

III

How to Deal with Disturbers of Attention

What are the chief disturbers here? They are both inner and outer. How deal with them? I can give only a few illustrations here, for the trick varies from situation to situation.

Unless absolutely necessary, never attempt to adjust to *extremely intense* disturbers. Never work when very hungry or thirsty or upset by any physical ailment. It is simpler to turn your energies to the prompt relief of resulting tensions. If hungry, eat. If thirsty, drink. If you can't attend to your job because of a cold in the head, take stern measures to recover from the cold. Do not delay one minute! Noble attempts to let mind control matter are a foolish waste of time and energy.

The same rule applies in most cases to extremely intense outer stimuli, such as the deafening noise of a rivetting machine or a dazzling light. Many people have much trouble in paying attention to what they are reading because they read under excessively bright lights. The pupils of the eye contract, and muscle tensions are set up in eyelids and face which cause fatigue, pain, and headaches.

You attend to reading best, so far as light is concerned, under indirect lighting from a fixture so constructed that the opaque under-surface is indirectly illuminated with a not-too-high candle power lamp. Direct light rays should not enter the eyes. If the rays are brighter than the object viewed, you feel eye strain.

A glare on paper interferes with attention while reading or writing. Never use glossy paper. You read best the white type on dead black paper. Next best is black type on lemon yellow paper, which reflects much more light than white paper under ordinary conditions of illumination.*

Attention in the face of similar intense disturbances is usually impossible. Either remove the offending stimulus, or flee from it.

Faint stimuli, too, arouse attention easily and powerfully. As a rule, you adapt to them more easily than to those of high intensity. Usually they leave you with a more or less pleasant feeling. Sometimes they disturb you seriously. Minor eye muscle tensions caused by slight astigmatism often upset you completely. Probably there is no muscle tension in the entire body which, relative to its magnitude, sets up such enormous disturbances as minor eye strains. If these plague you, go to an oculist, of course.

* For a fuller discussion of the attention factor in reading, see "The Art of Rapid Reading." New York. 1929.

Faint outer stimuli interfere with attention much more than one might suppose. These you can usually learn to adapt to quickly or to ignore. You are mildly annoyed, let us say, by two whispering gossips sitting behind you in a movie theatre. Usually good manners prevent your moving away from these insects. Nor can you have them ousted summarily. So you must learn to focus your energies elsewhere. Here practice makes perfect. Its technique we shall soon discuss.

Energy directed toward one's inner states rather than toward the environment seriously diverts attention to the job. Day dreaming blocks straight-line transmission. This tendency is characteristic of many neurotics. The healthy, well-adjusted man's brain is run by the environment almost entirely. He seldom thinks of his inner states. He hardly knows that he has a body. His organs intrude on his thoughts and acts only when they are diseased or starved or injured. Not so, however, with the neurotic. His higher nerve centers are under interminable bombardment from his own insides no less than from the outer world. So his attention oscillates between the two sources of attack. The weaker his mental controls, the more thoroughly these two streams of stimulation blend in his mind. When he dreams, half of the content of vision comes from the organs, and half from the environment.

The straight-line discharge of energy is

most economical. The healthy, well-balanced man learns to attend to that field of the environment that immediately concerns him. If disturbed by mind-wandering, he takes himself in hand and puts himself through a severe course of sprouts, whose fundamentals we shall soon show you.

To organize good attention habits, work hard and spend much energy relative to your own level the minute you undertake any task. Everything worth doing at all is worth doing well. And easy beginnings make hard endings. He who invests little energy in mastering an art or a plan will have to spend much later. This is an old, old rule in business no less than a philosopher's maxim.

Failure to observe it has caused millions of young Americans to grow up half-baked, misty-minded, and provokingly incompetent. Our schools have regarded themselves as greenhouses in which delicate little flowers are encouraged to unfold their tender petals, emit their perfume, and then—be cut off and peddled for funeral cortèges and wedding corsages. Educators have called this blossoming "the unfolding of the personality." Starting with the essentially correct belief that men do well only what they are interested in doing, they distort the thought into an absurdity: they permit the young to work at a task only in so far as they are momentarily interested *in working*.

INTEREST

Plainly, to be interested in a subject is not the same as to be interested in working at it. And to be interested in working at it is by no means the same as to be interested so deeply that one masters it step by step. There are a thousand and one levels and intensities of interest, ranging from the most superficial interest in looking at and enjoying the spectacle up to a profound, persistent, highly technical interest in doing a difficult task.

No matter what your interests, you must work hard and persistently at them. The higher your energy, the more strenuously you must make it work for you. Here in large part is the explanation of the remarkable achievements of that apostle of the Strenuous Life, Theodore Roosevelt. "I am only an average man," he said, "but, by George, I work harder at it than the average man." No average man, of course, could ever have worked so hard as the ebullient Teddy, nor could the average man have spread his efforts over so many fields. Many a man with magnificent energy wastes quantities through haphazard or dawdling beginnings. Do one thing at a time, and that hard and well.

Thus, though man cannot, by taking thought, add a cubit to his stature, he can do something more wonderful and more useful. He can, by taking thought and learning the

art of attention, add an hour to every sixty minutes of his waking life. This is the ultimate magic of mind, that he can augment his personality and multiply achievements in the dimension of time, though not in those of space. Work always increases the aptitude to work provided you follow your own natural lines of interest and ability.

BOREDOM

Lack of variety interferes with good attention. Variety multiplies your powers. Do any single thing to the exclusion of everything else and you soon do that thing badly. Boredom overwhelms you. The more intelligent and energetic you are, the worse you are bored. You try to escape the irksome task by wriggling, yawning, looking around and day dreaming. All this is a leakage of energy running to waste for lack of a proper outlet.

Boredom has been called the gravest menace of civilized man. I protest. It is a menace only to the uncivilized. Anybody who has learned how to make the most of his energies, his time and his money will seldom be threatened by this gray monster. But the badly educated man will. He lacks proper variety of interests or perhaps some social or economic freedom in pursuing such. Above all, he has not been trained in versatility of work and play.

The well-trained man sinks into the

morass of boredom chiefly as a result of some obscure lowering of his energies; and it is this fact which warrants my discussing the subject here. It falls within our scope of inquiry only in so far as it can be dealt with by some technique of energy tapping.

Almost anything that throttles down the flow of free energy or interferes with the volume of normal reactions can contribute to boredom. When it becomes hard to exert oneself in the manner called for by the pursuit of a genuine interest, then the discomfort that results from effort spreads over into the field of the interest itself and insidiously corrupts it. How prevent this? There is only one way, and that is to seek the cause of the energy slump.

Are you suffering from some decline in the previously adequate flow of hormones? Have root abscesses in your teeth started to poison your blood? Is some other more obscure focal infection undermining you? Or is it nothing worse than one of those diffuse tensions that started in some emotional upset? Look closely into your recent moods. Be your own psychoanalyst.

Every shift of attention is a shift of tensions. Every shift of tensions breaks down (more or less) the bad effects of the previous tension; hence it is good. When complete relaxation is impossible, shift attention considerably. This will prove to be a second best scheme for keeping fresh.

The most effective way of shifting attention is to shift attitudes. Suppose you are seated next to a bore at a dinner party. Manners forbid your leaving your seat or ignoring the fellow utterly. In a few minutes his dull drone has exhausted you emotionally. You feel all worn out. How refresh yourself and still remain within the pale of etiquette? Change from your affable compliance and your "ah, yes! Indeed?" and like remarks to an aggressive tone. Ask the bore all sorts of questions. As soon as he has finished a sentence or two in reply to one, hurl another at him. Then count the number of questions required to floor him. After this has failed, take a scientific attitude. Become curious about something, be it in the bore's topics or manner or dress or perhaps in something else at hand. By the time you have investigated everything, the party will be over; so out into the cool of the evening you go, again a free man.

Hundreds of times have I pursued this simple method. And I can truthfully say that I have never been bored for more than a few seconds at a stretch. Hard though this may be to believe, it is a fact. I can recall only two or three occasions in my life when boredom has persisted long enough to become obnoxious; and then conditions were peculiarly adverse to the unnoticed use of this escape mechanism.

Always have on hand many projects at which you can work when the spirit moves, or

when you need a change. Most people fail to do this. I know scarcely a score who follow this sound psychological rule. All the world moves in narrow grooves; work at the office, then golf, then bridge, then the movies, then a weekend party, and maybe now and then the Best Seller and a popular hit on Broadway. Beyond this dulling treadmill nothing! No wonder that mental fatigue sets in early. No wonder boredom haunts the sleepless pillow!

To make the most of your energies, you must tap them through the greatest possible variety of outlets. This is the inexorable law of variety. No man can prescribe for another here; one's variety is another's monotony, of course. But I venture to say that, if you have had sufficient intelligence to earn a degree from any first-class college, you probably ought to try out at least a score of simultaneous projects ranging from something fluffy like detective stories up to something beyond your powers like higher mathematics or portrait painting or walking the slack wire. You should arrange your affairs so that all these undertakings may be dropped and resumed at will, without too great disturbance of your day's work. For instance, I have often recommended to business men that they transfer part of their home libraries to their offices and dip into their favorite books between conferences. Most business executives' sessions would be improved by this procedure. They would get more out of

themselves, hence more out of life. If they doubt this, let them study the lives of interesting and successful people. Here's a fair sample.

D. H. Lawrence was extraordinarily resourceful and versatile. Hence, says Aldous Huxley,* "one of the great charms of Lawrence as a companion was that he could never be bored, and so could never be boring. He was able to absorb himself completely in what he was doing at the moment; and he regarded no task as too humble for him to undertake nor so trivial that it was not worth his while to do it well.

"He could cook, he could sew, he could darn a stocking and milk a cow, he was an efficient wood-cutter and a good hand at embroidery, fires always burned when he had laid them and a floor, after Lawrence had scrubbed it, was thoroughly clean. Moreover, he possessed what is, for a highly strung and highly intelligent man, an even more remarkable accomplishment: he knew how to do nothing. He could just sit and be perfectly content. . . ."

Never allow your attention to be disturbed by disorderly or inadequate tools for the task at hand. You waste precious energy every moment you are distracted while you search for a pencil, a knife, or a misplaced dictionary. Every such disturber not only shifts the focus of attention, sometimes seriously, but requires additional energy to "get set" or

* "The Letters of D. H. Lawrence." New York.

warmed up to the task again. Many people have only their own slovenliness to blame here.

If the conservation of human energy is a high moral duty, then the lowest circle of hell must be reserved for the sloven. No animal lower than he, none more destructive to civilization and to the happiness of our race. For the person who misplaces things, leaves tools lying on the ground, takes a machine apart and fails to reassemble it, washes his hands in the kitchen sink while it is full of dishes, throws newspapers and old letters on the floor, and scatters cigarette butts in his wake regardless of place and time probably makes other people use ten times as much energy as he has to consume through his entire worthless life.

Several times in my checkered career I have been compelled to associate with complete slovens. I have refrained from cutting their throats only by shifting my interest to a statistical study of the time, energy and money required to replace and repair things which the slovens had dropped, broken or left in places where somebody was injured by their unexpected presence. For one full month I kept an hourly record of one alleged mechanic, and I would have continued the research but for the fact that an infuriated foreman kicked him off the premises. Roughly calculated, this arch-sloven, this genius of dislocation, caused other workmen in the shop to spend more time picking up after him, finding tools he had mis-

placed, and repairing damage caused in one way or another by his slovenliness than the sloven himself put in on his job! In other words, the company lost his full time and services through his slovenliness. So everybody gained by his sudden departure for parts unknown.

Slovens cause damages far greater than those brought on by rats. Hundreds of thousands of dollars go up in smoke every year simply as a result of some sloven's tossing a lighted cigarette or cigar over his shoulder and heeding not at all the spot whereon it alights. Other millions crash in automobile accidents for which slovens are to be thanked. Scores of people die because slovens mix up the bottles and pills in family closets. Other hundreds perish because slovens neglected a leak in a gas pipe. Is it to be marvelled at, then, that we look upon Sloven as Satan? The enemy of Cosmos, of course, is Chaos. Cosmos means order, system, form; Chaos is the lack of all these. Sloven has no sense of order, system, or form; so he must be the devil! Anyhow we ought to treat him as Public Enemy Number One!