

On Discipline - Reflections & Advice

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An inexperienced teacher who is full of enthusiasm and of faith in the attainment of that internal discipline which should grow up in the little community is faced with certain problems. She understands, and believes, that the children should be free to choose their occupations and should never be interrupted in their spontaneous activities. Neither instruction, nor threats, nor prizes, nor punishments are permitted. The teacher must remain silent and inert, patiently waiting. This she does, withdrawing, ready to efface her own personality, so that the child-spirit may have room to expand freely. She has placed at the disposition of the children a quantity of material- perhaps all the material.

And behold, disorder begins, which grows, and may reach alarming proportions. Can it be that the principles which she has learnt are wrong? They are not wrong. Between theory and results there is something lacking: that is to say, practical experience. On this point the inexperienced beginner needs guidance and enlightenment.

Something of the same kind happens to young doctors, and to all who, having gone through a training in the realm of ideas and principles, find themselves left alone face to face with the facts of life, which are more mysterious than the unknown quantity in the mathematician's unsolved problem.

We must remember that the phenomenon of internal discipline is something which must be achieved, not something pre-existent. Our function is that of guides upon the road of discipline. Discipline will appear when the child has concentrated his attention upon some object which attracts him, and which makes possible not only useful exercise but the control of error. By means of these exercises there comes about a wonderful co-ordination of the child-individuality, making a child calm, radiantly happy, busy, forgetful of self and on that account indifferent to praise or material rewards. These little conquerors of themselves and of the surrounding world are indeed superman, revealing to us the divine soul that is in man. The teacher's happy task is to show the way to perfection, providing the means and removing the obstacles, beginning with herself. For she may be the greatest obstacle of all.

If discipline were pre-existent, our work would be unnecessary: the child would have a sure instinct which would enable it to overcome all difficulties. But the three-year-old child arriving at school is a combatant on the point of being overwhelmed by repression. He has developed a defensive attitude, which masks his deeper nature. The higher energies are dormant which can lead him to disciplined peace and to divine wisdom; all that remains active is the superficial personality which exhausts itself in uncoordinated movements and wandering ideas, seeking to fight against or flee from adult oppression. The little soul, already encased in a shell, makes us think of the prophetic lamentation of Baruch: "Hear the commandments of life: give ear to understand wisdom. How happeneth it that thou art in thine enemies' land, that thou art waxen old in a strange country?... For if thou hadst walked in the way of God, thou shouldst have dwelled in peace for ever ... Young men have seen light and dwelt upon the earth: but the way of knowledge have they not known, nor understood the paths thereof, nor laid hold of it: their children were far off from that way".

But wisdom and discipline are waiting to be awakened in the little child. Repression has been at work upon him, but his shell has not yet become hardened. Our efforts will not be in vain. School must give the child-spirit its charter, and room for expansion. At the same time the teacher must remember that the defensive reactions and inferior characteristics which the child has acquired are obstacles preventing the expansion of spiritual life, and that the child must free itself of these also.

This is the "point of departure" of education. If the teacher cannot distinguish mere impulse from the spontaneous energy which wells up from a spirit at rest, her actions will bear no fruit. The very foundation of the teacher's efficiency consists in the power of distinguishing between these two kinds of activity, both of which appear to be spontaneous, because the child in both cases acts of its own accord, but which have an entirely opposite significance.

It is only when she has acquired this power of discrimination that a teacher can become an observer and guide. The necessary preparation is similar to that of a doctor of medicine: he must first of all learn to distinguish physiological from pathological facts. If he is not capable of distinguishing between health and disease - if all he can do is to distinguish a live man from a dead man - he will not be able to arrive at the fine and ever finer distinctions between pathological phenomena; it will be impossible for him to diagnose disease correctly.

This power of distinguishing between the good and the bad is the lantern we must carry in hand to lighten us upon the obscure road of the discipline that leads to perfection.

Is it possible to single out any symptoms, or combination of symptoms, sufficiently clearly and implicitly to help even theoretically in the recognition of the various stages through which the child-soul passes in its ascent towards discipline? It is possible, and in so doing a cornerstone can be laid for the guidance of the practical teacher.

The Child in a State of Chaos

Let us consider the three- or four-year-old child, as yet unaffected by the factors which will create in him internal discipline. Three characteristics exist side by side, and can be easily recognised by the help of a simple description.

(1) The voluntary movements are disordered. I do not mean the intention of the movements, but the movements themselves: fundamental co-ordination is lacking. This symptom, which would have more significance for a medical specialist in nervous diseases than for a philosopher, is of great importance. The physician observes the smallest details concerning the voluntary movements of a patient who is seriously ill; for example, of a paralytic in the first stages of creeping paralysis. The physician knows that these details have so fundamental an importance, that on them he bases his diagnosis, much more than on mental aberration or disordered behaviour, which are also among the symptoms of this disease. The small child who is clumsy in his movements will show many other obvious characteristics, such as disorderly actions, uncontrolled behaviour, screaming and contortions, but all these are of minor significance. An education which delicately co-ordinates the finer movements will by itself obliterate all the disorder of the voluntary movements. Rather than try to correct the thousand external manifestations of one deviation from the right path, it will be enough for the teacher to offer an interesting means of developing skill in the finer movements: placing a small light cube in the centre of a square, and so on.

(2) Another characteristic which always accompanies the above is the difficulty or incapacity shown by a child in fixing his attention on real things. His mind prefers to wander in the realms of fantasy. Playing with stones or dead leaves, he talks of preparing delicious banquets, of spreading magnificent tables, of sending out invitations, and his imagination will probably run riot more wildly as he grows older. The mind exhausts itself, divorcing itself constantly more from its normal function, and becoming a useless instrument of the spirit, which needs it for the purpose of developing the inner life. Many people, unfortunately, believe that this force which disintegrates the personality is just the force that develops spiritual life. They maintain that the inner life is by itself creative - outside there is nothing, or only shadows, pebbles and dead leaves.

The inner life builds itself up, on the contrary, on the fundamental basis of a unified personality - well orientated in the external world. The wandering mind, which divorces itself from reality, departs its normal function: departs, that is to say, from health. In that world of fantasy towards which it tends, there is no control of error, nothing which will co-ordinate thought. Attention to real things, with its future applications, becomes impossible. It is a fine distinction, but that life of the imagination, falsely so called, is an atrophy of the very organs whose functions are essential to the spiritual life. The teacher who seeks to attract the attention of the child to something real - making reality accessible and attractive - the teacher who succeeds in interesting the child, say, in laying a real table, serving a real meal - the voice of that teacher will recall, like the sound of a trumpet, the mind which had wandered far from the path of its own welfare. And the co-ordination of the fine movements, together with the recall of the wandering attention to reality, will

be the only remedy needed. We need not correct one by one the more or less obvious aspects of the one fundamental deviation. As soon as the power is acquired of fixing the mind on real things, the mind will be restored to health and will function normally.

The third phenomenon, concomitant with the other two, is a tendency towards imitation, which becomes constantly more prompt and rapid. This sign of profound weakness is an exaggeration of normal traits in children of two years. (The imitation of tiny children is of another kind, and cannot be dealt with here). It indicates a will which has not prepared its instruments, nor found its course, but follows the indications of others. The child has not entered on the way of perfection; like a rudderless ship he is the sport of every wind. Anyone who observes a two-year-old child with a limited range of imitative ideas as its sum total of knowledge will recognise the degenerative form of imitation of which I am speaking, connected with disorder and mental instability, and leading the child downward like the steps of a descending stair.

It is enough that one child in a class should do something rough and noisy - throwing itself on the ground, perhaps, laughing and shouting - and many, or perhaps all, of the children will follow his example and even outdo him. The foolish act multiplies itself in a group of children, perhaps even throughout the class. This sort of gregariousness leads to a collective disorder, the antithesis of social life which is made up of work and good order. Imitativeness propagates and exalts, among the crowd, the defects of one: it is the point of least resistance where degeneration begins.

The more this kind of degeneration takes hold, the more difficult it is for the children to obey one who calls them to better things. But get them once upon the right road, and an end will come to the varied consequences of one original mistake.

The Recall

That teacher may find herself in an anxious pass who, finding herself called upon to direct a whole class of such children, has no equipment but the basic idea of offering the children the means of development and then leaving them free to express themselves. The little inferno which has already begun to evolve in these children will draw into itself everything within reach, and the teacher, if passive, will be overwhelmed by noise and muddle almost inconceivable. The teacher who, from inexperience and over-rigidity or over-simplicity of principles and ideas, finds herself in such a situation, must remember the powers which lie dormant in these divinely pure and generous little souls. She must call upon them, waking the sleepers with voice and thought. She must help these little creatures, who are wildly rushing along the downward path, to reascend. A vigorous and determined recall is the only true kindness to these little souls.

Do not fear to destroy evil. It is only the good that we must fear to destroy.

As we must call a child by its name before it can answer, so it is necessary to call vigorously to awaken the soul. The teacher must take her materials from

the school, and her principles from what she has learnt; and then she must face practically, for herself, the question of this recall. Only her own intelligence can solve the problem, which will be different in every individual case. The teacher knows the fundamental symptoms and the obvious remedies - the theory, in fact, of treatment, and then it is she who does the rest. The good doctor, like the good teacher, is an individual, not merely a machine for administering medicine or applying educational methods. Details must be left to the judgment of the teacher who is taking her first steps on the new path, as for instance whether general disorder is best quelled by raising the voice, or whether it is best to whisper to a few of the children so as to rouse the curiosity of others and make them quiet. A chord struck loudly up on the pianoforte will sometimes check disorder like the stroke of a whip.

Apparent Order

An experienced teacher will never get extreme disorder in a class because, before she retires into the background, she will be watchful for a time, directing the children so as to "prepare" them in a negative sense, that is to say, in the direction of checking uncontrolled movements. There is for this a series of preparatory exercises which the teacher must bear in mind, and children whose minds are wandering away from reality should feel the strong help which the teacher should be able to give. Calm, steadfast and patient, her voice should reach the children, commending or exhorting. Some exercises are especially useful, such as rearranging chairs and tables without making a noise; arranging a row of chairs and sitting down upon them; running from end to end of the room on tip-toe. If the teacher is really sure of herself it may be enough to say: "Now let us be quiet", and calm will fall as by enchantment. The simplest exercises of practical life will bring down to the terra firma of real work the little errant spirits thus recalled. Little by little the teacher will offer the didactic material, never, however, leaving it to the children's free choice until they understand the uses of it.

Now we see a quiet class: the children are in direct touch with reality; their occupations have a practical aim, such as dusting a table, removing a stain and so on; they go to the cupboard, take a piece of the material and use it correctly. It appears as if the faculty of free choice improved with exercise. In general the teacher is satisfied, but it appears to her that the material, as determined by the Montessori method, is insufficient, and she finds herself faced by the evident necessity of adding to it: "In a week a child has used all the material again and again". Perhaps the majority of schools do not get beyond this point.

One factor - one only - reveals the fragility of this apparent good order, and threatens the collapse of the whole fabric: the children pass from one thing to another, do each exercise once, and take something else from the cupboard. The journeying to and from the cupboard is perpetual. Not one of the children is finding, on this earth to which he has descended, any interest which will be worthy of awakening the divine and strong nature within him: his personality is not exercising, developing and fortifying itself. In these fleeting contacts, the outer world cannot have upon him the influence which puts the spirit in equilibrium with the world. The child is like a bee, which flits from blossom to blossom, but does not find the flower on which to settle,

exhaust the nectar and satisfy itself: he does not settle down to work to that point where he feels awakening within himself the wonderful instinctive activity destined to build up his character and mind.

The teacher feels, at this stage of wandering attention, that her task is difficult; she also, in general, runs from child to child, inspiring them with her own anxious, tiring agitation. Many of the children when her back is turned play with the material, weary of it and put it to foolish uses. While the teacher is occupied with one child, others make mistakes. The moral and intellectual progress, so confidently expected, does not take place.

This apparent discipline is a very fragile thing and the teacher, who feels disorder in the air, is all the time in a state of tension. The great majority of insufficiently trained or experienced teachers end by believing that the "new child", so eagerly expected, of which so much has been said, is only an illusion, an ideal: and that in reality a class held together thus by an effort of nervous energy is tiring for the teacher and unprofitable for the child.

It is necessary that the teacher should be able to understand the children's condition: they are going through a transitional period - they stand without the door. The little spirits are knocking, waiting till it shall be opened unto them. In the matter of progress, however, there is little to be observed. This stage of affairs is nearer to chaos than to discipline. All the work of such children will be imperfect; the elementary movements of co-ordination will be without strength or grace, and their actions capricious. In comparison with the first stage, in which they are out of touch with reality, they have scarcely progressed; this is only a convalescence after illness.

In this crucial period of development the teacher has to exercise two different functions: first, watchfulness over all the children; and secondly, the giving of individual lessons - that is to say, she must offer the material regularly, showing its exact uses. General watchfulness and individual lessons exactly given are the two means by which the teacher can help infant development. She must take care at this stage never to turn her back on the class while attending to a single child. Her presence must be felt by all those little souls wandering in search of eternal life. The lesson, exact and forceful, given in intimacy to each separate individual, is an offering which the teacher makes to the profundity of the child-spirit. She who thus calls takes on an aspect of grandeur. One day some little spirit awakens; the ego of some child takes possession of some object; attention becomes fixed on the repetition of some one exercise; executive skill perfects itself; the irradiation of the child's countenance indicates that its spirit is being born anew.

Discipline

Free choice is a higher activity: only the child who knows what he needs to exercise and develop his spiritual life can really choose freely. One cannot speak of free choice when every external object calls the child equally, and the child, lacking in directing willpower, follows everything and passes from one thing to another without end. This is one of the most important distinctions which the teacher should be able to make. The child who does not yet obey an internal guide is not the free child entering upon the long and narrow way of

perfection. He is still the slave of superficial sensations, which make him the sport of his environment; his spirit is tossed between one object and another, like a ball. The man is born when the soul feels itself; fixes, orientates itself and chooses.

This grand and simple phenomenon appears in every created being; all living things possess the power of choosing in a complicated and many-sided environment that, and only that, which is actually necessary to maintain life. The roots of every plant choose from among the many elements of the soil those which they need; an insect chooses definitely and fixes itself in the flower formed to receive it. In man, however, the same wonderful discernment is not pure instinct, but something which has to be won. Children have, especially in the first years of life, an internal sensibility as to their spiritual needs, which repression and wrong education can cause to vanish, to be replaced by a kind of slavery of the external senses to every surrounding object. We ourselves have lost that profound and vital sensibility, and we find ourselves before its resurrection in the child as before a mystery revealed. It reveals itself in that delicate act of free choice, which a teacher untrained in observation would trample under foot before she had noticed it, as an elephant might crush a flower-bud springing up in the grass. The child who has fixed his attention on a chosen object, and is concentrating his being upon the repetition of an exercise, is a saved soul, in the sense of spiritual health of which we are speaking. There is no need henceforth to occupy ourselves with him, otherwise than by preparing his environment so that it will supply his needs, and by removing obstacles which might obstruct for him the way of perfection.

It is before these higher phenomena that the teacher should repress herself, so that the child-spirit may be free to expand and to express itself; it is that the importance of her task lies in not interrupting the child at work. This is the period in which the teacher's moral delicacy, acquired during training, will show itself in her repression of the impulse to help, as of the impulse to admire. She must learn what is not easy - how to serve, or perhaps only to stand by observing. In serving also she must observe, for the dawning phenomenon of concentration in the child is as delicate as a bud just about to open. She will not observe now for the purpose of making her presence felt and of assisting weak spirits with her own strength; she will observe in order to recognise the child who has concentrated his attention in order to behold the glorious rebirth of the spirit.

The child who concentrates is happy within himself, unconscious of his neighbours and of his surroundings. For an instant his spirit is like the spirit of the hermit in the desert, and there is born in him a new consciousness, the consciousness of his own individuality. When the concentration passes, he seems to become aware, as if for the first time, of the world which surrounds him, with unlimited scope for further discoveries; aware also of his companions in whom he shows a loving interest.

He awakens to a love of persons and of things - gentle and affectionate towards all, and ready to admire everything that is beautiful. The spiritual process is evident; he has to detach himself from his world in order to acquire the power of uniting himself to it. We go out of the city to admire it spread

out in panorama, and it is from an aeroplane - rising, that is to say, above the earth, - that one can best see terrestrial features. Thus also the human spirit, in order to exist and to dwell with its fellows, must retire into solitude and fortify itself, and after that behold with love its fellow creatures. The saint in solitude prepares himself to regard with wisdom and justice those social needs which are hidden from the mass of humanity; the preparation in the desert precedes the great mission of love and peace.

The child simply takes up an attitude of profound isolation, and the result is a strong peaceful character, radiating love on all around. Arising from this attitude are self sacrifice, unremitting work, obedience, and at the same time a joy in living, like a bright spring that sprang up among surrounding rocks, and is destined to help all living creatures around it. The result of concentration is an awakened social sense, and the teacher should be prepared for what follows: to these little newborn hearts she will be a creature beloved. They will "discover" her, just as they have newly discovered the blueness of the sky and the almost imperceptible scent of tiny flowers that nestle in the grass. The needs of these children - rich in enthusiasm and, as it were, explosive in their wonderful progress - might puzzle an inexperienced teacher. In the early stages it was not the children's many disorderly acts which she had to consider, but only the signs of fundamental needs, so now the innumerable signs of moral richness and beauty must not overwhelm her. She must aim always at something simple and central which is like the pivot on which a door revolves - hidden necessarily, but independent of the ornamentation of the door, whether sculptured or rich with gold and precious stones. Her mission aims always at something constant and precise. She begins to feel herself unnecessary because the children's progress is disproportionate to the part she plays in it. Constantly she sees the children becoming more independent in their choice of occupations and in their rich faculty of expression, and their progress seems sometimes almost miraculous. She feels herself a servant only, whose task is the humble one of preparing the environment and effacing herself. She remembers the words of John the Baptist after the Messiah had revealed himself: "He must increase, but I must decrease".

This, however, is the time at which her authority will be most sought by the children. Many devotees of these lovable little souls have an experience, apparently insignificant: a child who has produced something by his intelligent activity - a drawing, a written word, or some such little thing - comes to the teacher and asks her if he has done it well. They never come and ask what they should do, nor how they should do it - indeed they defend themselves against all help; choice and execution are treasured prerogatives of the freed soul. But when the work is done they go and ask for the sanction of her authority. A similar instinct makes them defend energetically their spiritual privacy - their mysterious obedience to the directing voice which each seems to hear within himself - and then submit to exterior authority their actions, as if to make sure that they are really upon the right way. It makes one think of the first steps of the little child with uncertain limbs, who needs to see the grown-up person's arms outstretched and ready to prevent a fall, although the powers which initiate and perfect the act of walking are within the child himself. The teacher should respond with a word of consent, encourage with a smile, as the mother smiles at the child taking his first steps.

For perfection, security must develop within the child, from internal sources with which the teacher has nothing to do.

The child, in fact, once secure, will no longer seek the approval of authority for every step. He will begin to accumulate completed work of which the other knows nothing, obeying simply the need to produce in quantity and to perfect his productions. What interests him is to finish his work, not to have it admired nor to hoard it as his own property; the noble instinct which actuates him is far removed from pride or avarice. Many visitors to our schools will remember how teachers have shown them the children's best work without ever indicating the authors. This apparent oversight of honest, laborious work comes from the teacher's habitual knowledge that it is of no importance to the children. In any other kind of school a teacher would feel guilty if, in showing a good piece of work, she did not introduce the author of it. If she forgot to do so, she might even hear the childish protest: "I did that!" In our schools, on the other hand, the child who did the work is probably by himself in a corner engaged upon another wonderful effort, and his great wish is not to be interrupted.

This is the period in which discipline establishes itself: a form of active peace, of obedience and love, in which work perfects itself and multiplies, just as in springtime the flowers take on colour, leading on to the production of sweet and refreshing fruits.

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