History Teachers' Forum

THE LENGTH OF THE TETHER

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There is a story that a professor who showed up at Johns Hopkins University back in the eighteen-nineties to take some graduate courses, when asked by a fellow graduate student why he came, replied: "I came to lengthen my tether." This answer, said to have been given by Albion W. Small to Frederick J. Turner, is full of significance. It impressed me very much when I heard it, and, in the years since, I have often passed the simple but profound message which it holds on to people capable of further education.

Everyone has sometime seen a cow grazing on a village common tied with rope or chain to a stake or rod driven into the ground. The tether in such a case is the radius of a circle. Often the cow will exhaust the supply of grass within the circle. Then she will stick her neck out (not here a slang expression) and reach after every bite of grass at her command around the entire circumference. Even a cow knows enough to enlarge her circle of operations and thus increase her happiness or well-being. Should her owner double her tether he quadruples her grazing area, and, should he treble it, he multiplies it by nine, since circles are to each other as the squares of their radii.

A fundamental reason for acquiring an education, if not the most fundamental, is that it enlarges the circle of life. An education does not create any gray-matter, but it enables the possessor of gray-matter to make better use of what he has. It does not matter whether one obtains his knowledge and skills in college or out of college, or both in and out of, his horizon is pushed farther away—he lengthens his tether.

The teacher of history who constantly increases his knowledge or adds to his understanding of historical events and movements, not only enlarges his own circle, but is enabled to do more for those who study under his direction. There is something nourishing in the learning process that one engaged in any kind of teaching cannot remain alive without. The teacher of history who does not to some extent constantly seek new knowledge loses what is truly essential. In fact, such a teacher proves by the lack of an inner urge to
further study that he missed the most important acquisition when taking his training. There is no such thing as acquiring an education in history, or in any other field, and remaining fit ever afterwards. A life-license to teach any subject is no guarantee against certain deterioration unless there is a never-ending search for more knowledge and meditation on its meaning. To reach a certain degree of training and efficiency and then stop means that the tether is not lengthened, and that the area on which one feeds becomes more and more barren. To increase the length of the tether, on the other hand, means growth and a richer life.