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SCHOOL-ROOM CLASSICS. IV.

THE ART
OF
Securing Attention.

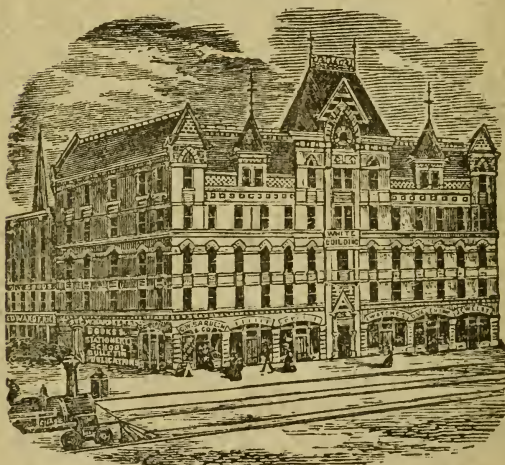
BY
JOSHUA G. FITCH, M. A.

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THE following paper contains the substance of a lecture delivered to training classes established in connection with the British Sunday-School Union. In editing it for this series of educational publications, I have omitted such portions as pertain exclusively to the work of mission Sunday-schools, and were unessential to the continuity and completeness of the work as a valuable manual for public-school teachers.

C. W. BARDEEN.

SYRACUSE, April 9, 1880.

THE
ART OF SECURING ATTENTION.

By attention I mean fixity of thought, the concentration of the whole mind upon one subject at a time; that effort of will by which we are enabled to follow what we hear or read, without wandering, without weariness, and without losing any particle of the meaning intended to be conveyed.

I do not doubt that to many of you the thought occurs, "This, indeed, is the one thing which I most want. If I could only secure attention, what an admirable teacher I should be! How happy I should be in my work! How much success and usefulness would follow my efforts!" Now, this is a very natural reflection; but it will be my object to prove to you that it is not a very sound one; and that attention must not be looked upon as the *condition* of our being good teachers; but rather as the *result* of our being so.

Let us first of all acknowledge to ourselves, that attention, such as we want to get from children, is a

very hard thing to give. You and I, even when we have the strongest sense of duty urging us to attend to a subject, often find that it is next to impossible to chain our thoughts resolutely down to it. The memory of yesterday's business, the prospect of tomorrow's pleasure, will intrude upon us in spite of all our efforts. We constantly lose the thread of argument, even in a book that interests us; the eye glances down the page, but the thoughts do not follow it, and we are compelled to go back again, and make a renewed effort to keep our wayward minds in harness. You know how often this is true; whether you listen to a sermon or a lecture, or read a book. It is true even when you most desire to resist the temptation. How much more is the difficulty likely to be felt by little children, who are constitutionally more restless than we are; whose moral natures are but partially developed; and who have, at present, no strong sense of duty to chide them into silence or awe them into attention.

And let us confess to ourselves, also, that we are accustomed to make very heavy demands upon a child's faculty of attention. We expect him to listen to teaching from nine o'clock until twelve; then after a brief interval to compose himself into stillness and attention again, often giving him instruction,

the greater part of which is above his comprehension, and adapted to cases and experiences very different from his own. He is naturally very inquisitive about things that immediately surround him; he is curious to learn about the sun, and the moon, and the stars; about distant countries; about the manners of foreigners; about birds and beasts and fishes; nay, even about machines, and many other human inventions; but he is not prepared at first to perceive that the knowledge which you impart is related to his daily life. You do not find the appetite for such knowledge already existing. You have to create it; and until you have created it, he cannot give you the fixed and earnest attention you want, without an effort which is positively painful to him.

I think it important at the outset that we should be aware of these two simple facts: first, that fixed attention is a hard thing for anybody to give; and, second, that fixed attention to prescribed subjects is especially a hard thing for children to give. When we have fairly taken these facts into account we shall be better prepared to avail ourselves of any counsel which may enable us to secure attention. It is always a great step toward the removal of a

difficulty, to know that there is a difficulty and that it needs to be removed.

For you know, however hard it may be to gain attention, we *must* get it if we are to do any good at all in school. It is of no use there to tell children things which go no deeper than the surface of their minds, and which will be swept away to make room for the first trifling matter which claims admission there. If children are really to be the better for what we teach, if the truths which we love so well are really to go deep into their consciences, and become the guiding principles of their lives, it is no half-hearted, languid attention which will serve our purpose. We are not dealing with facts which will bear to be received and then forgotten: but with truths which, if they have any significance, and, if they have any practical value to a child at all, must be not only received by his understanding, but lodged securely in his memory, and made to tell upon the formation of his character for this world and the next.

Let me tell you first how you will *not* get attention. You will not get it by claiming it, by demanding it as a right, or by entreating it as a favor; by urging upon your pupils the importance of the subject, the kindness of their teachers, or the important

character of the truths you have to impart. All these are very legitimate arguments to use to older people. You and I, we may hope, feel their force. The sense of these things keeps us thoughtful and silent many a time, perhaps, when we are hearing a dull or unintelligible address. We feel we *ought* to be attentive, and so we make an effort to be so. George Herbert argues that if the preacher's discourse entirely lacks interest, we must consider that

“God takes a text, and preacheth patience.”

This is a very valid argument to us, no doubt, but it is no argument to a child. Nothing in the long run (except fear, which I know you would feel to be a very unsatisfactory motive) can keep a child's attention fixed, but a sense of real interest in the thing you are saying. It is necessary that he should feel that the subject claims attention for itself, not that you are claiming attention *for* the subject. Depend upon it, that attention got by threats, by authority, or even by promises, or indeed by any external means whatever, is not a genuine or effective thing. The real attention, such as alone can serve the purpose of a teacher, must always be founded on the facts that you have got something to say which is worth a child's hearing, and that you can

say it in such a manner that he shall *feel* it to be worth hearing.

And of course the first condition to be fulfilled, in order to secure this, is, that the teacher's own mind shall be accurately and abundantly prepared on the subject which he has to teach. It seems a trite thing, to say to teachers that they should prepare their lessons. Few of my readers, I hope, need to be reminded of their duty in this respect. But I doubt whether many of us see the importance of preparation in its true light. Observe, I said a teacher should be *accurately* prepared. By this I mean, that there should be no vagueness or indistinctness in his mind about what he is going to teach. He should not rely on a general impression that he comprehends the subject. He must have details—facts which he knows how to state with exactness; and a degree of nicety and precision about his knowledge far greater than he can ever hope to impart to the children. Again, I said he should be *abundantly* prepared. This means that he should store his mind beforehand, not merely with what he means to impart, but with a great deal more. He does not know what topic may grow out of the lesson; he cannot tell what questions the children may ask, nor what illustrations he may find most effective. So he should provide himself at

all points. He should look *at* the lesson and *into* the lesson, and *all round* the lesson, before he gives it; gathering together in his mind all that can possibly throw light upon it, and become useful in his teaching.

There is another reason for attaching great importance to *abundant* preparation. No man can ever teach all he knows on any subject. I doubt, indeed, whether he can teach half of what he knows. If you would be a good teacher, therefore, up to a certain point, you yourself should have gone far beyond that point. We must look at any fact we want to teach from very different, and perhaps distant points of view, in order to comprehend its true relation to other facts. If any teacher just gets up a lesson from printed notes, and is only barely provided with the knowledge actually required for his class, he is sure to fail, both in securing attention and in getting the subject understood. Children will always carry away with them far less than you bring. Make up your mind at once to the fact, that a large discount or percentage of even a successful lesson is always lost in the very act of communicating it. Therefore, if you wish children to receive a given amount of instruction you must be provided with a great deal more. I always notice when a man is teaching, that

the moment he gets within sight of the horizon, and feels that he is approaching the limits of his own knowledge, he falters; he becomes embarrassed; he loses confidence in himself; the children soon detect his weakness, and the lesson loses interest immediately. Now the practical inference from this is, get all the subsidiary and illustrative information you can possibly accumulate about your lesson before you give it. Anecdotes, definitions of hard words, illustrations of eastern life, verses of poetry, parallel texts and allusions, may or may not be needed in the lesson; but at any rate, they certainly *will* be needed by yourself, to give due life and vigor to your teaching, and to make you feel a confidence in your own resources.

But the preparation required cannot all be obtained from books. Valuable as book knowledge is, it is not the only knowledge, and it is certainly not all a teacher wants. His preparation must be going on in the world as well as in his study. He must watch the incidents of every day, and see what use he can make of them in his class. If he has an open eye, and that "loving heart" which a great writer has called the beginning of all knowledge, he will be able to learn a great deal by observation respecting the nature of childhood, its dangers, its wants, and

the peculiar teaching which is best suited for it. He will constantly be watching incidents and events, and treasure up as much of them as can be brought to bear upon his scholars, or is likely to convey instruction to them. I am afraid some of us do not think enough of this. Why, there is not a circumstance that happens to any one of us, not an incident in our daily life, public or private, not a success or a failure, a misfortune or a blessing, which has not its own special significance, and is not meant to teach us some useful lesson. If we only had eyes to see and hearts to receive it, we should perceive that the history of each day's experience, even of the humblest of us, every one of the shifting phenomena of our daily life, illustrates some great moral and spiritual truth which underlies it, and is meant to be recognized and understood by us. Do we husband the experiences of every day? Do we watch the lessons it teaches, the warnings that it brings, and do we try to bring it to bear upon our teaching? If we do not we lose a great opportunity of usefulness, and throw away one of the main securities for obtaining attention.

For, after all, one of the first requisites in good teaching is, that it shall address itself to the actual experience and necessities of the learner, and not to

any imaginary experience or necessities. We cannot fulfill this condition unless we make it our business to know what are the real dangers and temptations, the weaknesses and the wants, of the children whom we have to teach. I took a little child to church with me the other day, and her remark on coming out was, "I don't understand that preacher, he doesn't talk like gentlemen in rooms." Now I do not suppose that public service can ever, in the nature of things, be otherwise than strange and unintelligible to children; but I am sure that the more teachers talk like "gentlemen in rooms," the better. If there is anything unfamiliar, or artificial, or sermonizing in your language or even in your tone; if your illustrations are bookish and unpractical; if the virtues and the vices you talk about are not the actual virtues which it is possible for them to practise, and the actual vices into which they are likely to fall; if in any way you shoot above their heads, or betray a want of familiarity with the real lives which children lead, your class will cease to feel any interest in what you say.

We may safely say, I think, that ample and accurate knowledge of the subject, and skill in applying it to the case of children, will in every case give the teacher a right to be heard, and will enable him

therefore, without difficulty, to gain the ear of his class. But suppose attention is once gained in this way, we still have to inquire how it may be kept up.

First, let me mention one or two merely mechanical devices for maintaining attention. Of course these are not the highest, but they are sometimes useful nevertheless. For instance, children need *change of posture*. The restlessness which we often complain of in children is not a fault; it is a constitutional necessity. It is positively painful to them to remain in one attitude long. We ought to be aware of this; and occasionally, when attention seems to flag, let the whole class stand for a short time, or go through some simple exercise which requires movement. You will often find that in this way your class will be refreshed. When the body has had its lawful claims recognized, the mind will be more at leisure to devote itself to the lessons; the sense of weariness will disappear, and the work of teaching proceed with more cheerfulness. I have often seen teachers and children remain sitting during the whole of a long summer afternoon, and the teacher wondering at the listlessness of his class. But I see nothing to wonder at. Indeed, for myself, I know I cannot teach with vigor and spirit for long

together while I am sitting down; and it is hard to expect children to be better in this respect than myself. Dullness and lassitude begin to creep over the mind, and I confess I like to see a teacher stand up, now and then, and throw a little life into his lesson, as well as occasionally cause his scholars to stand up too.

In a small class, also, attention may very often be sustained by causing the children to answer strictly in turn; by making them take places, and by recording the number of times the same boy gets to the top. The little emulation promoted by this plan is favorable to mental activity, and often prevents a lesson from becoming dull. It requires to be rather skilfully managed, and needs a good disciplinarian to conduct it; but I have seen the plan used with very great success, and excite great interest on the part of the children. It is particularly useful in testing the result of your teaching by questions at the end of each division of the subject. as it applies the test with perfect fairness and uniformity to every child in the class.

What is called *simultaneous reading* may also prove a great help in maintaining the interest and attention, especially of a younger class. Of course it must not

be practised in a crowded school-room, when the noise would disturb other classes, unless you have tutored your class to read in a quiet and subdued tone, (which is a great point in education, and quite worth taking some trouble to obtain.) But if it can be adopted, the plan will occasionally relieve a lesson very much. It is always interesting to children to do something in concert; and if the teacher has a sharp eye and a quick ear, he can easily secure that every child shall be thoroughly wakeful and attentive. The exercises may often be well varied in this way. The teacher reads a passage slowly, and with correct tone and emphasis, alone: he then reads it a second time, the class joining with him, and reading in unison. He then asks them to be silent, and to keep their eyes fixed on the book while he reads, and to supply any word which he leaves out. Then he reads the passage, pausing frequently, and omitting a word to be supplied by the children. Lastly, he calls upon one and another separately to read the same passage. The plan of elliptical reading is one of the best I know to stimulate watchfulness and fixed attention on the part of the children. I have seen fifty little ones together, their eyes fixed intently on the book, all eager to pronounce the word omitted by the teacher at exactly the right moment.

There is an indirect method of questioning, too, very familiar to you all; which is founded on the same principle, and may serve a useful purpose in sustaining attention. I mean the use of *ellipses*, as they are called. The teacher, instead of finishing the sentence himself, pauses suddenly, and requires the children to finish it for him. Good teachers, especially those of infant schools, have long been accustomed to use this method, and have found it very efficacious. Only it must be remembered that it is a device which wants very skillful management. The word left out of the sentence, which the children are expected to supply, should be one which they ought to remember, and it should also, in every case, be a definite word. There should be no vagueness in the teacher's own mind as to what he expects; there should be one way, and only one way, in which the sentence can be properly finished. The word required, moreover, should be one which it requires a little effort to recollect; it should not be the mere echo of the word just uttered. And it is just as necessary in the use of ellipses as in the practice of questioning, to take care that there is no guessing, and no merely mechanical utterance of a word to which the child attaches no meaning. The elliptical method is an admirable device for keeping up the

attention, especially of little children; but it can never be made a substitute for good questioning, for the simple reason that it only demands a single word, and can never enable you to be sure that the learner understands the whole sentence of which the word forms a part.

Again, one of the greatest safeguards for the attention of the class is the cultivation on the teacher's part of *quickness of eye and ear*. It is surprising sometimes to see teachers addressing themselves to one part of their class, and apparently unconscious that another part is listless and uninterested. They seem incapable of taking in the whole class at one glance. Their eyes move slowly, and they either do not see the disorder and trifling which lurks in the corner of their class, or they do not care to notice what it would give them some little trouble to remedy. A person of this kind will never keep up attention, nor prove a successful teacher, however well he may be provided with knowledge, and however anxious he may be to do good.

What every good teacher greatly needs is a quick eye and a comprehensive glance, which will take in the whole class at one view, or travel instantly from one part of it to the other. He should be able to detect the first rising of disorder, and the first symp-

toms of weariness, in an instant, and to apply a remedy to it the next instant. It is from want of promptitude in noticing the little beginnings of inattention that our classes so often get disorderly and tired. I recommend every one who wants to be a good teacher, therefore, to cultivate in himself the habit of sharpness and watchfulness. He should so train himself that he shall become peculiarly sensitive about the little signs of inattention. It ought to make him uncomfortable to see one child's eye averted, or one proof, however small, that the thoughts of the class are straying from the subject. The surest way to increase inattention is to seem unconscious of it, or allow it to pass unnoticed. I would have every teacher here ask himself these questions: "Can I *see* the whole of my class? Do I stand or sit so that the slightest movement or whisper on the part of any single child will be apparent to me in a moment? Do the children all know, that whatever happens I am sure to notice it? Do I allow myself to remain at ease during inattention? Have I got used to it by long practice, and become reconciled to it? Or does it pain me to discover even a slight proof of it? Do I, in short, make it a practice never to go on with my lessons until I have recovered attention?" Unless you can answer these

questions satisfactorily, you will always be plagued with inattention. For among the minor characteristics of a successful teacher, few things are so important as alacrity of movement; promptitude and readiness both in seeing and hearing; skill in finding out, at a moment's notice, who is the idlest boy in the class, and in giving him a question, or giving him a verse to read, or making him stand up at once, before his mind becomes thoroughly alienated from the subject, and before the contagion of his example has had time to spread among the rest. A sluggish, heavy, inactive looking teacher can never gain the sympathy of children, or keep up their attention long.

I have called these *mechanical methods* of sustaining attention, because no one of them has anything to do with the *matter of teaching*, or with the treatment of the subject; but they are simply external, and subordinate contrivances for keeping the attention of a class from flagging. Of course no one needs, especially in a class of elder children, to adopt all these methods at once, and the better a teacher is, the better able he will be to do without some of them; but we all need to keep them in mind sometimes. And I want, before I pass on to the more important part of the subject, just to remind you that all I have

said on this point is founded on two principles: first, that the nature of childhood, its physical weakness, above all, its restlessness and need for change, should be fairly taken into account and provided for by a teacher, and not set down as faults, or frowned down by authority; and, secondly, that every child under a teacher's care should always feel that there is something for him to do. Continual employment is the great antidote to inattention. I think that if you will keep these principles in view, you will be induced to invent many expedients for keeping up the vivacity and interest of a class besides those which I have named.

Closely allied to what I have called mechanical methods, is one which, however, needs some intelligence to put it in operation. I mean the practice of *recapitulation*, by dilligent and thorough interrogation, not only at the end of the whole lesson, but also at the end of each separate division of it. This is of great importance in sustaining the interest of a class. Children are not likely to take much pains in receiving and remembering a lesson, unless they know that their memory is sure to be tested; and that, however many facts or truths you teach, you are sure to wish to hear of them again. Every lesson should be planned out in the teacher's own mind so

as to consist of two or three distinct portions. I do not mean that he should talk about "firstly, secondly, and thirdly" to his class, or make any needless display of the skeleton or framework of his lesson; but a clear logical division of the subject into two or three portions is indispensable to the teacher himself; and at the end of each of these he should go over the ground thoroughly, and challenge the children to give him back all he has taught. When boys become habituated to this they learn to expect it as a matter of course, and are therefore induced to prepare for it by much closer attention than would otherwise seem necessary to them. I always made it a practice, in my own class, not only to recapitulate the lesson just taught, but also to spend the first ten minutes in giving a few questions on preceding lessons. I kept a record of those who answered best, and rewarded them by an extra mark or ticket. With elder boys, also, I always required the substance of last lesson to be written down on paper, and brought to me. One consequence of this was, that some of the boys kept note books with them, and at any rate far closer attention was paid to my teaching than before. Of course, this plan involves the necessity of some system and method, and of some little trouble too; for all the papers require to

be taken home and read by the teacher. But of one thing we may be sure: no one of us, child or man, ever takes pains to grasp a subject, or fasten it in our memories, unless we expect in some way to find a use for it hereafter. So, if we wish to get a real effort of attention from children, we must do it by leading them to expect that their knowledge will be asked for again, by showing them that when we have once taught a thing we do not forget it, but are sure to return to it; it may be half an hour hence, or it may be a week hence, but at any rate certainly and systematically.

One of the most efficient means of kindling the interest and chaining the attention of children, is the power of using good and striking illustrations. The best teachers are always those who, in addition to a knowledge of their subject, and the other qualifications which are necessary, possess also what may be called *pictorial power*. By this I mean the power of describing scenes and incidents so that they shall appear to a child's imagination as if they were really present to him. Now, we must always remember that the imagination is a very active faculty in a child. It is developed far earlier, in the life of all of us, than the judgment and those reasoning powers which we are generally so anxious to cultivate.

Every teacher therefore, should know how to address himself to this faculty, and should be able to gratify that love of description which is so natural to a child. Now, how many of us are there, I should like to know, who can tell a story well, or who can so describe a thing which we have seen that those who hear our description shall think they can almost see it too? Yet a man is never a perfect teacher until he can do this; and no appeals to the reason and conscience, and the feelings of a child, will be so effective as they might be unless we can also appeal to his imagination. Need I remind you how constantly this is recognized in the word of God; how continually the Bible writers, and especially the great Teacher himself, condescended to the weakness of man in this respect, and addressed their teachings not to the understanding directly, but indirectly, through the medium of the senses and the imagination. What else is the meaning of our Lord's parables? What else are those glowing Eastern Metaphors, sparkling like rich gems over the whole surface of the Bible, but helps to the comprehension of great truths, optical instruments, so to speak, through which our dim eyes might behold doctrines and principles, and deep lessons, which otherwise they could not have perceived? Now, it is almost

unnecessary to say much as to the power of exciting attention which a teacher possesses who is able to use good illustrations. We all know what an advantage such a teacher has over others. We have all observed, when a scene is picturesquely described, or a striking illustration brought forward, or a story told, how the faces of the children have lighted up with interest, and their eyes have been fixed upon the speaker. But, perhaps, while we all acknowledge the attractiveness of pictorial teaching, we have not all duly considered its usefulness, nor the reasons which give it its peculiar force and value. Let us look for a moment at an example or two. When we read in the Psalms the word : "The Lord God is a sun and shield," we know, and every child knows, that the words are not literally true, but must be thought of a little before they can be understood. So we say to ourselves, "What does this mean? The sun is the great source of light and cheerfulness, and a shield is something with which soldiers defend themselves in battle. Therefore, this must mean that God's presence and favor make a man glad and happy, and at the same time shelter him from danger." Suppose all this has passed through our minds, we have got the knowledge of a great truth in a somewhat indirect way, it is true; but we are far

more likely to be impressed by it, and to remember it, than if the literal fact had been conveyed to us in plain language. And why so? Because we have had a share in finding out the truth for ourselves; because the mind was not called upon passively to receive a truth in the form of direct statement, but to exert itself a little, first in interpreting a metaphor, and, secondly, in drawing a conclusion from it. We are always far more interested by what we have had a hand in winning for ourselves, than by what is merely communicated to us as a favor, or enforced on us by authority. Which of us has not a deeper feeling of the Saviour's tenderness and compassion, after reading the parable of the Good Shepherd, than we could ever have had otherwise? When we read, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous runneth into it, and are safe;" or, "As the mountains are about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people;" "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God;" or, when we come upon that glorious description, in the Apocalypse, of "a city which hath no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it, for the Lord God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof," we are conscious that, over and above the value of the truths thus imparted, we receive a cer-

tain gratification from the form in which the truth is presented, and are pleased to have had something given us which we have been able to interpret for ourselves.

Consider, again, in regard to the lessons which lie hid in allegories and stories, that we often receive them far more effectively into our minds for the very reason that they are indirect, and do not at first seem to apply to ourselves. If we obtrude our moral teaching too early, or if we begin by telling the children that we hope they will learn a useful lesson from what we are going to say, children fancy that we are preaching, and are perhaps indisposed to listen. But if we take care that the religious truth, or the rule of conduct, which we wish to enforce, seems spontaneously to grow out of the lesson, and keeps its place as an inference to be gathered from the story we are telling, it is far more likely to be efficacious. When Nathan was commissioned to reprove David, you know that if he had gone at once, and taxed him with the offence, and said, "You have committed a great sin, and I have come to rebuke you," David would probably have been prepared with some answer. That was a form of accusation which he very likely anticipated, and we do not doubt he had so armed

himself with pleas of self justification, and so skillfully "managed" his conscience, that the charge would scarcely have impressed him at all. But instead of this, the prophet began to tell him a narrative: "There were two men in one city, the one rich, and the other poor." He went on further, as you know, detailing the various incidents of his story, until "David's anger was greatly kindled against the man," and he exclaimed, "As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die." Not till the solemn words, "Thou art the man!" had been uttered in his hearing, did the conviction come thoroughly home to his heart that he was really guilty. Now, why was it that Nathan's method was so effective? Because David had listened with interest so the story without supposing that it concerned him. His Judgment was clear and unbiased, and he came to the right conclusion before he perceived that the conclusion applied to himself. How much deeper and more permanent was the impression thus made than if the prophet had confined himself to a plain literal examination of the right and wrong of David's own case. And we may see the same thing illustrated in our Lord's parables constantly, that they are not only chain the attention of the listner by their pictorial

character, but they set him thinking for himself, and drawing inferences about truths of the highest value almost without being aware of it. The most effective lessons which enter the human heart are not those which take the form of lessons. It is when we are least conscious of the process by which we are impressed that we are impressed most deeply. And it is for this reason, if for no other, that the indirect teaching which is wrapped up in stories and metaphors often secures more attention than teaching of a more direct and didactic kind.

But it is very likely that some of you may be disposed to answer, "Yes, I know that teaching, when well illustrated by stories and parables, is far more interesting to children than if it is full of dry statements; but then the power to choose such illustrations wisely, and to make a good use of them, is, after all, a very rare power, and a very difficult one to acquire. I do not possess it, and I do not know how to get it. Besides the creative genius which can invent skilful illustrations is a special gift. It is rather the attribute of a poet than a teacher. I must learn to do without it."

Now, I cannot help sympathizing with any one who speaks thus, but I should like to encourage him a little, nevertheless. We may all mend ourselves a

great deal in this respect if we try. Suppose we endeavor to remember carefully things which we have seen, and to describe them afterward. Suppose we practise ourselves a little more than we do in the art of telling a story. Suppose, when we have read of a circumstance, or met with one which has interested us, we sit down and try to reproduce it in our own language in writing. Suppose we watch carefully the sort of illustration and metaphor which excites our own attention, and then carefully husband it in our memories, with a view to making use of it in our classes. Suppose, when we are going to give a lesson on some Bible narrative, we study all its details and all its surrounding circumstances so well, that we can almost realize the picture of it ourselves. Suppose, in short, we always keep in view the necessity of rendering our teaching more vivid, and are always on the watch for material by which it may be made more so, I believe that we shall make a step in the right direction at least. Any man whose heart is in his work may do all this, and may become a very interesting teacher without being a poet, and without possessing any peculiar natural gifts. If you go to the sea-side, and hear the rolling of the waves, or if you stand on a hill in view of some fair landscape, which the summer sun lights up with

unusual glory, try to retain your impressions, and see how far you are able to convey the picture of the scene to others. If you want to give a lesson on St. Paul's preaching at Athens, try to find out what it was that the apostle could see as he stood on Mars Hill, with the temples of Minerva and of Theseus near him; with an eager inquisitive crowd thronging round his feet; with the altar, and its mysterious inscription, "To the unknown God," just in sight; and with the blue waters of the Piræus spreading out beyond. And if you will do this; and if, meanwhile, you take care that your love of illustration never betrays you into levity or trifling; that you never tell stories for the sake of telling stories, but always for the sake of some valuable lesson which the story illustrates, I cannot doubt that, by God's blessing, you will become possessed, not only of one of the best instruments for keeping up the attention of little children, but also of a key which will unlock their heart.

Another hint, which it seems to me is sometimes needed most by those who are the best teachers, is this: Do not get into a *stereotyped routine method* of giving lessons. You will often, at conventions, hear a good model lesson: you will admire its style and its method; you will think it, perhaps, the best les-

son you ever heard. But do not suppose that is a reason for imitating its method precisely, and for casting all your lessons into the same mould. Different subjects admit of and require great diversity of treatment; and even if they did not, it would still be necessary to vary your mode of teaching constantly, for the sake of sustaining and keeping alive the interest of your class.

Illustration, such as I have spoken of just now, is not always equally desirable; the lesson will not always fall into the same number of divisions; questions must not always be given in the same proportion, or at the same times. Almost every lesson does in fact demand a different treatment; and though there may be some one course which, on the whole, we have reason to prefer, we should not confine ourselves to it, but look into the nature of each subject when we are preparing it, and determine what is the best form in which it is likely to present itself to the mind. Besides, the method which is best for one teacher is not always the best for another; and no teacher is worth much who does not exercise a little originalty and independence in the construction of those methods which are best suited to his special circumstances, and to what he knows to be the character of the children who compose his class. At any

rate, remember that uniform methods have a tendency to destroy interest, and that prompt attention can only be kept up by varying our plans as occasion may require.

Again, it is very desirable that there should be a *coherence and unity* about the lessons of each day. We must beware of dissipating the attention of children, by leading them too hastily from one subject to another, or by giving them too many lessons which seem to have no mutual connection.

But one of the main safeguards of attention, after all, is to determine that, whatever you teach, you will not go on unless you carry the whole class with you. Very often we set down in our minds exactly what is the area which the lesson is to cover, and how much we mean to teach. We then go into the class, and find perhaps that we are not getting on so fast as we expected. So we push on hastily, in order that the plan on which we were determined shall be carried out. Meanwhile, attention has flagged; stumbling-blocks have revealed themselves which we have not had time to remove, and we discover at the end that only one or two have kept pace with us. Now, it is far better to do a little thoroughly than to do a great deal superficially and unsoundly. We all know that. So it is far better to give half

our intended lesson, than the whole, if only the half could be well understood. We do not come to the school so much that we may *give* lessons, as that the children may receive them. Let us determine, therefore, that, however little we teach, the whole of that little shall be learned. Let us stop and recapitulate very often, especially if the class seems languid and indifferent; let us think no time lost which is spent in satisfying ourselves that what has been said is understood, and that we are making sure of our ground as we are going on. Let us pause whenever necessary, and put questions, especially to the least attentive members of the class. And let us determine at every step to secure that the whole of the children are advancing with us. It is wonderful to see how often really intelligent and valuable teachers seem to forget this. They take for granted that what is so clear to them, and what is evidently so plain to one or two, is therefore communicated to the whole of their pupils, whereas they ought to have evidence step by step of the fact.

They should remember that attention once lost is a difficult thing to recover, and they should therefore be careful not to lose it. I am sure that more of us lose attention by going on too fast, and by attempting to teach too much, than we are inclined to be-

lieve. The best teacher is he who is never afraid of the drudgery of repeating, and going back, and questioning in many different forms, and who is content to move slowly, if only he can make the dulllest member of the class move with him. After all, it is by the dull boy that you should measure your own progress in a lesson; not by the quick one. Move with the worst learner, not with the best, and then your pace will be sure at least, even though it be not very rapid.

And now I wish to remind you of two or three things worth remembering about attention. The first is, that it is an *act of the will*. It is the one of all the mental faculties which is most under our own control. We *can* all be attentive, or at least more attentive than we are, if we wish to be so. The degree of attention we pay, therefore, depends on our own disposition to attend. This shows us that the matter, after all, is very largely one of *discipline*, and that, all other things being equal, that teacher will win most attention who has most personal influence, and who is looked up to with the greatest respect. Is there any one of you whom the children are accustomed to treat with disrespect? Do any of you find your commands disobeyed, and your look of anger disregarded? Depend upon it, if this be the case,

that the disposition to attend to your teaching will not exist, and that you are sure to have trouble in your class. Depend upon it, also, that there is something in your own conduct, or manner, or character, which does not entitle you to be looked up to as you ought to be. Ask yourself, in that case, whether your own behavior is uniform and dignified; whether you ever give commands without seeing that they are obeyed; whether you waste your words or your influence in an injudicious way; whether there is anything in your conduct that reveals to the children a want of punctuality, or of earnestness, or of steadiness on your part. For children are very keen observers of character, and in the long run are sure to feel loyalty and affection for one who is manifestly anxious to do them good, and who can be uniformly relied on in word and deed. There can be no thorough attention unless you accustom yourself to have perfect order, and therefore every step you can take to secure better discipline, and to gain more influence over the minds of the children, will indirectly tell upon the degree of attention you will obtain in teaching.

Nor must we forget that *attention is a habit*, and subject to the same laws which regulate all other habits. Every act we perform to-day becomes all

the easier to perform to-morrow, simply because we have performed it to-day. And every duty we neglect to perform to-day becomes harder to perform to-morrow, and harder still the next day. Every faculty and power we possess is daily becoming either stronger or weaker; we cannot stand still, and our characters are becoming hardened and stereotyped every day, whether we wish or not; hardened, too, we must recollect, not according to what we think, or to what we wish to be, but according to what we do. Therefore, every time we listen languidly to an address, or read a book carelessly, the habit of inattention becomes strengthened, and it becomes less and less possible for us ever to become clear thinkers or steady reasoners. On the other hand, suppose we determine to make a great effort, and resolutely bind down our whole thoughts to a subject; the next time we wish to do the same thing, the effort required will be less painful, the third time less painful still, until at length the habit of attention will grow on us, and will become easy and pleasant to us. What is the practical inference to be drawn from these simple truths? Why, that in all we do in schools, the habit of strict attention to rules should be cultivated, in little things as well as in great. If a boy is allowed to be unpunctual, to

miscall words without being compelled to go back and correct himself, to read how he likes, to answer when he likes, to sit down when he is told to stand, to repeat tasks inaccurately, and to give a half-hearted attention to the minor rules of the school, of course he will give half-hearted attention to the teaching. It would be wonderful if he did not. The habit of inattention is strengthened in little things, and necessarily shows itself in great. Do not, therefore, think lightly of the minor acts by which obedience, and promptitude, and close watchfulness can be cultivated. See that these minor acts are done well, and you will find that in this way the habit of listening attentively to your teaching will be confirmed.

And, besides this, it is necessary to recollect that teachers have a great deal to do with the formation of the intellectual habits which will cling to their pupils for the rest of their lives. Of course, apart from the primary and immediate object of imparting instruction, we ought all to feel some interest in the sort of mental character which our little scholars are acquiring during their intercourse with us. We must look forward to the time when the children will be men and women, and consider what sort of men and women we would have them to be. We

cannot help desiring that when hereafter they read a book, they shall read seriously; that when they hear a sermon they shall not bring preoccupied or wandering minds to what they hear; that as they move along in life they shall not be unobservant triflers, gazing in helpless vacancy on the mere surface of things, but shall be able to fix their eyes and their hearts steadily on all the sources of instruction which may be open to them. If they are ever to do this, it is necessary that they should have acquired in youth the power of concentrating their attention. This power is the one qualification which so often constitutes the main difference between the wise and the foolish, the successful and the unsuccessful man. Attention is the one habit of the human mind which, perhaps more than any other, forms a safeguard for intellectual progress, and even, under the divine blessing, for moral purity. Now, every time a child comes into your class, this habit is either strengthened or weakened. Something is sure to be done, while the children are with you, either to make them better or worse in this respect for the whole of their future lives. If you claim and secure perfect obedience; if, without being severe, you can be strict enough to enforce diligent attention to all you say, you are attaining another important end beside that

which is usually contemplated, for you are developing the intellectual vigor of your scholar, and familiarizing him with a sort of effort which will be of immense use to him hereafter. But every time you permit disorder, trifling, or wandering, you are helping to lower and vitiate the mental character of your pupils. You are encouraging them in a bad habit. You are, in fact, doing something to prevent them from ever becoming thoughtful readers, diligent observers, and earnest listeners, as long as they live.

We are, I hope, brought by these reflections within sight of the one great rule on which not merely all attention, but all true success in teaching depends. *Try to feel with the children, to understand their natures, and to discern what is going on in their minds.* Do not half the faults of our teaching arise from a want of thorough acquaintance with the little ones, and a want of true insight into their mental and moral nature? Does not this lie at the root of much of the inattention of which we complain? The truth is, that a good teacher ought not only to possess that sympathy which makes him feel *for* a child, and love him, and try to do him good; but the sympathy which feels *with* him, which makes due allowance for his imperfectly developed nature, and which thoroughly comprehends his character

and wants. Some of you who hear me are young teachers, and it is not so long ago that you were learners. Perhaps you have not forgotten how you felt then, and what sort of things interested and affected you; how knowledge looked when it was first presented to your view, and what was the kind of teaching which best secured an entrance for that knowledge into the recesses of your minds. If you have nearly forgotten these things, strive with all your might to recall them. As you grow in knowledge, in thoughtfulness and experience, take diligent care not to lose the remembrance of what you were years ago. He is always the wisest teacher who can combine the man's intellect and the child's heart; who contrives to keep fresh in his memory the knowledge of what he once was, and what a child's wants, and a child's likes and dislikes, and a child's infirmities really are. We are sometimes so glad to find ourselves *men*, that we take a pleasure in casting off the traditions, and the habits, and the thoughts of childhood. But a really earnest and loving teacher will esteem every recollection very precious which helps him better to understand the nature of the being on whose heart he is going to work; he will be very careful not to set up a man's standard to measure a child by; he will always ask himself,

when preparing or giving a lesson, not, "What will it seem proper for me to say?" but, "What is the thing best adapted for these children to hear?" He will cultivate an intimate acquaintance with childhood, and all its little whims and follies. He will ask God daily to enlarge his own heart, and to make him sympathize with every form of childish weakness, except sin; and he will lay to heart the secret meaning of the solemn warning which our Saviour addressed to his disciples: "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones." I think that such a teacher will not want any one to give him rules for sustaining the interest of his class, because he will have got hold of the principle which will enable him to devise rules for himself. Such a teacher will be sure to win attention, and when he has won it will be likely to keep it.

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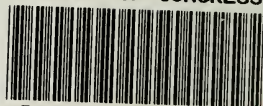
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