

**MENTAL TRAINING:
A REMEDY FOR EDUCATION**

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PUBLISHED IN THE JUNE 1923 OF *THE FORUM*

**EDITED BY
RODNEY W MANN
JANUARY 2012**

THE FOURTH IN A SERIES OF FOUR ARTICLES ON EDUCATION

MENTAL TRAINING: A REMEDY FOR EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM GEORGE JORDAN, 1923



WHEN an educator of the unquestioned ability and high standing of Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler¹, president of Columbia University, sums up education in a sentence, his words are worthy of careful listening. He said on one occasion: "When one reflects upon the ravages which have been committed in the name of education, there is some excuse for wondering whether it would not be advantageous to agitate for compulsory illiteracy." Such an expression from the lips of a mere layman might be construed as wild and fanatic, but spoken by Dr. Butler they represent the sane, serious crystallization of the thought, observation and long experience of a clear thinker who is in a position to know. They show relentlessly that there is something intrinsically rotten in the Denmark of education.

Gladstone once said: "The most distinguished professional men bear witness, with an overwhelming authority, in favor of a course of education in which to train the mind shall be the first object, and to stock it the second."² James Beattie put the same idea in other words, when he said: "The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think than what to think—rather to improve our minds so as to enable us to think for ourselves than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men."³ Thousands of our thinkers have echoed the same thought. We have gone still further in attempting to show that because of the false theory of making knowledge of supreme and first importance and training the mind a by-product, an expected secondary result, education fails in both phases.

We have ventured to suggest a new model, a new ideal, a new inspiration, which we shall call "Mental Training," to differentiate it from the old education. This new model has three cardinal points. It would make training the mind itself, the first and supreme aim, giving as much knowledge as could be given in exercises and in conjunction with the training. It would prepare the individual for the seven lives we all must live: a physical life, a mental life, a moral and ethical life, a civic life, a social life, an aesthetic and emotional life, and a spiritual life. It would train in accord with the spirit, methods and mental processes of genius, the revelation to man of the mind working at its best. In the suggestion of genius as the model for education, there is no attempt to create genius but merely to start the individual in the right way, to appeal to and stimulate his mind in accord with the mental laws the genius unconsciously obeys, and to develop the powers, faculties and qualities common to all men, and which genius alone shows in perfect flower.

To present Mental Training in a coherent, consecutive, convincing way and to outline it as a complete and practical system, with the wealth of explanation and detail, illumination, illustration, exercises and suggestion of methods would require a series of books. Upon such a comprehensive work the writer has been engaged for over twenty years with the unsatisfactory limitation of brief snatches of time taken from other demands and duties. Within the limits of a magazine article one can touch merely on a few essentials, high-lights of difference between the ideals and methods of the old and the new. It will be little more than a thumbnail sketch of a

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great panorama, but enough may be given to appeal to the reader's imagination and to direct his thinking.

The difference between Education and Mental Training are differences in attitude, spirit, aim, scope and methods. We ask of education, "what knowledge does it give?"; of mental training "what power, faculties and qualities does it develop?"; of education "what does it teach?"; of mental training, "in what does it train?" The curricula of the two show how far apart they stand in their purposes and ideals. When asked what are the subjects in her course of study, Education gives: Reading, writing, arithmetic, history, language, geography and the others of its thirty or more subjects. The same question asked of Mental Training would bring forth a different answer: Trained senses, memories, observation, judgment, reasoning, clear-thinking, self-expression, language and conversation; training in accuracy, thoroughness, initiative, resourcefulness, responsibility, concentration, rapidity of thought and action; exercises in physical training, training in character and ethics, in social civilities, courtesies and graces, in civic duties and responsibilities, in appreciation of the beautiful, in sentiment and emotions, in spiritual consciousness. The list is incomplete but it suggests the scope and the larger vision of the proposed model.

This curriculum would apply to the elementary school and the high school. There would be simply a continuous progressive, cumulative perfecting of the training in widening circles of application, and finer forms of expression and activity. The final aim of mental training is to teach thinking, exercising the individual not in *what* to think, but in *how* to think, making all parts of his mental machine work individually at their greatest ease, smoothness and rapidity and in finest co-operation. It is not doing this *for* the individual but *with* him, training him in the how and why of every process, so that his mind and all its manifestations will be under his control. As the exercises become progressively harder the individual will be ready and eager for the next step and the amount of real knowledge, absolute and relative that he can grasp, absorb, assimilate and use will be marvelously increased.

Examinations and markings, as we know them today, would be banished from mental training. They are blighting in their influence, unfair as tests, false as motives for study, and unethical in their reaction on the mind of the student. As an evil they are logical first fruits of a false theory. Max Muller puts one phase of the evil strongly, when he says: "All real joy in study seems to me to have been destroyed by examinations as now conducted. Young men imagine that all their work has but one object—to enable them to pass examinations. Every book they have to read, even to the number of pages, is prescribed. No choice is allowed; no time is left to look either right or left. What is the result? The required number of pages is gotten up under compulsion, therefore grudgingly, and after the examination is over what has been gotten up is got rid of again like a heavy and useless burden. The only thing that remains is an intellectual nausea — a dislike of the food swallowed under compulsion."⁴

Guyau⁵, a wise and witty French educator, says: "An examination is a permission to forget." The child and the older student lives under a constant fear of punishment or failure that stimulates nervousness and lack of attention, warping and wracking the mind. Sometime in the future we shall realize that it is as barbarous an injustice to punish a child by a bad mark for a missed

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lesson as it would be to whip it for having the measles. The child is not punished for failure to study, but for failure to learn. This is not his fault. He may know ninety per cent of a lesson perfectly and be tripped up by a question on the unlearned ten percent. He dimly realizes this as unjust and feels an unethical and unholy sense of having beaten the game when he later receives a maximum mark on a lesson wherein his answer represents the only thing he knows about it.

Examinations make “cramming” mandatory and this process has a most pernicious effect on mind and brain. They exercise only the rote memory, the weakest of all memories and one often found well developed in defectives and in those almost imbecile. They blur the process of memory by paying no attention to the association of memories by principle, classification and relation. They deaden the mind by putting a premium on acquiring words untranslated into ideas or clear concepts.

In mental training, with no examinations and marking, the child would attend school with joy and freedom, prepared to be led to love knowledge and power for their own sakes and for the use he could make of them. The absence of formal examinations would not imply that no estimate would be made of the child’s progress, for he would be under the constant watchful eye of the teacher, studying his progress and development as he would manifest them in his daily activities.

In education we hear and read much about the questions the teacher should put to the child, little or nothing of the questions the child should be inspired to put to the teacher. There is no time for the latter questions in our present system. They represent the child’s instinctive effort to orient himself, to get his bearings in a new world, to feed his mind and satisfy his mental hunger, to find out that which it wants to know. The first questions of a child are queries key-noted in “who” or “what.” He is first starting wisely with “identity.” He soon evolves into “why,” “how,” “which,” “when,” and “where,” first the thing itself, then its qualities, its relations, its method, process or reason, its time, its location and its individuality. These queries are but the outward expression of inward analysis. A Darwin, a Huxley, a Spencer, or a Newton uses the same words in interviewing Nature.

Mental training, modeling its method on the mind of the child and that of genius, has reverence for these questions. It substitutes for textbooks and recitation, the free air of question, discussion, conversation and exchange of thought. The child’s questions are vitally significant as a means of self-expression and as evidencing not only its hunger for knowledge but the slant of the child’s thoughts, his aptitudes, tastes, reasoning, imagination, tendencies and understanding.

The first duty of mental training is to seek to put the child into harmony with his environment. This means not only answering his questions but stimulating, directing and intensifying them, and giving him knowledge, first and essentially of the immediate world around him, and in this process beginning the training of his mind and all its powers, faculties, and qualities. While the basic principles of mental training would be identical and unchanging the world over, and be as true and applicable in India or Peru as in America, the knowledge to be given would differ. The child in Bombay would have different surroundings, scenery, phases of nature, animal and plant life and manners and customs from those of a child living in Lima. Similar differences, though

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less in degree, would exist between child life and environment in the Tennessee Mountains and in El Paso, Texas. The basic knowledge would differ but in all instances the natural curiosity would be equally nursed and stimulated in mental training instead of being starved and deadened in education. Today we take a child hungering to understand what he sees and hears in his little world, and place him in the artificial bookish atmosphere of the schoolroom. There we shunt his interest off from the thousand things he wants to know and seek to divert this interest to what is dull, dry, disassociated from his natural life and activities.

It is as though a traveler were new-landed in some strange city of the Orient. With every sense, keen, alert and stimulated and his whole mind avid to know and to understand, he seeks instinctively to adjust himself to his new surroundings. Questions crowd so close and so fast to his lips that he can hardly give them expression. "What is that?" "Who is that man whom all seem to reverence?" "Why does he wear that bright robe?" "What is that strange looking building?" "Why do these men suddenly kneel?" "Why do they stand apart like statues?" "Where are the shops?" "How do these people live at home?" The questions are but the emanations from the white heat of his interest. Suppose that instead of answering them, one were to say, "Come, let us not bother about these things now. I want to give you a course of lessons on cuneiform inscriptions or on quadratic equations," we should have a fair analogue to education's treatment of the child.

Text-books would have no part in mental-training, at least not in its early stages. For them would be substituted the living voice of the teacher. There would be greater appeal to the ear than is made in education. It requires greater mental quickness to grasp and retain what is spoken than what is printed for as this is permanent it can be referred to at will. There is a stronger appeal to the emotion and imagination in the spoken word than in the written or printed. Language, too, has its first message to the ear. In such training there is increased possibility in training in language at its best, for all speak and comparatively few write. The emphasis on the appeal to the ear does not mean that the training of the eye is neglected but it is merely given its true place.

In education, with its program of a fixed amount of knowledge to be given in a fixed period of time, every moment is scheduled; thirty minutes four times a week for this study, forty-five minutes twice a week for another and so on for other studies. The more we reduce education to a mechanism the easier it is to handle as an organization but such mechanizing and standardizing kills its very soul. It intensifies mechanical teaching and mechanical learning. We give a course of so many months in some subject and when the text-book is completed we examine on it, lock the study in some water-tight compartment of the mind where it is isolated from contact with other subjects and pay no further attention to it. It is taught once and that is all about it. It is assumed that because it has been taught the student knows it, retains it and uses it. It is really withdrawn from circulation like Confederate money. The separate studies do not speak to each other, they never mix, marry and procreate with an issue of new ideas.

Mental training cannot be so mechanized. Its aim is not a certain amount of knowledge, fixed and pre-determined but to give each child or older student all the mental power he individually seems capable of developing, with whatever knowledge can be acquired in connection with the

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process and stimulating such a love of power and knowledge that the individual will be able to acquire for himself such further power and knowledge in the right way as he may later desire. The new model therefore would resent the pressure of an exacting time table. Of course, some kind of a general working program would be evolved but it would be a most elastic affair, following the needs, not determining them. If we were asked what would be the term of the course in any subject in the curriculum of mental training in the elementary schools the answer would be —“eight years.” This means that though the direct training would lessen, the subject would always be in the foreground and be exercised in newer lines of thought and activity.

No single power of the mind could long be exercised alone. They are so intimately inter-related that the perfecting of any one implies the developing at the same time of associated powers. In the training of the senses, for instance, in exercising the child to take a clear visual image of a picture, memory classifies it, the reproductive imagination re-creates it vividly on demand, it enters into observation, questions regarding it call forth reason, and a true expression in description is an exercise in language and a drawing is one in art.

Education in her zeal to furnish knowledge, forces it so constantly and continuously and in such large doses into minds uninterested and untrained to assimilate, that the result is a mental dyspepsia that injures the mind instead of strengthening it, straining it instead of training it. Education's ideal of culture is extension, a little of everything. The ideal of mental training is intensity, a smaller field, more thoroughly cared for and nourished. Each exercise must be completely mastered before the next is undertaken.

The semblance of power or knowledge is nothing, its actuality is everything. Education spreads over infinite detail; mental training concentrates on thorough knowledge of fundamentals in any subject, guiding threads, principles and laws and essentials, outlines so perfectly mastered that all later knowledge fits into a prepared scheme where it is tested, seen in proper relation and properly evaluated.

In mathematics, education carries the student through algebra and geometry and beyond. Mental training by lopping off all that follows percentage and discount would save valuable time that could be devoted to more useful things and would give such thorough drilling in the smaller field that the student could almost work out problems in his sleep. He would be trained to do calculating mentally that now requires pencil and paper, every short-cut would be shown him and he would do the work with ease, accuracy and rapidity. Every adult in our country who has been educated in our public schools has been taught to “bound the states.” Each one has sing-songed the descriptive formulas over and over again, he has then drawn maps. What percentage of them could bound each of the forty-eight states today? Is not one per cent a very liberal estimate? In mental training, after a series of exercises in visualizing, the boy or girl would be trained to take a clear mental picture of the map of the United States in outline and color. He would be exercised repeatedly until it would be indelibly impressed on his trained memory. Similar methods would be used with maps of the continents. He would then have in his head, for all the years, an atlas of seven maps *tattooed* into memory, ready to be revived in his mind's eye instantly in a moment of need.

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In mental training everything is done to secure the child's active, zealous co-operation. Because genius works best and develops its highest powers in what it loves, the child is led, not forced, to love and desire his school life. It does not mean that everything is made easy for him, his mental food predigested for him, and bitter doses of knowledge all sugar-coated and capsuled. The opposite is the true statement, he is given tasks that call forth his mental powers at their strongest, he is made intensely conscious of the specific object of every exercise, its how and why of process and what benefit he should expect from it. The aim of mental training is to inspire rather than merely inform, to stir the hidden energies, to awaken love and desire, to quicken the imagination, to thrill the child with the glory of individual possibility, to give it seeing eyes for the wonders and beauties of life and listening ears for its great message, to fill his mind with the glowing sense of power, self-reliance and self-dominion, to exercise him in initiative and responsibility, to awaken the creative impulse, to show him his true relationship to himself and to the world, to train him to think for himself and to think the best, know the best, feel the best, do the best and live the best.

In this spirit of wakening love and interest, the wonder side, the romance, the appealing, the picturesque in every subject is first presented. We today teach history in a dry-as-dust way, peppered with unimportant dates, that for most people have killed all interest in it as a study or a source of pleasurable reading in later life. What they *do* know has been acquired under the suspended sword of fear of bad marks or the false spur of preparing for examinations. What little the child later remembers is the picturesque episodes, either actually pictured in the books or made real by vivid, colorful description such as the Boston tea-party, the landing of the Pilgrims, Queen Isabella pawning her jewels, Washington crossing the Delaware, Washington at Valley Forge, signing the Declaration of Independence, Franklin and his kite and a few more similar episodes. Most of what remains of what was taught is buried in the oblivion department of memory. Nearly two thousand years ago it was said: "A little child shall lead them."⁶ The little child *does* lead. He is constantly showing us how to help him, he leads us in countless ways in education, but we do not follow. We ignore his revealing of the natural way, and blindly and fatuously continue our false, unnatural, complicated process.

In the study of English literature we have hundreds of able, well-informed, zealous and appreciative teachers in our schools and colleges. But because of the insistence on sweeping the whole field from Chaucer to Chesterton,—the terror of examinations and markings, the burden of remembered names and dates, the drudgery of study and writing papers, the sense of literature as a task, and other contributing factors, the results are far from satisfactory. The teacher's first great duty and fine privilege is to develop a genuine love of reading, and of reading the best. If teachers accomplish this, all they leave undone in literature will be forgiven them. More interest in Shakespeare has been killed by making text-books of his plays than has ever been stimulated by their forced study.

One book, lovingly, leisurely, sympathetically and appreciatingly read aloud to a class, with frequent interruptions and comments—as we stop on a country road to note the beauty of a sunset, a water-fall, a cloud effect, a glory of Autumn foliage, a tree etched against the sky or some other of Nature's beauties—with discussion free and natural as the air, about the happy choice of a word, the imagery, the fuller meaning and message, the charm of fancy, the

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individual touches, the sympathetic notes of character interpretation, the wisdom, the wit, the philosophy, the emotional or intellectual appeal, would do infinitely more good to the mind than the whole field of literature studied as a task. The true understanding of the soul of one great book is greater than the knowledge of the mere anatomy of a thousand. Lincoln performed miracles of self-culture with three books—the Bible, Shakespeare and Aesop's Fables. This intensive culture is in the spirit of mental training. He who loves one book will discover others to love.

When the suggestion is made that a true system of education should train the individual for each of his seven lives, the first reaction of many minds is the thought that each of them might be developed in a course of so many weeks with proper text-books. This is an initial mistake. You cannot train the physical body, develop character, generate high ideals and practice of morals, prepare for citizenship and for man's true relation to his fellow-man, awaken and intensify his love of the beautiful, inspire in him high emotions and spiritualize his living by brief text-book courses. These great things must be gained in years of daily exercise, running as the warp and woof⁷ of the whole fabric of mental training. How does a wise mother seek to train her son to character? She seeks to make what she would teach the atmosphere of the home, to inspire him by example, to instill into his mind simple sound principles of right action, to surround him with right influences and to safeguard him from wrong ones, to help him to the best in reading and companionship, to make him not merely obedient but self-directing and morally self-supporting. These are but a few random suggestions of the atmosphere of the schoolroom in mental training.

The question that naturally comes to the mind in all this is: "How would we get time in the twelve years of elementary education, for the moment ignoring what the colleges should do, if we accepted this model as worthwhile?" The question is proper and pertinent. Time sufficient would there be to lay solid foundations in all of these and to raise a satisfying superstructure. The elimination of certain studies as distinct subjects of courses, the lessening of the scope of others, wiser and more psychologically true methods and the quickened power of the trained minds of the boy or girl to grasp and to assimilate would combine to furnish all the time necessary within, and perhaps very much within the twelve years of elementary and high school education. As to what the colleges now do or fail to do and what they should do is, as Kipling remarks, "Another story." It is too long to enter into at this time.

It will be said that it would require geniuses to teach in this spirit. This is not true. Reduced to its lowest terms what has been written seems but simple, common sense applied to a great problem. Teachers would have to be trained for the work, in its fullest bearings, and special books written on details of the subject and with suggestive exercises. Fifty years ago there was not a chauffeur, an aviator, a typist, a telephone operator or a wireless operator in the United States. The demand created the supply.

How could our present system be transformed into harmony with this suggested model, even if we accepted it? To attempt here to propose even a few partial changes finally leading to fuller harmony seems unnecessary, unsatisfactory, an unwarranted intrusion and would serve only to open up a side discussion that would divert thought from the question at issue. In all that we

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have written against education as a whole, we wish to give full recognition to the good work in many directions done in many private educational institutions, but at their best they are handicapped and limited by being forced to prepare for entrance to college. Countless educators and psychologists, experimenters and thinkers, seeking a better way have worked out theories, methods, principles and practical details of real value. These would serve richly in correcting, elaborating, or strengthening our incompetent outline of a new model. Certain public schools, in advance of the others, have solved problems in self-government, civic training, play, manual training, children's gardens and other phases worthy only of praise. They have failed to do *more* merely because of the falsity of the basic theory of education.

In closing this series of articles two questions are of supreme importance: "Is preparing and training the individual for the seven lives he must live a sufficiently broad, practical conception of what education should accomplish?" "Is there a possible higher ideal or a more basic foundation for such training than making genius the revelation and the model for true education?" If the answer of the thinking public be one of approval, then the co-operation of educators can transform this vision of what might be into an actuality, this dream into a reality.

¹ Nicholas Murray Butler (1862 – 1947) was an American philosopher, diplomat, and educator. Butler was president of Columbia University, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. He became so well-known and respected that The New York Times printed his Christmas greeting to the nation every year.

² William E. Gladstone (1809 – 1898) British statesman who served as Prime Minister four times (1868-74, 80-85, 86, 92-94), Chancellor of the Exchequer (1853-55, 59-66, 73-74, 80-82), was first elected to Parliament in 1832. The quote is from an [address](#) Gladstone delivered before the University of Edinburgh 16 April 1860.

³ James Beattie (1735 – 1803) was a Scottish poet, moralist and philosopher. He was a professor of "Moral Philosophy and Logick" at the University of Aberdeen. The quote from an essay entitled "[Remarks on the Utility of Classical Learning](#)" written in 1796.

⁴ Prof. F. Max Müller (1823 – 1900) had these words published in multiple magazines including "[Comments on the 'Sacrifice of Education'](#)", Popular Science, February 1889.

⁵ Jean-Marie Guyau (1854 – 1888) was a French philosopher and poet.

⁶ Isaiah 11:6 "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and *a little child shall lead them.*"

⁷ Warp and Woof: "The essential foundation or base of any structure or organization; from weaving, in which the warp – the threads that run lengthwise – and the woof – the threads that run across – make up the fabric: 'The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence are the warp and woof of the American nation.', *The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. 15 Jan. 2012. [Dictionary.com](#).