

‘The silence I insisted on when I was there and teaching was a great means to achieving my goal.’

13 Discipline Means: Being There

A few years ago there was a late-night discussion on Swiss television about school uniforms and discipline. Uniforms and discipline? Are we in the army? I do not propose to argue about whether we need uniforms in school or not, but education is unthinkable without discipline. Why?

As human beings we are constantly prey to sense impressions or physical urges. And there are always things going on inside our heads as well. All kinds of thoughts, imaginings, memories, ideas and visions of the future jostle for our attention. The more responsive a person is, the more receptive to impulses from within and stimuli from outside, the more they are in danger of dissipating their energies.

To counter this, each one of us possesses the power of *concentration*. We are able to ignore the variety that presents itself to us at any one moment and devote ourselves to one single issue. By so doing we achieve depth and a solid foundation, both in the matter in question and inside ourselves.

Concentration and dissipation are not, however, two poles of equal value, such as activity and passivity. It is certainly not a case where we should 'choose the happy medium' and not let ourselves get entirely bound up in concentration, but enjoy the seductive attractions of variety as well. This, I admit, is a fundamental ethical decision. I agree with Angelus Silesius: 'Man, find your essence.' One could also say, 'Man, find yourself.' This is our main task in life and allowing ourselves to be pulled this way and that is a latent danger. Only the practice of concentration can take us closer to our goal, for that alone gives us conscious

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and deliberate commitment. Squandering our energies on everything from inside or outside that attracts our attention and is not subject to conscious evaluation, takes place without the involvement of our will. It simply happens to us. But if we consciously resist it, then we are no longer *being lived* by various kinds of stimuli, we ourselves *are living* in the true sense of the word.

Everything mankind has ever thought up or created rests on this ability to curb the centrifugal forces within us by concentrating on one single thing at a time. This is also true of what Pestalozzi calls the 'creation of one's self' which every one of us has to work at. And we can only do that by concentrating on the tasks that prove necessary for this process of education in the widest sense.

One might object that a person who, after a few seconds, turns his attention from one thing to another and then to another is concentrating during those seconds. But taking notice in this way is not the result of a conscious effort and as a rule does not contribute to education. What is required is the ability to concentrate on a single matter over a lengthy period, and this ability is called 'discipline'. I repeat: education without discipline is impossible.

The key question of course is: how do we get the pupils to behave in a disciplined manner and thus to concentrate on their school work? There are no simple answers but it is an important step if the teacher is convinced that discipline is not simply something he *can* demand but something he *must* demand and establish himself. And the first commandment is: when teaching, always keep your eye on all the pupils. Make sure they look at you when you are speaking. Do not continue speaking if pupils are talking among themselves or not paying attention. What you say is always important or you wouldn't say it.

Part of the art of teaching is the ability to bring pupils' attention back to the matter in hand or to react to conversations among them in a way that does not disturb the class's concentration even more. Politeness, gentle humour, a smile, a look, half a step in the direction of those talking, are more effective than coming down hard and making a show of the miscreants. It would, though, be unrealistic to expect to achieve discipline without having occasionally to exercise one's authority, or even one's power. A reprimand will not guarantee that the pupil

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will really concentrate on his work, but it will reduce the possibility of him distracting others, even the whole class.

However, it is just as unrealistic to think that the discipline needed for education can be basically or, indeed, solely achieved by pressure in an atmosphere of fear. True discipline only comes about when work on a task gives pleasure and is felt to be rewarding. And that can only happen with teaching that takes account of the age and the individual needs of the pupils and is thus in accord with their human nature, as Pestalozzi recommended. This brings me back, as so often, to the point where I must say that none of my suggestions can be realised in isolation. Everything supports everything else. Teaching that is in accord with human nature is a world, a living organism.