

IX.

SEED TIME.

WHEN I began to think over the title of my paper, the first idea which came into my mind was, ought not every period of human life to be a seed time? Furthermore, are there not many seeds of our characters and actions, which were sown long years ago by the experiences of our ancestors? Perhaps, however, this important contribution to our making is rather to be compared to the preparation of a selective soil, more favourable to the cultivation of some crops than to that of others. Do we not receive from our forbears a mass of tendencies which form a soil congenial to the germination of certain kinds of seeds, in which they will spring up almost as if by magic, but so inimical to others that, do what our parents and guardians can, the crop will be poor and stunted?

The seeds of character, which come to us through life, each have their seasons. Some have their best and proper chance of development in babyhood and little-childhood, others belong to later childhood, more find root and flourish only in adolescence, youth, or manhood, and not a few, thank God, can still take root and come to fair proportions, up to the very end of life.

Having granted all this, I think we may assume that the seed time which concerns us covers only babyhood, childhood, and adolescence. It is certain that our power, as parents and teachers, to control the crops in any marked degree, as well as our knowledge of what will best grow in the soil, will diminish inversely as the child's age increases.

In the case of a baby or any young child, we can, within certain limits, and in certain directions, do almost anything we set ourselves to accomplish. (That we shall not attempt to exercise our power too much, or exhibit "*trop de zèle*" by interfering with the child's higher personality, is assumed in members of the P.N.E.U.) As life goes on, however, and the complexities of character show themselves, the action and re-action between the growing being and its environment becomes more involved. It is increasingly more difficult to

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foretell, with any certainty, the results which will be produced by any special influence or experience. It also becomes less and less safe to try experiments. It is more and more hidden from us what influences are shaping the individual, and into what manner of man he is growing. Not uncommonly the eyes of those to whom the boy or girl is nearest and dearest are the most holden, and they, least of all, see and realize what vital and spiritual things are taking place in the recesses of character.

As soon as a baby begins to take notice and gives attention to the things around it, we may say that seed time has begun in earnest. It was stirring already, but now it becomes active. The child's brain is waking up, and getting ready for use. It is the organ which, while he remains in this life, will, as far as we know, subserve the uses of his mind. We know that this wonderful instrument develops most enormously and rapidly during babyhood, doubling its weight in the first year, and trebling it by the end of the second year. This increase in the mass of indescribably delicate, complicated and highly organized brain tissues, is the concrete outward sign of the far more marvellous intellectual growth, which is taking place at the same time.

While the brain centres are organizing the connections from one to another, and

becoming better co-ordinated in their action, the child's mind is forming links with the interests around it and *pari passu* appropriating all kinds of delightful knowledge. Every hour of the day, seeds from the whole environment are taking root, and germinating in its character. Just as bodily food goes to build up these tissues of the brain, so new sights and sounds are eagerly sought after by the intellect, to feed the mind and spiritual nature of the child with ideas, the food upon which these grow and strengthen.

We cannot too often repeat that a quite young child is a highly intelligent person. It is, however, ignorant from want of real experience, and still lacks knowledge to reason from. This it can only gain by forming the links we have referred to, with everything in the world around it. From want of knowledge it has not as yet been able to form standards with which to compare its multitudinous experiences, and so measure the probability and value of all it hears and sees. To the young child one thing is nearly as wonderful as another. Hence it is very credulous, and is easily bewildered among

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the number of strange and new experiences with which it comes into contact.

Now, for a moment let us think of a plot of ground which is uncultivated, and ready to grow almost any kind of vegetation, the seeds of which come its way. We may be sure that many seeds are already in the plot, prepared to germinate, spring up and multiply, either at once or later. Others will come to it by degrees, or be brought according to the plan or choice of any cultivators, who are ready to take pains to bring about a special result, and who are often so mistaken as to imagine that the whole business is in their hands, and that the future is entirely under their control. The atmosphere in contact with our plot of earth may be either dry or moist, warm or cold, and may contain either injurious gases or others which have a specially beneficial influence. In any case it will carry in it a multitude of wind-blown seeds. Where these come from, one seldom knows. The birds of the air, too, will bring their contributions. These last often come from very distant places, and may be strange and foreign varieties producing unexpected plants, the efflorescence of which we are too ignorant to foretell. The soil with its own special tendencies will powerfully modify the growth, being favourable to some of the seeds, injurious to others.

These things are an allegory.

The plot of ground is the new-born baby. The seeds already there, and the selective soil are the ancestral tendencies which it brings with it when it comes into the world. They are the outcome of the history of the race from which it springs, an heritage from its forefathers. Everything else belongs to the environment in which the child finds itself. The atmosphere, genial or ungenial, is that of the home into which it has been born. The cultivators are all who intentionally influence the young life, and who purpose to bring it as near as they know how to their own ideals. They are the parents, teachers and nurses. The infinite number of wind-borne and bird-brought seeds are all the unforeseen circumstances and impressions, both physical and spiritual, which bear down upon every human soul. To these last are really due the greater part of education.

From all and each part of this whole environment the selective soil takes what it can make use of; the rest it rejects.

Everything which can be learnt about the soil, the

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atmosphere and the seeds, closely concerns us who are the would-be cultivators, and we dare not neglect the study of any of them.

Naturally we turn first to the earliest influences. With that baby waiting there (no, it never waits a moment), to be brought up, the question its parents quite rightly hasten to ask, is "Which are the seeds first needed to supplement or counteract those already in the soil, as well as those which are, even now, being brought by the wind and the birds?"

What must first be thought of, are surely the influences which may be regarded as the equivalents of those seeds, which we are told in gardeners' books, are to be "sown in open ground in February, March or April." These are the common hardy herbs and flowers which ought to be in every garden, which seem almost indigenous, and which require only the very simplest methods to secure their healthy growth. We know quite well that any good ordinary soil, where they can be sheltered from the worst frosts, protected from the ravages of garden pests, watered and kept free from weeds, will serve to produce good crops of these every day, necessary things.

To these plants we may liken the good habits of daily life, which, while our children are very young, it is our undisputed duty to establish in them. These habits are to a great degree physical. They concern regular ways in sleeping, breathing, bathing, taking food, and exercise, and attending to all the other daily needs of the body. Some of them would be called definitely moral, though undoubtedly the regular fulfilment of all good habits has a moral and disciplinary side.

The habit of obedience to constituted authority is a plant which ought not to be forgotten in the very earliest days. Its growth needs little in babyhood, except that those in charge of an infant should realize how important to both moral and physical well-being, the obedience of children is. If they know this, they can readily establish a *rapport* between themselves and the baby. The firm handling of an infant will alone do this, for long before a little child can speak it seems to understand. The tone of command in a well-known voice conveys to it a very definite message. *What is really expected of little children they do*, and those who do not know how *really to expect*, are not the right people to have charge of them.

We all know people whose orders are always fulfilled at once, and others whose commands are discussed and reasoned about,

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before they are carried out. Said a little boy, to a younger brother who (accustomed to his mother's uncertain orders), hesitated for a moment in fulfilling an aunt's request, "You *silly!* don't you know that when Aunt Margaret *says* a thing she *means* it?" Even babies are conscious of the quality which belonged to that aunt's personality. It gives them moral support and confidence, and they entirely respect those refreshing grown-ups in whom they recognize it. The people who are thus obeyed are generally those who have themselves a well-developed sense of duty, and who, when they know a thing *ought* to be done, *do* it.

Most of the habits of which we have been speaking are readily formed in infants simply by regular repetition of the action, helped out, as they come to months of discretion, by a proper use of thought-turning. All young children love repetition of the same act or experience, and they greatly prefer that no variation should occur in the sequence of events which they expect. In this way Nature comes to the assistance of education, and nurses or parents have only themselves to thank for it if, by doing a thing for a little child in one way one day, and in

another way another day, they fail to form a good habit where all has been made easy for them. If they miss these psychological opportunities, they are much less likely to meet with success later on. There are no truer conservatives than young children!

None but those who have themselves gone through the misery of having been “spoilt children” can, perhaps, realize the peace and rest which regular habits, with obedience as their chief, give the little child. The inward meaning of this sense of peace is that such habits increase nervous balance, and allow of good storage of nerve force. The secret of nervous stability is mechanicalization of all those acts and duties of life, which it is allowable to form into habits.

The second necessity for the rightly-balanced and highest kind of nervous stability is that the mind should have a full and sufficient diet of vitalizing ideas. This we ought all to realize very early in the lives of our children, for it applies to them quite as much as it does to adults. Only under this condition can mental balance possibly keep at its best and sanest.

To the tiny child such ideas come from the life all around him, from much that he sees and hears. Even to find out

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that he himself can do anything as interesting as to produce a lovely noise by rattling and crumpling a piece of paper is, to the baby, a vitalizing idea. He is busy getting into relation with all the little things of daily life, which are to us so common that they no longer interest. Such experiences are so near at hand and plentiful that they may be regarded as some of the wind-borne seeds, which are to be found everywhere.

As a child grows out of infancy more help must be given in forming up his links with manifold interests, and also, when he asks questions, we must exert ourselves to answer them. This often calls for more thought and study on our part than lazy grown-up people are always prepared to give. Many is the occasion when we should like to refer to the mad bull who gored the little boy to death for asking questions, only that we know the inevitable reply: “But if the bull was mad, how did it know that the little boy asked questions?”

The intelligence of these questions often fills us with awe and astonishment. If, however, we look back to our own earliest recollections (to the things we remember when we were, say, three to five years old), we shall at once recall how clear, and wise, and logical we were about them; and how absurd it seemed of the people to expect us not to understand.

We can realize from our own experience that, as far as our knowledge went, we were as intelligent as we are to-day. Perhaps in some ways our minds were clearer for the reception of new truths, as they had not become the clouded palimpsest which, in some of us, they have developed into in later years.

Our earliest memories are generally of isolated scenes. We remember being somewhere, or somebody saying something, or showing us something, or we observed what someone did without being able quite to account for the action. Akin to this, when grown-up ourselves, we are constantly struck in our intercourse with children at the way in which they will give clear evidence of observation and thought on one occasion, and perhaps, half an hour later, show themselves silly, bad-tempered, obstinate, or anything else which is quite inconsistent with the former mood.

I remember a lady telling me how she took her little boy of ten with her to the large Suffrage Gathering in Hyde Park, on the day of the arrival of the Women’s Pilgrimage in London. I expect she felt it to be a chance for a few wind-blown seeds on

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the position of women to reach him, and take root in his mind. The little boy seemed to pay no attention; in fact, he was more inattentive in manner than was usual with him. He fidgetted, and occupied himself with all kinds of trifles, making it difficult for his mother to give her attention to the speeches. Fully a month later, perhaps it was even longer, this little boy was playing at dressing up, and coming to call on his mother. He got himself up in the character of one of the chief speakers who had been in the Park that day, and delivered himself of an excellent speech, in which he made many of the points to which he had seemed to pay no attention on the day of the pilgrimage. Playing the game, and thanking him for the speech, his mother said to him: "I am so glad to have had this opportunity of hearing you, Mrs. —, for indeed the other day when you spoke in the Park, I could hardly attend to what you said because my little boy was so fidgetty and troublesome." "Ah, my dear madam," replied he, "you do not surprise me; children often are *a very great nuisance*."

Again, a little girl of between four and five was sitting crying on the floor. In came one of her Aunts and said: "There must be a baby here. I hear it crying!" The little girl stopped, and turned on her in indignation, "You're a very *untruthful person*. I am not a baby *and you know it*." The same little girl one day, when she had been naughty, was sent up to the nursery. She began to pull the clothes off her cot, and before her proceedings were realized, threw them out of the window in her violent passion. A few days after she said: "Mother, you are not to get a governess for baby. I shall be her governess." "What will you teach her?" asked her mother. "I shall teach her not to throw her bedclothes out of the window."

Time would fail me were I only to recount mere lists of the seeds which those who have to do with children should keep in memory. There is, however, one crop of which I should like to speak, and which begins to be sown very early. There is generally plenty of seed for it, but often of a very inferior quality. It is nevertheless of the highest importance that from the first, nothing but the best should be sown, and that it should also include a rich variety of species. I refer to the crop we call speech—in our own case the power to speak and write the English language. How neglected this power is at the present day, we all know well.

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Waiting for every English man and woman his language is a beautiful inheritance, to be had for the taking, and yet only a very small percentage of the nation ever comes into real possession of it in its perfection. That this terrible thing is true is nearly altogether due to the carelessness and blindness of parents, who, themselves using a very limited vocabulary, often fail to realize how that of the next generation is becoming even smaller and poorer than their own. Not only is the crop apt to be of second-rate quality, but frequently also the tares of slang spring up amongst it.

As we all know what, par excellence, lifts human beings above other animals is the transcendent gift of speech, capable of nearly unlimited development. Is it not the means by which ideas are given form, and does it not convey from one living soul to another all that life and knowledge mean? It is, of course, now well-established that many animals communicate with each other by means of something equivalent to speech. There are men who have learnt much of the languages of the creatures, and have been even able to talk to them in their own tongues. What these very people, however, have learnt only makes it clearer to us that the vocabulary of even our cousins the anthropoid apes, is an exceedingly limited affair. We must

still hold that man stands alone as a speaking animal, and realize that each one of us has a grave responsibility with regard to this unique inheritance.

From the very first babyhood the ear is becoming accustomed to different sounds, detecting, recognizing, and associating them with the things around the child. The hearing of pleasant voices, with good pronunciation, by a mere baby, means much more than is generally realized. When words and sounds begin to be imitated the muscles of speech, under the guidance of their nerves, naturally follow the pronunciation to which the ear has become most accustomed, and a faulty accent, taken up at the first, is only with great difficulty corrected later. In every department of life it is desirable to avoid, as much as possible, the wasteful process of *unlearning*. Pains should also be taken with the youngest children to make them enunciate well, but this, like the pronunciation, comes through the channel of the ear, and the child who is surrounded by good speaking will speak well.

Furthermore, however, numbers of people pronounce their words well, and enunciate clearly, yet, possess vocabularies

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which are small, and poor beyond description. There is no certain safety from this danger except wide reading of the best living books, and hearing constantly words of every shade of meaning used to express, clearly and fully, what they really mean. Little children ought to be read to from the very first. There is a lot of real literature, expressed in beautiful and fitting language, which is quite suited to the very youngest children. There are poems and there are fairy tales, and stories too, of daily life, which are full of interest for them. Let them learn some of the poetry, and re-tell the stories they have heard read. So will they quite naturally become the possessors of a wide vocabulary, and for each circumstance of life have fit words in which to express themselves and their ideas. There will then be no danger of their reaching the age of fifteen or sixteen in the case of a very nice girl to whom I was speaking the other day. She was waiting somewhere, waiting for me I am sorry to say, and when I came to her, I found her deep in the *Essays of Elia*. "Isn't it a delightful book?" I asked. "It is just a perfect book to take up from time to time and enjoy a bit of." I found, however, that to her, Charles Lamb was not an old friend, but a very new acquaintance. She was reading it because Miss So-and-So at her school was going to give a lecture on it, and she added "It is difficult to read because there are very curious words in it, ever so many that one has to look up in the dictionary."

The good old fashion of reading aloud as a regular custom in the family has become rarer and rarer. Even a little good literature read every day would, alone, work miracles in improving the average knowledge of the English language.

A rich vocabulary is indeed the very material of which are formed the links along which man, as a spiritual being, can reach out towards the infinite, and so come into possession of all that is highest, fullest and best.

Do not let us, by neglect in this matter of providing the very best seed, cut our children off from any of their intellectual or spiritual opportunities.