experience & imperfect attainments. Those friendships that are formed from similarity of character in early life, generally derive their beginning from a community of taste in diversion, or such a conduct in play as would be laudable in real life. As dissimulation is more rare in tender age, & even children are less under restraint at play than at other times, that season affords, perhaps the fittest opportunity of discovering the real characters of men.

In the adorned & studied page of historians they often present us with what they call the character of persons whom they never saw, with whom they have never lived, & with whose

dispositions & motives of action they are utterly unacquainted. These characters they collect in the best manner they can from such of their public actions as have come to their knowledge, the most part of which perhaps have been the effect of constraint, necessity, institution or dissimulation. From such descriptions we can ordinarily gather what they wished to be thought,

or were desirous of appearing in the eye of the world, rather than what they really were.

But if a Biographer, who is not ambitious of historic fame, & who disdains not to mention small matters, can find means to tell us in what manner any man conducted himself in early life, what were his favorite amusements, & in what manner he behaved in them, we would be able to pronounce a clearer judgment of the prevailing habits of his mind, than from all those pompous pages of historic painting, erroneously called Characters. The general assertions in these are only to be depended on when they are drawn from such sources as we have mentioned, & not from public life, in which the greatest part of Men's actions are theatrical, & contrived merely for show & imposition.

Justice is the queen & chief of virtues; & this may be exhibited & practised at play as well as in real life. A boy, who is an unfair play fellow, has little appearance of becoming an honest man. On the contrary, the habits of injustice, which he has indulged in his diversions, will follow him into real life, & those, who have known his character at school, will

be afraid to trust him when a man grown & capable of more important deceits. The boy, who regards truth & justice in his amusements, who never contends against matter of fact, nor pretends to win when he has really lost, exhibits an example of uprightness & magnanimity worthy of the envy & imitation of mature years, & there is the highest probability of his being a worthy & honest man, who has kept at the greatest distance from falsehood & injustice when a child. He that is faithful in a little is faithful also in much, & he that is unfaithful in a little will also be unfaithful in much.

We would most earnestly warn you against one thing, which is sometimes considered as a great accomplishment among young men, we mean secrecy & concealment. This is the virtue of Thieves, Free-Masons & Politicians, & is rarely accompanied with uprightness & integrity. Nothing needs so much to be concealed as villany & meanness, & something of these may be ordinarily suspected, when Secrecy is thought necessary in early life. Young men ought to suspect that there is something

base & disgraceful in what he is desired to keep a secret from his parents, friends or neighbours, even in the opinion of the proposer, otherwise he would not desire that it should be concealed. Boys that consult their reputation & integrity ought to make it a rule to have nothing to do with the proposers of secrecy & concealment. In this manner all private crimes are conducted & many vicious habits grow to considerable strength before they are discovered. Solomon, among the first advices he gives his son, cautions him especially not to become a highwayman, not from any notion of the alliance between the profession of a highwayman & that of a king, though they have often been very closely allied, but solely from a view to caution him against entering into secret Cabals, whose designs, even in their own opinion, are too base to bear the light. There is no crime in which a young man may not be easily engaged, when he is only prevailed on to

consider the faculty of secrecy as an accomplishment. The Duke of Maine, a prince of the royal blood of France, though bred at Court, yet in a treatise which he published when he was seven years of age, confesses that though we ought not to betray the secrets of others, yet it is bet-

ter to avoid being entrusted with them, & that we may reveal our own secrets, though not those of others. Indeed the world is so bad, that men cannot afford to reveal all their thoughts, but must keep some of them secret, yet honest men have always invariably the fewest secrets, & knaves always the greatest number. The love of secrecy is improper for youth, as being the school of knavery, lying & duplicity.

To conclude, if you would be as happy as possible in youth, & as wise & reputable as possible in riper age, take care to do nothing just now, which you would be ashamed of afterwards. Let your thoughts & undertakings be such as will safely bear the light. Abhor darkness, knavery & duplicity, & cherish justice, magnanimity & charity. If you do not love your neighbours you can never be happy in yourselves. Beware of Pride by which contention cometh, & be content to give others their due, & to seek no more than your own. Hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God, & keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of Man.