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HABIT, SOCIETY'S CONSERVING AGENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education, in a broad sense, means the operation of all forces that act upon a person from without to influence the way in which he acts, thinks, and feels. The aim of education in the United States of America is good citizenship and a happier, fuller life for the individual. Our educators and parents are not content with the country's educational achievements. They want a broadening of the facilities and instruction to not only reach a greater share of the population, but to fit our students to live in a "narrowing world;" to help them to cope with the changing world, the "small neighborhood."

The aim of our education is the individual, although at times our education seems regimented to me. Our educational system is supposed to respect and tolerate individual differences. This again, I sometimes doubt. However, we must help our students to think in a broad sense, beyond their own communities, own state, own country. As Einstein said, they should be taught that "every thing functions as a whole." Children know that what affects friends and neighbors in the way of troubles affects them, so also the troubles of other countries affect our country. This is felt through wars and pocketbooks.

We need to teach our children, in general, an

understanding of the social and economic situations existing in other parts of the world. If we understand the problems of other people, we understand the people better. We may not like their standards of living or of government, but that should not stop us from liking the people themselves. In other words, we should train our children to be future citizens of the United States of America, who will think of the whole world and their relation to it. If our students use this knowledge, they will live in a much happier world.

Most of the successful people in life knew what they wanted. Success in life is, of course, the most individual, the most personal thing in the world. Each individual must set up his own personal definition of success; he must envision the goal which, when achieved, will give him the particular sort of happiness and satisfaction sought for in life. A traveler who sets out upon a road with no destination in mind is foolish indeed. A person who travels through life without having decided what he wants to be is just as foolish, and just as apt to finish nowhere, doing himself and others no good. The sooner you set your goal, the surer you are to attain it.

Literally, habit means a garment or form of life, or a mode of conduct not having grown naturally out of the body but having been put on from without. According to this meaning even man's clothes are his habits, and it might still be said that man's habits are the garments of his soul. Habit is an acquired mode of behavior, involving the tendency to

- 3 -

repeat and reproduce certain actions; that is, to act the same way under the same circumstances.

"The adolescent is striving to achieve maturity, wants to make his own decisions with no interference, but he also wants his parents to take an interest in him and help him make decisions, wants to be treated as an adult but still enjoys the irresponsibility of childhood."¹

The way the adolescent meets his problems now will determine the type of adult citizen he will be in our society.

Habit is something distinctly human. God does not have habits because His Infinite perfection precludes them; the animal cannot have habits because its growth in perfection is completely arranged and wholly limited by the principles of nature. But man cannot get along without habits and all his human powers are perfected only in proportion to the habits which he has developed.

"Since personality traits and habits are learned and not inherited, adults who assume the responsibility for the upbringing of a child should guide his development so that there will be a pre-dominance of desirable personality traits."²

Leaving personality development to chance may produce good results, but the results are just as likely to be the reverse.

An attractive personality is one in which socially

¹Landis and Landis, Teachers' Manuel and Film Guide for Building Your Life, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954), p.31.

²Hurlock, Elizabeth B., Ph.D., Child Growth and Development, (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1949), p.92.

desirable personality traits predominate. It is impossible to find a person in whom only pleasing traits exist. But it is possible to develop in a young child traits that are regarded as attractive by others.

An individual who has an attractive personality is usually well adjusted. This means that he gets along with all types of people with more than average success. The better adjusted he is, the more attractive his personality.

Habit plays an important part in biology as well as in the sciences of the mind, i.e. psychology, ethics. Habit is a fixed tendency acquired by an organism during its lifetime. In psychology, the term has served as an explanation of "the rise and cause of mental process."¹ "Habit patterns have a great influence in shaping the character of an individual and the culture of a group."² If it were not for habit, human life would be impossible.

"Habits of conduct are acquired in much the same way that we develop other skills."³ To become the person you want to be, it is usually necessary to eliminate some old habits as well as to form new ones. The easiest way to break an old habit is to substitute a new one.

Habits differ from instinct. Instinct is an innate or inherited sense tendency, independent of education. Instinct

¹New International Encyclopedia, Vol. II, p.540.

²Compton's Pictural Encyclopedia, p.239-p.240.

³Bennett and Hand, Designs for Personality, (McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1952), p.115.

is specific and is an unlearned pattern of behavior. It is instinct and not habit that causes the birds to migrate south in the winter. Habit is an aptitude for action of behavior that has been acquired by the individual through practice and perfected by repetition. Instinctive acts do not result from intelligence and will, as habits do, but depend upon external stimulation and the inherited structure of man.

The physical basis of habit lies in the nervous system. The phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed. Plasticity means, of course, that the nervous system is endowed with the capacity of being molded and fashioned. Just as a lock works better after being used several times, as a piece of paper folds more easily in the same place again, so does man's nervous system grow the way in which it is exercised. Each act leaves an impression on the nervous system proportionate to the interests of the individual, to the intensity of the act, to the application of the will, and to the degree of accompanying satisfaction and success.

Man not only has habits of bodily activity, but he has also habits of memory, of judgement, of perception, of thought, of will, of feeling, of attention. This is evident from the fact that man continually finds himself inclined to think, to remember, to reflect, to attend, to will, under circumstances that are the same or similar to those which have occurred in the past. However, man's nervous system,

which is the physical basis of habit does not produce mental states, but the co-operation of the nervous system is an extrinsic condition of mental states. Thus the intellect, which is the faculty of thought, finds it easier to think along lines which the images naturally follow, and the images follow the tendencies which have been impressed on the nervous system.

The childhood years are critical in habit formation and character building because childhood is the most plastic period in life. The period from eight to twelve years of age is the best time for formation of useful and practical habits. This is the period of practice in subjects which constitute the tools of learning and which must become automatic to be useful, namely, reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is important for parents and educators to realize that the child who is always permitted to have his own way is being definitely trained to selfishness. Childhood is also the period for establishing habits of refined behavior, habits of pronunciation in language, and habits involving moral qualities.

Physical habits may be perfected during adolescence, but their training should be started much earlier. During childhood the muscles are more plastic and the nervous system more impressionable. Adolescence is also the time for concentrating on the organization of mental habits such as those of industry, attention, and self control.

The formation of habits is far more important and leaves more permanent impressions when exerted on the growing organisms than when brought to bear on the adult. Personal habits, such as pronunciation, gesture, and motion are best acquired before the twentieth year. Habits of thought and action, which later develop into mannerisms, are all acquired in youth, and leave their impression upon the character never to be erased until death.