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An Independent Voice: A Mill Girl from Vermont Speaks Her Mind

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD:In the large collection of manuscript letters deposited in the Vermont Historical Society's Library there are many single pieces of correspondence. The authors and recipients are often no longer identifiable, but from the contents of these odd and isolated letters images of Vermont's past arise to speak to us, often in very distinctive and independent tones. The following letter, recently discovered by Loriman Brigham while carrying on his extensive indexing of VHS manuscripts, was written by a young woman from Vermont who went in 1851 to work in a Massachusetts textile mill. Her purpose in millworking was to earn enough money to enroll at Oberlin College in Ohio.

A young woman planning to attend college in the early 1850s was certainly self-reliant and, as this letter shows us, Lucy Ann (we know only her first name) was an unconventional thinker on a number of topics. Whether she went to Oberlin is not known, but from the sounds of this letter we may assume that she spoke with a Vermonter's independent voice wherever she went.

Clinton June 29, 1851

Cousin Charlotte, —

Your letter was joyfully received last thursday evening, & this morning I take my pen with a right good will to answer you. This is sabbath morning & can I spend it better than in writing to you? Perhaps I might, but this I do know I should not. I am alone in my little bedroom. Cordelia & Cornelia Montague are with Chauncey Hopkins in the sitting-room.

Last evening Cordelia & I sat together in our window, when some one passed. Cordelia said 'that is Chauncey'. I laughed at her for thinking every one she saw Chauncey. She said it walked just like him & acted like him; then she went up to Cornelia's room, and that same gentleman passed our window again & behold it was Chauncey. I hastened to the door to meet him, sent him into the parlor & with a right good will went up to tell Cordelia.

Perhaps I am offending you to write about such things on the sabbath, so I will change the subject.—You say “I am afraid you do not love the house of God”. The house of God, what do you mean? Our churches? And can you call such a place of desecration a house of God? If you can 'tis a house in which I cannot worship. I can merely listen to truths or untruths, as the case may be, and ponder on their importance or unimportance, but to worship there, there is no feeling of devotion—no it would seem mockery to worship there amidst that crowd of well dressed idle gazers. Once perhaps the house of God was a place of worship, but it has degenerated into a place of vain idle show. I can just as easily worship in the Catholic church, amid their effigies, burning tapers & all their childish mummery, as in our own churches, filled with the same spirit of vanity & superstition. There are places, where even I feel devotional. We were created to worship & all, will at times, feel an almost irresistible inclination to adore a great Unknown. Wherever this feeling steals over us there is our church. Mine is in the wild-woods. I never walk alone amidst nature's solitudes without that same indescribable sensation of awe & devotion. & how inexpressably holy calm and happy are such feelings. Then our thoughts are raised to something higher & nobler than the days dull routine, then do we feel that we have a Soul-immortal, & shall I say only then?

To me it seems we, our churches I mean, have an established system of religion, but a few steps removed from paganism. When mere children our parents teach us to worship (that is right) when we arrive at years of discretion if there happens to be a revival we are prayed for, & labored with 'till a certain degree of exitement is produced & we resolve to become christians, resolve to live better lives; our spirits, at first depressed, because the good christians have pointed out the awful depravity of our natures, become elated at our good resolutions & hopes of the glorious reward & this we call conversion, then we are admitted into the church which we must ever after consider our place every sabbath. After the excitement has somewhat subsided we feel no different. O perhaps a trifle happier from our determination to do right, as that will always make one happier. Well we go on in our chosen course, praying so many times a day, as christians are required to do, giving so much for ministers, so much for the poor, & so on to the end of the chapter, & what does it all amount to? Echo answers what. Our ministers have a certain round of sermons. Something about faith love & charity; which in the style they are talked of in the desk, sound to me, at least, very much like dum diddle dee dee diddle dum.

There all this time I have been dressed for church & waiting with my bonnet on expecting to hear the bell ring, if I hear anything new, good or interesting I will tell you this afternoon.

Some two or three weeks ago, I went to the Catholic church & heard the best sermon I have yet listened to in Clinton, it would be funny to be converted by a Catholic priest would it not. The bell is ringing & I must go to church, Cornelia is ready.

After church. Here am I in our little room again, & with Cordelia, Cornelia—don't you think we have a fine little room full. Now I will endeavor to tell you what that old Catholic priest said, "When men follow the dictates of reason & forsake the ordinances of true faith, they will always fall into error; for reason is the result of experience, & a man may have either more or less reason as he has more or less experience". Now what do you think of that—I thot the light of reason was the only true light, but we must follow the ordinances of true faith—how shall we know what the true faith is. The good old customs of our forefathers? I am writing & talking, therefore I do neither correctly. But perhaps I have written to you what I should not & what I would not to some but you have firmness & combativeness enough not to fear anything & if you can convince me that our system of getting religion is the true one I will thank you forever. Do not imagine I would throw away churches & meetings,—by no means—let all that can enjoy them.

Really Charlotte I think this must be a curious letter for I am continually breaking off & chatting, but yet poor factory girl that I am I must make my fingers keep pace with my tongue even though it is to inflict such miserable scrawls upon my friends.

You think I want to go to Oberlin very much; you are quite mistaken there, Charlotte, for if there was the least thing in the world to hinder me I wouldn't cry a bit, but then why should I not wish to go. I have earned enough to school me awhile, & have not I a right to do so, or must I go home, like a dutiful girl, place the money in father's hands & then there goes all my hard earnings, within prison walls, my sleepless nights & gloomy days, & all for what, to benefit mother, to make her or any member of our family happy?—No! but to buy chairs, tables, beds &c for our neighbors. And are they better off or happier with them? Not if they are honest for there is the continual thought, that uncle Jonas is not paid, then is not my earnings a dead loss to the world, so appropriated. I answer yes, & my loss of strength & energy are spent in vain. I have done nothing but harm in the world. But if I go to Oberlin I take comfort & forget all those long wearisome mill

days & perhaps I prepare myself for usefulness in this life—if not I can at least prepare myself to enjoy this life & *the next* in my way of thinking. If I am necessarily detained at home I shall think all is for the best. I merely wish to go because I think it the best way of spending the money I have worked so hard to earn.

You enquired about my health. I declare I wish that question was blotted from existence, 'tis one of my first lessons in hypocrisy. I remember of hearing, when but a little girl, a woman complaining in company, of her poor health, her aches, pains &c. & how she was pitted; but the moment she took her leave how the ladies did talk about her whining. I resolved then never to complain. You seem to think I have abused the good health I have been blessed with. Doubtless I have as we all do, through ignorance, but not in walking through wet & snow, as you seem to think,—no I do not remember of taking even a cold after one of those long walks, because I used to take great precaution & freely use the cold water before resting after them. I could not walk now as I am out of practice but I do think they did not hurt me so much as does boarding house fare in one week. As to sitting up late nights do not many others the same. Colonel Lemnhowsky said four hours of sleep is all that he requires. But I sleep enough; they will not let me read in the mill so I sleep there & read nights, & some funny dreams I have beside my looms. I presume I could tell of as many aches as most people, but will that do any one any good? no nor me either.

I usually go to bed between ten & eleven, put the lamp in a chair nearby, & read Weld's Grammar till I get sleepy. I do not get through more than one lesson usually, but when I have an interesting book or story, I do not feel sleepy till sometime in the "wee hours agout the twal". I have lost so much energy & ambition since I came to the mill that I fear I shall not do much at school, unless I meet with something to arouse me.

O Charlotte do learn phonology. I am so vexed every letter I write that I cannot spell the easiest way. I write to Reuben in that style & he does to me. Il rit just a litl tue let yu se ho mug ezier it is—al yu ned tu lurn is just wun nuspapre & yu can lurn tu rit me a letur in a cler styl in just wun wec. Aftur I had ritn 3 pajes I rot Rubin a letur & he sed he culd red it wel enuf.

Then you are writing a journal? That is well.

I commenced one at fifteen & at twenty I burned it & commenced another which I presume I shall be ashamed of at twenty-five & burn as I did the first.

I think it useful for it learns us to write, but sometimes I think if I would select proper subjects or questions & write it would be still better for me.

You say the secret for E is in your possession. I'm sure I cannot think of any secret of my own. In truth I do not think my conscience was ever burdened with a secret

Learning is the narrow stuff we have so much of in all our wagon cushions or around them rather. Six strands are woven together & then cut apart. So my web is wider & harder to look over than the narrow lace I used to weave. I earn more; last week I made \$3.50 on two looms.

I hope you will have better success in the Harbor than I did. I never felt satisfied with that winter's work. I did not get the scholars into the right state of feeling.

I received a letter from E some two weeks ago. I expect she will thank me for answering your first. Please write soon. Tell Laura & Samuel I would like to hear from them. Yours truly

Lucy Ann

I'm anxious to know how grandmother is.