

LETTER 40.

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My dear Friends,

I remember that I said I would write this time about becoming a lecturer. It is not in some ways so inspiring a subject as that which we generally talk about, and yet in a way it is, for what can be more necessary and inspiring than finding out how to increase our band of lecturers? They are needed so very much. Our President, Brother Raja, said in an address to members in New Zealand that now not only the truth of Brotherhood, but the truth upon which human brotherhood is founded, the divinity of all men in their deeper selves, it is the mission of the Theosophical Society to proclaim. These are his words: "You and I will go forth into the next twenty-five years to proclaim not merely Brotherhood, but the Divinity of Mankind."

Now how shall we, in increasing numbers, do that with dignity and effectiveness? In this way I do not feel that I am the very best person to talk about lecturing: I have never been to school or college or ever learned elocution. I do not think I lecture. I just talk. Of course I have realized that there come moments when one is talking when the sublimity of the subject lifts one up into a "diviner air" and then (I expect this is called inspiration) one finds oneself not only glowing with the subject, but also uttering words of far greater beauty than on ordinary occasions. For that we must be utterly absorbed in and dedicated to the beauty of our subject. We must have lost all trace of self-consciousness.

This last is not easy, especially for beginners. But as time goes on and we become accustomed to speaking before a number of people, that power of self-forgetfulness grows. Then we become truly effective speakers. Do not trouble as to whether you are using good words or good grammar. I remember when I first lectured in Edinburgh before the intellectual Scottish, a lawyer in the audience sent me next morning a post-card whereon was inscribed four grammatical mistakes I had made the evening before. It did not upset me, for I think that such mistakes do not matter in the least, it is what you say that matters--the sincerity and enthusiasm that lights your words, that carries conviction to your hearers. You can usually convince others if you yourself are utterly convinced. Suppose you have a provincial accent? That does not matter either. No one minds that if you have something to say. I know lecturers who are scared of questions. That also is quite foolish, for no audience minds your saying quite simply, "I do not know."

Do not follow the bad advice sometimes given to budding speakers to regard the audience as "a row of cabbages." That attitude entirely prohibits the establishment of a warm rapport between the speaker and his listeners. And do not look up into the air while speaking. We are talking to our fellow-men, not the angels! That is the point; we are talking to men just like ourselves, not any more clever or ~~any~~ stupid than we are. It is a great mistake to try to impress an audience either with our knowledge or our charm. And the audience is like a child, it will inevitably detect insincerity or a desire to impress. They will like you much better if you are not troubled about what they think of you. If we do our honest, kindly best they will forgive us any little peculiarities. And do not lecture with a wooden face. We must smile and look human. Of course, we have to be careful about jokes. Unrefined or unkind jokes are never permissible, but a sense of humor, if it is genuine, very much lightens a lecture and makes it easier for the audience to follow and not become tired.

Never lecture too long. About 50 minutes is the limit on most occasions. No audience can easily listen beyond that time, unless the speaker is very fascinating. And do not be in a hurry. We must give time for the ideas we present to "sink in." There is one thing that is absolutely certain. No written and read speech can ever come up to an extempore one in its effect upon an audience. It is never so "alive." So let us all try to learn to speak extempore, from notes if necessary, better still from none at all. Practice does it. Try to speak on every available occasion. Talk to anybody, to any group of people or society who will hear you. Join a debating society. And when forming a lecture, formulate it in coherent and sequential order, point following point; perhaps only six or seven in the whole lecture. Many beginners try to say too much and to cram in all they have ever heard on the subject. Thus they only give the audience mental indigestion.

And this brings me to another important point. The majority of people "think in pictures." Therefore, if we wish to make them see and remember something, we must make a glowing picture of what we wish to say. Use homely similes, just as our Lord the Christ did when He taught. He talked about the flowers of the field and of all the familiar objects of daily life around Him. I remember one of our lecturers who was a little "high-brow" giving lectures which sent everyone to sleep because he used long words and metaphysical ideas without one illustration or simile. Another who was a beginner thought it was up to him to impress the audience with the depth and extent of his own knowledge, so he sent everyone away bewildered. As one lady said in leaving the hall: "I thought he was wonderful, but I could not understand a word." I am glad to relate that that speaker saw the error of his ways and took to giving homely and practical lectures, thus becoming one of the best and most loved speakers in his land.

Should we learn elocution? Dr. Annie Besant once told us that she did not believe in learning elocution as it tended to make speakers "artificial." But learning voice production is a different thing. And at least let us learn to open our mouths and be heard. So many people speak through almost closed teeth. I did it myself once but an old actress who heard me told me to practice "dropping my jaw" as far as it would go. Elocution teachers talk about variety of tone. Of course one of the best ways to send an audience to sleep is to have a monotonous voice and delivery. But I feel variety comes naturally to those who are truly interested in what they are saying, and want to tell their fellow-men something lovely they would share. Let us be natural. If we are truly and simply natural an audience will let us "get away" with anything and say what we like. Sincerity, honesty, true kindness and happiness are the most attractive assets that any lecturer can possess. Lovely words and beautiful phrasing can be learned by the reading of great literature. Reading aloud is good. A vocabulary and choice of words grows with absorbing such liveliness from the great. And lastly let us learn to lower the tones of our voice and to acquire a deep and velvet controlled voice. Dame Melba learned that by singing m-m-m-m-ma! etc. But a professional must teach us that.

I expect this is about all I can say about lecturing. I hope you will find it helpful. One other thought. Theosophical lecturing is not ordinary lecturing. It has its greatest effect when the speaker is a dedicated man or woman. For then it is not only he who speaks but a greater force through him. Among other things I often say to myself before I go on to a platform the words from the Liberal Catholic liturgy: "May the Lord be in my heart and on my lips, that through my heart the love of God may shine forth and through my lips His power be made manifest."

Your affectionate friend,

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Clara Codd