1931

The Art of Living in Los Angeles

George Shelton Hubbell

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq

Recommended Citation

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.
The Art of Living in Los Angeles

By GEORGE SHELTON HUBBELL

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author insists that this essay is optimistic. It was written in a blithe mood and in good faith. One can live in Los Angeles!

Six years ago I was living in Albuquerque; now I live in Los Angeles. Many people now of New Mexico would like to live in Los Angeles. I have heard some of them say as much; and I have seen the endless procession of dusty motor cars that bring into this state migratory families from Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, New Mexico, and points east. (Once here, they look back upon all that hinterland as simply East—synonym to them for by-gones, limbo of lost years.) I, then, one of those who came, write these words as a message to those who have not come—at any rate, not yet.

It is foolish to be "choosy" about the place where one will live. At all events, it is generally vain. We must live where we can, and make the best of it. But I used to think otherwise. I once fancied that a certain environment—in my case, an environment of libraries and seminars—must be indispensable. Among my associates I did not wish to apologize for a footnote, to take up time explaining the elementary facts about Ammonius Saccas. In short, I fear I was too particular. My feeling, however, was not snobbish, but defensive. The fact is, I had been acutely unhappy in other environments, whereas among books and bookish people I had found peace. It did not occur to me then that I might discover an art of living peacefully even in unfavorable conditions and along with people whose interests were not mine. Yet one chooses, when the time comes, among possibilities, not among ideals. I came to Los Angeles. Not as the migratory families come from Iowa, full of hope and
The confidence, but with grim resignation, I turned my face to this western coast. I anticipated no congenial, fostering surroundings. I found none. But I knew that here henceforth was home.

I set myself then, of necessity, to learn the art of living in Los Angeles. And I have come to believe that the general principles of that art apply to living anywhere. Those principles, though very difficult to practice, are simple and obvious.

1. **First, one learns not to be a drag, ultimately at least, on anybody.** This principle, implied by Emerson in his doctrine of self-reliance, has both material and spiritual consequences. For our total human condition is fundamentally economic. We have not enough of anything to justify careless expenditure; time, energy, sensitiveness, intelligence are all limited. Henry Adams wrote of his father: "Charles Francis Adams' memory was hardly above the average; his mind was not bold like his grandfather's (John Adams) or restless like his father's (John Quincy Adams), or imaginative or oratorical—still less mathematical; but it worked with singular perfection, admirable self-restraint, and instinctive mastery of form. Within its range it was a model." Charles Francis Adams had, I take it, an important qualification for living well. Happy are those who operate efficiently within their own range. We manage our powers, as a country safeguards its resources, by watching the trade balance. When our proper resources fail and we start using those of our neighbors, trouble has begun. Dependence brings compromise, sense of inferiority, the poignant shades of envy and discontent.

From Demosthenes to Patrick Henry to Everett Dean Martin endless have been the panegyrics of liberty. Yet few will resist the temptation to enslave themselves by dependence. In debt to begin with for our early nurture and education, we always find it distressingly easy to take more
than we can pay for. But the secret of living well in any environment lies first in discharging there, as nearly as possible, every obligation. Helpless youth and helpless age must be paid for in working years. All co-operation, all gifts and favors must be acknowledged and duly recompensed. Only so is one free to live one's own life on even a narrow margin of liberty. And this means practically that obligations must be cut down, in order to increase the margin. He who borrows little has little to repay. By operating on little, obscurely in some corner, one conserves time and energy for the main enterprise, the making of one's own life.

This vital economy today is easy in material things. One's neighbors strain and impoverish themselves to buy motor cars, radios, expensive clothes, and other luxuries. Then, throwing good pennies after bad, they squander still more of life and energy in the use of these knickknacks. But the relative enrichment from doing without unnecessary impedimenta is quite easily achieved. One has, of course, to forego the reading of the more popular magazines and the newspapers, both of which aim principally to promote sales. But the loss from such abstinence, compensated by better reading or more advantageous use of the time, turns out really to be a gain. One has also to live in a cheap rented house in an inferior neighborhood, but this too has delightful compensations, beyond the economy. Resulting freedom from responsibility and from disturbance of entangling social activities is almost the essence of liberty.

But vital economy must extend to mental and emotional life. One must swallow one's own smoke. One must learn to shun confession, consolations, advice, perhaps even religious dependence. Debts in these realms are still debts, entailing obligations, limiting the margin of liberty. Wherever they have to be incurred, they must be promptly and fully discharged. And here again there is rich compensa-
tion, in self-confidence and self-respect. There is happiness in being a drag on no one.

2. But a life well led in any environment must contribute, must construct. To break even, simply owing no man, is, of course, creditable. Most of us will be lucky if we can do as well as that. We cannot, however, feel quite satisfied with a performance which, after hard work, leaves everything just as it was. Even to fall behind might seem more interesting. Yet real contributions are difficult to make. One may fail to achieve the harmonious operation of mind necessary for significant creative thought; it is an all-but-universal failure. One may lack the enormous energy necessary for abundant work of very fine quality. And there arises, in either case, the temptation to borrow what is needed, with future accomplishments as security. But that is a poor arrangement, involving obligation, and mortgaging achievement. No, it cannot be learned too early that a constructive life is almost impossibly difficult. And such a lesson implies that life itself is difficult, for our best incentive to living is the desire to make some peculiar contribution. Without extraordinary gifts, then, and without borrowing too heavily from the gifts of others, how can we preserve a reasonable hope of living well—even any zest for living at all?

The requisite technique is old, simple to present, difficult to master and apply. It has four steps: Learn, practice, plan, build. One must be working at any or all of these steps throughout life. New projects must be continually taken up, whether old ones succeed or fail. Efficiency must be developed by continued learning and practice; wisdom should rise and accumulate as the process goes on. Faithfulness and quiet zeal in the work are fostering conditions, but the sine qua non is intelligence.

3. One realizes that all living is relative to some environmental conditions. The important thing is not that
one should accomplish this or that piece of work, but that one should strike a balance between obstacles and achievement. God does not exact day-labor, light denied. Our tasks, however they obsess ourselves, are petty and inconclusive at best. And their results constitute only very subtly the index of our living. Only the finer qualities of our work evidence the deprivations and struggles through which it was completed. Is there nothing of the Civil War in *Paradise Lost*, nothing of blindness, nothing of domestic turmoil? Work unmarred by any hostile environment yet is the worse for the doer's inexperience. Prosperity is an obstacle. One's spiritual stature will be the same, North, South, East, or West; fostered or obstructed; magnified in success or cut off in failure. Great living is *always* difficult, failure fatally easy.

For any life of mind and character, Los Angeles furnishes an environment of great hostility. There is not much narrow persecution or concentrated disparagement. The opposition is oblique, but not the less powerful on that account. For here smart houses exhibiting every characteristic of finished workmanship and modish line sell at breathtaking prices; but they are made of paper, chicken-wire, and fancy mud; they begin to warp and leak as soon as the workmen leave; after a few years they totter to hopeless decay. They do! Here men at fabulous expense concoct entertainment with much glitter; but it insults the intelligence of the world. Here schools, imposingly housed and bewilderingly administered, seek to indoctrinate millions of children and young people with a standardized intellectual pap calculated chiefly to make them victims of any advertiser's page. Here people cultivate luxuries under the guise of civilization, chicaneries dressed up as service. They ride out of town in their cars, and then at evening ride back again. They turn the knobs of their radios for hours to hear scrappy nonsense and blatant insincerity.
It is like a fair or a circus—tolerable for a holiday, perhaps, but maddening for a permanent environment. It is the froth of America. It is mad. And finally there is no health in it. Only the real shall endure, only the truth. All else is a heady illusion. Los Angeles is nine-tenths illusion. In this place one, to keep sane, must hear nothing but the wind overhead, and the ocean waves. One must see only the sky and sea and mountains. Here one's ideas must come from books, one's aims strictly from within. Through the wild babel no intelligent voice is heard. Beauty or honest strength is lost in the confusion of shams. Yet one can have no grudge against a city; living in Los Angeles is like swimming in the sea, like working with fire. It is not necessary to drown or burn.

The art of living in Los Angeles, though based on the same principles which underlie all good living, has, of course, its special conditions, including some advantages. The chief advantage is solitude. Among millions, one will almost never find a companion for other than material concerns. And the library stacks offer real solitude. One's time can well go to books and typewriter; there is no human converse by which to be detained.

But with all the wealth about, one might almost as well go to Isleta for a scholar's equipment of books. Most of the funds available to the libraries for purchase of books have apparently gone to furnish innumerable duplicate copies of textbooks, reference books, and popular novels, so that the money gave out long before the supply of necessary works could be completed. And, of course, a new library never can have many old or rare books; it is necessary to wait till they come on the market.*

*The city holds some very excellent special collections, notably the Huntington and Clark libraries and the private collection of the late Dr. Lummis. The university collections and the Los Angeles Public Library are growing rapidly. Perhaps by 1950 or 1960 they will be large enough to serve the principal needs of graduate students.
At all events, in this city there need be no apology for footnotes; they are ignored, apology and all. One may read about Ammonius Saccas in peace; nobody cares. One may think anything, say anything, quite without effect. The advertisements are so loud on every hand that no private voice is heard. One might as well be alone in the midst of a desert. Indeed, living here is like living as a hermit in some desert cave, around which incessant mirages rise and fade. Only ignore those illusive appearances, only hold fast to the vision within, only use the utter loneliness for the strength and leisure which it affords—do these things without tiring, always, and you have mastered the art of living in Los Angeles.

For an Autumn Moment

Pause, like the earth, and shoulder the light of evening;
The light, and the light reflected in yellow water
Where the river turns and flows south against the mesa,
Thrusting the black rocks asunder with its singing
That never is hushed an instant, even at sundown
When the world pauses, and you and I, and the leaves that hang windless
In the moment of changing to gold from the green of summer.

MARGARET POND,