

Part III. What are we drawing the students to?

The Means of Motivation

So far we have considered incidental ways of trespassing upon those rights of personality proper to children, but we have more pervasive, if less injurious, ways of stultifying intellectual and moral growth. Our school ethic rests upon, our school discipline is supported by, undue play upon certain natural desires. It is worthwhile to reflect that the mind also has its appetites, better known as desires. It is as necessary that Mind should be fed, should grow, and should produce, as that these things should happen to Body, and just as Body would not take the trouble to feed itself if it never became hungry, so Mind also would not take in that which it needs if it were not that certain Desires require to be satisfied. Therefore, schoolmasters do not amiss in basing their practice upon the Desires whose very function appears to be to bring nourishment to Mind. Where we teachers err is in stimulating the wrong desires to accomplish our end. There is the desire of approbation which even an infant shows, he is not happy unless mother or nurse approve of him. Later this same desire helps him to conquer a sum, climb a hill, bring home a good report from school, and all this is grist to the mill, knowledge to the mind; because the persons whose approbation is worth having care that he should learn and know, conquer idleness, and get habits of steady work, so that his mind may be as duly nourished every day as is his body. Alas for the vanity that attends this desire of approbation, that makes the boy more solicitous for the grin of the stable boy than for the approval of his master! Nay, this desire for approval may get such possession of him that he thinks of nothing else; he must have approval whether from the worthless or the virtuous. It is supposed that outbreaks of violence, robbery, assassinations, occur at times for the mere sake of infamy, just as deeds of heroism are done for the sake of fame. Both infamy and fame mean being thought about and talked about by a large number of people; and we know how this natural

desire is worked by the daily press; how we get, now a film actress, now a burglar, a spy, a hero, or a scientist set before us to be our admiration and our praise.

Emulation, the desire of excelling, works wonders in the hands of the schoolmaster; and, indeed, this natural desire is an amazing spur to effort, both intellectual and moral. When in pursuit of virtue two or a score are 'emulously rapid in the race,' a school acquires 'a good tone' and parents are justified in thinking it the right place for their child. In the intellectual field, however, there is danger; and nothing worse could have happened to our schools than the system of marks, prizes, place-taking, by which many of them are practically governed. A child is so taken up with the desire to forge ahead that there is no time to think of anything else. What he learns is not interesting to him; he works to get his remove. But emulation does not stand alone as Viceregent in our schools; another natural desire whose unvarnished name is avarice labors for good government and so-called progress cheek by jowl with emulation. "He must get a scholarship,"—is the duty of a small child even before he goes to school, and indeed for good and sufficient reasons. Sometimes the sons of rich parents carry off these prizes but as a rule they fall to those for whom they are intended, the sons of educated parents in rather straitened circumstances, sons of the clergy, for example. The scholarship system is no more than a means of distributing the vast wealth left by benefactors in the past for this particular purpose. Every Grammar school has its own scholarships; the Universities have open scholarships and bursaries often of considerable value; and a free, or partially free, education is open to the majority of the youth of the upper middle class on one condition, that of brains. It is small wonder that every Grammar and Public School bases its curriculum upon these conditions, knows exactly what standard of merit will secure the 'Hastings,' knows the children who have a chance, and orders their very strenuous work towards the end in view. It is hard to say what better could be done and yet this deliberate cult of cupidity is disastrous; for there is no

doubt that here and there we come upon impoverishment of personality due to enfeebled intellectual life; the child did not learn to delight in knowledge in his schooldays and the adult is shallow in mind and whimsical in judgment.

We need not delay over that desire of power, ambition, which plays its part in every life; but the educator must see that it plays no more than its part. Power is good in proportion as it gives opportunities for serving; but it is mischievous in child or man when the pleasure of ruling, managing, becomes a definite spring of action. Like each of the other natural desires, that for power may ruin a life that it is allowed to master; ambition is the cause of half the disasters under which mankind suffers. The ambitious child or man would as soon lead his fellows in riot and disorder as in noble effort in a good cause; and who can say how far the labor unrest under which we suffer is inspired and inflamed by ambitious men who want to rule if only for the immediate intoxication of rousing and leading men? It is a fine thing to say of a multitude of men, —"I can wind them around my little finger"; and the much-burdened Head of a school must needs beware! If the able, ambitious fellow be allowed to manage the rest, he cheats them out of their fair share of managing their own lives; no child should be allowed to wax feeble to make another great; the harm to the ambitious child himself must be considered too, lest he become an ignoble, maneuvering person. It is within a teacher's scope to offer wholesome ambitions to a child, to make him keen to master knowledge rather than manage men; and here he has wide field without encroaching on another's preserve.

Another desire which may well be made to play into the schoolmaster's hands is that of society, a desire which has much to do with the making of the naughty boys, idle youths and silly women of our acquaintance. It is sheer delight to mix with our fellows, but much depends on whom we take for our fellows and why; and here

young people may be helped by finger-posts. If they are so taught that knowledge delights them, they will choose companions who share that pleasure. In this way princes are trained; they must know something of botany to talk with botanists, of history to meet with historians; they cannot afford to be in the company of scientists, adventurers, poets, painters, philanthropists or economists, and themselves be able to do no more than 'change the weather and pass the time of day'; they must know modern languages to be at home with men of other countries, and ancient tongues to be familiar with classical allusions. Such considerations rule the education of princes, and every boy has a princely right to be brought up so that he may hold his own in good society, that is, the society of those who 'know.'¹

It must be borne in mind that in proportion as other desires are stimulated that of knowledge is suppressed. The teacher who proposes marks and places as worthy aims will get work certainly but he will get no healthy love of knowledge for its own sake and no provision against the ennui of later days. The monotony I have spoken of attends all work prompted by the stimuli of marks and places; such work becomes mechanical, and there is hardly enough of it prepared to last through the course of a child's school life.²

Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. How do school ethics and school discipline unduly play upon the natural desires? Give examples
2. Where do we err as teachers? Why must this be?
3. Why does emulation work against learning? Avarice? Ambition? Society?
4. What are we drawing students to when we play upon these motives?

¹ Charlotte Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 80-85.

² *Ibid*, 94.

5. Think about school life for the student in elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. Talk about the ways at these various ages in which we “motivate” children towards schooling.
6. What happens to the desire of knowledge when the other desires are at the forefront?
7. How is this seen in the school classroom? The homeschool classroom? The use of curricula? The home? Children’s sports and activities?