

II

The Art of Attention

Attention is a moment of relative rest in which we hold ourselves open to stimuli from some particular source. When we attend, we adjust all the muscles of the body so that the sense organs being used are in the best *position* and *condition* for receiving stimuli. This is the first, absolutely essential act in all selection. Try to imagine a creature which could not respond selectively to anything. In some serious diseases of the thyroid, the victim attends in a helter-skelter fashion, swiftly shifting from one thing to another. He cannot keep his eyes on any one object long enough to analyze and interpret it.

In order to sense one thing more keenly, we must inhibit all other sensing. As we concentrate on one, we become dulled to everything else at the moment. When we read an absorbing book, we are more or less deaf to street noises.

But no single moment of attention endures for more than one or two seconds. Attention is always shifting. Useful attention shifts from one point to another within the field of interest. Useless attention wanders afield; there is no inner connection between things attended to.

There are two types of attention: primary and secondary.

Primary attention is purely sensory. Here energy is burned up within the sensory nervous system, and we respond to stimuli from without, such as a noise, cry, or bright light, and from within, such as hunger, thirst, or a sore thumb. In every act of primary attention, the sense organ involved generates and uses energy, but in amounts so tiny that measurement by the most delicate of instruments is still impossible. Even so, tiny differences may result in total insensitivity of some sense organ (as in certain types of blindness) or in some painful hypersensitivity. People differ enormously here. But one's sensitivity never correlates with total bodily energy. Many people of tremendously high general energy may be dull of hearing or sight. Thousands of frail souls see, hear, taste, smell, and feel with enormous keenness.

The hypersensitive person has difficulty in controlling energy leakages. The slightest sounds or faintest lights may stimulate his sense organs so powerfully that controlled attention is impossible until the stimulus has been removed, or finally adapted to.

A man whose sense of smell is far keener than that of the ordinary person may attend to the task at hand with perfect concentration as long as he senses no increasingly intense nor momentarily unfamiliar odor. Let the faint smell of cooking or gas from a passing car seep

through to his nostrils, and he is aroused like a shot. His concentrated attention ceases abruptly. If he can adapt to the odor, the disruption is not serious. Otherwise, he must seek another odorless environment, or remove the disturbing stimulus.

Both Joseph Pulitzer and E. W. Scripps were plagued with terrific hypersensitivity of hearing. Both had to spend much of their time on their yachts, as far as possible from sounds of any kind. They would insist on all motors being stopped, every engine shut off. Neither could sleep while stimulated by the slightest sound. Pulitzer went so far when travelling as to send a secretary ahead to each town he visited with instructions to engage every room above, below, to the right and left of Pulitzer's hotel room. Thus only could he finally manage to sleep.

The energy with which you respond to primary stimuli determines your interests far more than most people suspect. Hypersensitivity often contributes to great interest in and success on a job which turns the trait to useful account. The man of hypersensitive smell, for example, might well become an expert coffee taster. For this job requires an acute sense of smell. Interest in colors is chiefly a matter of eye sensitivity. Artists see them more vividly than do ordinary people. Weak sensitivity greatly limits the field of attention and interest. A very near-sighted person tends to become in-

terested in things seen at short range. He often enjoys reading or microscopical work more than people of normal eyesight. A man somewhat deaf inclines to be interested in few social contacts, simply because he finds it hard to follow conversation.

In many important though often unsuspected ways, the energies of primary attention are closely related to those of secondary. Primary stimuli may or may not induce secondary attention. Here we turn mind and body jointly to a situation, a body of facts, a problem, or whatever may be involved in a primary stimulus. We use not only our sensitivities, as in simple acts of hearing, seeing, tasting, and so on, but bodily and mental energy whose volume, quality, and direction of flow we try to adapt to the demands of the situation. Energy in secondary attention is released in a much more complex and patterned manner than that of primary attention. We inhibit energy in some fields and release it in others. Our success here depends on the prompt and appropriate relief of tensions which are set up in every act of attention.

TENSION AND ATTENTION

Tensions are impulses to do something, though often we do not know what. Every stimulus releases energy, however little. If we direct our energies toward the object or situation stimulating us, we relieve the tensions. But if we

can't identify the tensions nor recognize the stimulus, we feel vaguely discontented, confused, or restless. Thus with many restless women whose energy is aroused by many stimuli which they do not recognize, and who do not find appropriate release from tension in managing their homes. They are plagued with chronic discontent largely because they are impelled to do *something*, but for the life of them they don't know what. So they sit around and feel unhappy.

Sometimes we know the cause of the tension but can't relieve it by direct suitable action. Then we seek a substitute. This may be good or bad, depending on its consequences. Suppose, for instance, that you are insulted and angered by unfair criticism from your employer. He accuses you of lying. The situation arouses terrific tensions. You can hardly hold your tongue and control your fists. Under ordinary circumstances, you can't act directly and strike him, as you are moved to. You have to do something else. You can resign your job, but then the breadline awaits you. Or you can continue the argument. This only prolongs your rage. Or you can walk off and get back to work. This you decide is the most sensible course. You work off your steam and relieve tensions in an extra spurt of toil. Eventually you cool off. Here you have achieved a moderately good substitute.

Tapping energies is an art that cannot be divorced from the relieving of tensions induced by cravings such as those involved in rage,

fear, love, curiosity, pity, and simple eroticism. Attention is normally dominated by these tensions. We always tend to direct eyes, ears, and other sense organs toward things which can (in fact or in erroneous belief) serve to break down the unpleasant tensions. Only after cravings have been satisfied is the organism relatively free to attend to purely pleasant and exciting things in the spirit of free play or in esthetic detachment.

Hence it follows that peak performance can be maintained only by one who has mastered the art of relieving himself of all the tensions of rage, fear, love, curiosity, pity, and simple eroticism as fast as they arise and in the most natural manner possible. Instead of striving to beat down the appetitive impulses, such an efficient person reverses the process. And an enlightened society encourages this way of life. For in the long run it gains most from the free flow of energies.

ATTENTION PATTERNS

No matter what the situation, you tap your energies best *by attending only to those objects and situations arousing tensions which may be relieved by direct, prompt, and effective action.* This is why you must learn to select the focus of attention with such care. But the focus must always depend on your own native energy

pattern. The latter manifests itself in attention in three important ways:

1. The relative volume of your energy discharge, or what we may call *strength*;
2. The *scope* of the focus of attention, which may be either a simple or complex object or situation;
3. The *speed* at which your attention shifts effectively.

These three are independent variables. Any one may appear in any degree with any form of the other two. So there are thousands of individual patterns of attention. All may be broadly indicated in the eight extreme types of attention:

1. Strong-complex-fast;
2. Strong-complex-slow;
3. Strong-simple-fast;
4. Strong-simple-slow;
5. Weak-complex-fast;
6. Weak-complex-slow;
7. Weak-simple-fast;
8. Weak-simple-slow.

The earlier in life you discover which of these eight types most nearly describes your own natural behavior, the more likely you will be to organize your energies appropriately, hence selecting interests which, when attended to, you can easily follow through.

If, for example, you are constitutionally of the strong-complex-slow type, there are cer-

tain kinds of important enterprises in which you may profitably engage, but there are also others which are barred to you. Charles Darwin is a case in point. More or less of an invalid, his mind and body both moved in a leisurely fashion. Yet he naturally attended with enormous energy to complex objects and situations. So he had to work for years to reach conclusions in a field where haste would have been fatal.

There are, of course, many special varieties under each of these eight classes of attention. Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt and Lloyd George show the same variety, the strong-complex-fast. Another kind is found in the juggler who can keep six balls in the air while he drinks a glass of water and jigs. He must have exceedingly strong-complex-fast attention in dealing with visual moving objects. But he does not need the kind of ability we find in a good statesman; he need not carry in clear focus masses of figures, names of people, analyses of current events, and the like.

Many brilliant but plodding scientists are of the strong-complex-slow type; so, too, are expert golf players, whose skill depends more on strength of attention and keen analysis of the position of the ball and the stick required for the next shot, rather than on sheer speed of striking.

Lack of space prevents illustrations of all eight varieties. In the fifth class you find a few mathematicians, like Henri Poincaré, who

attended for brief, swift spurts with weak energy discharge to problems of baffling complexity. The feeble-minded illustrate the eighth type. They attend with weak energy discharge to extremely simple objects and shift attention with difficulty.

Now you see why so many psychologists use so many devices for testing a person's attention. They know that all mental life is rooted in the behavior pattern of attention. You see, too, the importance of selecting foci of attention which harmonize with your energy pattern. We like things to which we attend easily. Dissatisfaction and boredom often result from disharmony between one's natural attention type and the kind of attention required by an activity.

DOMINANCE

In which directions do your energies flow most naturally? Answer this question, and you can answer the larger one about the most effective control of your energies. For what we call your dominant traits can always be analyzed into systems of energy streams flowing in certain directions. As Charles M. Child first pointed out clearly in his highly original hypothesis, "The Physiological Foundations of Behavior," "the point of primary excitation is the region of primary dominance." Does this sound obscure? It need not, for it is really simple and direct. All it means is that the source of

strong impulses prevails over the regions of the body into which these impulses spread. A blast of dynamite which shatters windows a mile away dominates the situation for the moment in the elementary sense that the air waves of the explosion move from a central point outward and set up changes in things roundabout. The things do not, *in the same sense*, set up changes in the initial explosion.

A dominant impulse, we might say, gets the jump on things around it. By gaining an advantage, so to speak, it holds its lead over them, just as the football team which, by a violent spurt of well-concentrated aim, crashes through its opponent's line and pell-mells through for a touchdown. Often victory is a matter of a fraction of a second rather than a matter of greater power. Watch the boxer. He dominates his adversary quite as much by striking more quickly as by putting more power into his punches. Free flow in straight lines wins out over blocked flow and flow in devious paths.

Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding and Herbert Hoover all failed lamentably as national leaders simply because each in his own peculiar way was unable to maintain dominance in important crises. Franklin Roosevelt succeeds primarily as a result of his easy dominance over people and affairs. Just what does this mean? Wilson could not assert himself in open conference; so he withdrew and thought all alone, reaching decisions which failed to reckon cun-

ningly with trends and wishes. Harding was easy-going, soft, and a moral moron: so his clever, strong, corrupt friends got the jump on him simply by telling him what to do in a compelling voice. Hoover was somewhat like Wilson in that he could not turn on his energies effectively in the presence of strong men who differed with him. But where Wilson was unable to do this mainly because he was a semi-invalid with a diseased ego, Hoover failed chiefly because he was too easily vexed and even enraged by opposition, sometimes to the point of speechlessness. Furthermore, Hoover must have been dimly aware of his own limitations as a leader; for he always inclined to turn over every decision to a committee or to a national conference—and straightway to drop the matter. This form of “passing the buck” is manifestly one odd sort of self-subordination, not a manner of dominance. It is a half-frank surrender of leadership, sugar-coated with the sweet name of “socialized group action.”

Franklin Roosevelt always acts dominantly. He gathers advice and information from all quarters. While doing this, he is openminded in the finest manner. But as soon as he reaches a conclusion, he takes the reins firmly, issues orders, and brooks no opposition. The time for the opponent has passed. The hour of action has arrived. Action is a discharge of energy. Masterful action drives straight and true. Even when it leads to mistakes, men respect it be-

cause they understand that it is much better to put all one's energies behind a wrong decision than to wobble feebly all around a right one.

THE THREE DETERMINERS

Your energy flow varies with changes in three major forces: the quality of the stimulus, your own energy habits, and the momentary tensions demanding prompt relief. The weaker any one of these, the stronger are the other two, relatively.

The weaker the stimulus, the stronger relatively are habit and momentary desire. If, for example, I am asked to do at noon a task that doesn't interest me anyhow, I resist undertaking it; for at noon I am hungry and usually eat lunch. The hunger tensions are far more insistent on prompt relief than the mild tensions aroused by feeble intellectual interest. My noon-lunch habit, too, is stronger. Hence, if I do the work, I do it with weak interest and attention.

If you use your energies in a hit-or-miss fashion and have few well-organized habits, you will be dominated more by the stimulus or momentary desire than by your habits. Children and adults of inferior mentality attend to very simple stimuli, and shift their attention from object to object without any strong inner direction of their energies and interests. They lean on an outer directing force. And "they want what they want when they want it."

Finally, the weaker your momentary desire, the stronger are stimulus and habit. You have few impulses to relieve strong momentary tensions. If you are neither hungry, nor thirsty, nor otherwise moved by some craving, you are easily dominated by stimulating objects and situations, and by habit, whether good or bad. People who have everything they want either pursue each passing novelty or else stick in their comfortable rut.

The problem of attention is chiefly one of energies so well-organized relative to the task at hand that we use no more energy than absolutely necessary to achieve good results. To establish effective attention habits, then, we must eliminate as far as possible everything that interferes with the straight-line transmission of energy.