Horace Mann Pleads For Public Libraries (1840)

Horace Mann, the most influential educational reformer of his day, sacrificed a lucrative law practice for a life of public service. His influence radiated out from Massachusetts, where he did much to improve the common schools by securing better buildings, higher salaries, and superior teaching methods through teachers’ institutes and normal schools. A born reformer and a Puritan at heart, he also fought against slavery, lotteries, the liquor traffic, profanity, intemperance, smoking, and ballet dancing. In this famous lecture on public libraries, Mann posits a relationship between ignorance and vain opinionatedness.

A library will produce one effect upon school children, and upon the neighborhood generally, before they have read one of the books, and even if they should never read one of them.

It is in this way: The most ignorant are the most conceited. Unless a man knows that there is something more to be known, his inference is, of course, that he knows everything. Such a man always usurps the throne of universal knowledge, and assumes the right of deciding all possible questions. We all know that a conceited dunce will decide questions extemporaneously which would puzzle a college of philosophers or a bench of judges. Ignorant and shallow-minded men do not see far enough to see the difficulty.

But let a man know that there are things to be known of which he is ignorant, and it is so much carved out of his domain of universal knowledge. And for all purposes of individual character, as well as of social usefulness, it is quite as important for a man to know the extent of his own ignorance as it is anything else.

To know how much there is that we do not know is one of the most valuable parts of our attainments; for such knowledge becomes both a lesson of humility and a stimulus to exertion. Let it be laid down as a universal direction to teachers, when students are becoming proud of their knowledge, to spread open before them some pages of the tremendous volumes of their ignorance.

Now those children who are reared without any advantages of intelligent company, or of travel, or of books—which are both company and travel—naturally fall into the error of supposing that they live in the center of the world, that all society is like their society, or, if different from theirs, that it must be wrong. They come, at length, to regard any part of this vast system of the works of man, and of the wisdom of God, which conflicts with their homebred notions, as baneful, or contemptible, or non-existent. They have caught no glimpse of the various and sublime sciences which have been discovered by human talent and assiduity; nor of those infinitely wise and visible laws and properties of the visible creation…

Now, when this class of persons go out into the world and mingle with their fellow men, they are found to be alike useless on account of their ignorance, and odious for their presumption. And if a new idea can be projected with sufficient force to break through the incrustations of folly and prejudice which envelop their souls,… they appear as ridiculous, under its influence, as did the mouse which was born in the till of a chest, and, happening one day to rear itself upon its hind legs and to look over into the body of the chest, exclaimed, in amazement, that he did not think the universe so large!

A library, even before it is read, will teach people that there is something more to be known.