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IX. LETTERS TO A YOUNG TEACHER.

BY GIDEON F. THAYER,

Late Principal of Chauncey-Hall School, New Haven.

Teachers, like men of all other vocations, are subject to human infirmities; although, in judging them, this consideration is often overlooked. Hence, the increased importance of that self-control which has already been urged on your attention. In our own days, as well as in those of Goldsmith, it is a melancholy fact that the state of mind in which a teacher enters his school-room, and begins the duties of the day, is but too often the foretokening of the day's occurrences;

"As coming events cast their shadows before."

O, furnish no just cause to have it said of you,

"Well had the boding tremblers learned to trace
The day's disasters in his morning face."

Let your habits be regular. I mean as to your diet, amount of sleep, exercise, &c. Your temper of mind, your feelings, your nervous system, will depend essentially on this; and these will affect your school-room operations. Some persons, with iron constitutions, are able, for a time, to live recklessly, and yet escape the immediate infliction of the legitimate penalties. They are, however, in their cases, only postponed: their sin will find them out. But, with few exceptions, school-teachers have not the bodily vigor to withstand the effects of irregularities of living. They either enter on the profession before the muscular system is hardened into maturity, or, under a confinement to which they had not been accustomed, they usually impair the strength they brought to it, and thus quicken into life those infirmities so fatal to success. I am not speaking of habits of a criminal nature; but of those to which worthy, moral young men, from inconsideration, are very apt to become addicted—and this, as they think, in a good cause. For example: they feel a deficiency of knowledge in some science they are required to teach, or they wish to pursue their investigations in some favorite study; and, aware that the quiet hours of night are most favorable to their purpose, they
draw on those hours to such an unreasonable amount, as to leave but
a very inadequate portion to meet the claims of the drowsy god;
which claims can never be met but in kind—no substitute being,
by nature’s unyielding laws, ever admitted. This, then, is the first
and great requisition—a liberal amount of sleep, and taken as regu-
larly as practicable. Any degree of knowledge, procured at the
sacrifice of needful sleep, is too dearly purchased; especially by him
whose days are to be devoted to the instruction and training of the
young.

Many persons have tried the experiment of living without sleep,
or of showing with how small a portion they could live; but, if they
have not died under the trial, they have so impaired their physical
powers as to have made the latter part of their lives a burden—full
of ails and of nervous annoyances.

It is true, that Napoleon, while in his career of conquest, dashing
like a meteor over half of vanquished Europe, lived for months
together with but a very few hours of sleep in the twenty-four; and,
during a large part of his time, in the saddle. But he was a man of
extraordinary vigor of body as well as of mind; possessed an indomi-
table will, and a fixedness of purpose that knew no aspect but success.
Reared in the camp, proof against exposure to the elements and to
hardship, he was a model that few could successfully emulate; and,
by no means, a suitable one for your fraternity.

Next to sleep, I would speak of food; a liberal supply of which,
and that of a nutritious character, I deem indispensable to health and
usefulness. I am aware that opinions differ on this point; but expe-
rience and observation prove the affirmative of it. The well-considered
laws of health, founded upon the structure and natural desires of
a human being, testify to it. I say a liberal supply; I do not mean
a quantity unreasonable in amount or variety. I repudiate the idea
of excess. Gluttony may claim as many victims as intemperance.
There is a rational course, which every one who carefully considers
the subject may easily ascertain. Let it but be deemed of sufficient
importance to secure attention to it, and the evil will be avoided.

On this point, I speak from feeling as well as from conviction. I had,
associated with me in school, for eight years, one of the best men, and
most successful teachers, that it has been my fortune to know. It
was CLEMENT DURGIN; and I am glad of this opportunity of placing
his name on record, where it may meet the eyes of his many friends,
in connection with a slight tribute to his memory and his worth. It
should have been done long ago, by an abler pen: it could not have
been performed by a warmer friend.
Mr. Durgin was a self-educated man, and he did the service well. He far more nearly verified the common remark of school-boys, "He knows everything," than many of those who are distinguished by college honors of the first, second, or even third degree. He was a universal student; not of printed books merely, but of the great book of Nature—not sealed to him, but ever open, and read with understanding and perpetual delight. The pebble, the tiny wild-flower, the buzzing insect, the downy moss, the magnificent tree, the singing bird,—all created things, animate and inanimate, were subjects of his contemplation, and furnished him with lessons which enriched his school instructions, while they attuned his mind to harmony and love. Always equable and self-possessed; he seemed to have imbied the influence of the Source of kindness, the Giver of all wisdom. He was devoted to Natural Science, and to all science, not only from their intrinsic attraction, but from a laudable ambition to be something, and to do something, in the world. His lectures and addresses, orations and poems,—for he was no mean poet,—evidenced knowledge, judgment, patriotism, and taste, of which many young men would have been proud. Patient of labor, and willing to oblige, he was called on to devote many an hour, after his day's school-toll was over, to the preparation of literary performances for lyceums, anniversary occasions, temperance societies, national holidays, &c., to which he always cordially responded, and which he successfully performed.

These proved a fatal temptation to him. Unwilling to present anything not worthy of himself and the occasion, or that should fall below the anticipations of his friends, he bestowed much care and time upon them, and these at the expense of needful rest and bodily exercise, crowning his error with abstinence from suitable food. Having an idea that his intellect was clearer when but little food was in the stomach, he indulged sparingly in eating, and abandoned the use of solid animal food altogether—taking, instead, vegetables, fruit, and pastry, with a little milk. For a short time, he found he could write with more facility and readiness; but nature soon revolted, demanding a supply of nourishment which his newly-assumed diet did not furnish, and which was needed all the more from his accumulated mental labors. This demand was not complied with, or acceded to too late; and he fell into a decline, from which no curative treatment could restore him, and died of rapid consumption, a few months after, at the early age of thirty-one years—a victim to too rigid a system of dietetics, and too small an allowance of sleep and bodily exercise. And yet, so far as man could judge, with the capacity of fulfilling the three-score and ten years assigned as the lifetime of a human being.
His ashes repose amid the quiet shades of Mount Auburn, the trustees having accorded a small triangular lot for the purpose; and on the tablet of his monument is inscribed the following epitaph:

"Clement Durgin, associate principal of Chauncy-Hall School, Boston. Born, Sept. 29, 1802; died, Sept. 30, 1833: a student and lover of nature, in her wonders, he saw and acknowledged, and through them adored her beneficent Author. His life was a beautiful illustration of his philosophy; his death, of the triumph of his faith.

"His pupils have reared this monument, as an imperfect memorial of their grateful affection and respect."

The loss of a life so valuable to myself, to the profession, and to the community, I have uneasingly mourned; and cannot but cherish the hope, that others, influenced by similar tendencies to his, will take warning from this melancholy example, and be just to the claims of their physical nature, as well as to the aspirations of the nobler part; remembering that man is a complex being, and that to neglect the wants of either of the two principal elements is certain eventually to destroy or impair the power of both.

I have here, incidentally, introduced the subject of exercise; but wish to say a word more upon it, and particularly on the mode of taking it. Exercise derived from swinging dumb-bells in your chamber, or from splitting wood in a cellar, is of but little use. It will quicken the flow of the blood, and, consequently, warm the system; but more than this should be aimed at, that the mind may also have a share in the benefit sought for. Choose a place, then, if you can, where the scenery is attractive, and the objects are such as to make you forget yourself, and the reason of your being abroad. If you are favored with a locality that furnishes a water view, seek that, and you will not want for incidents of interest. If, instead, you have hills, or mountains, or forests, they will furnish you with agreeable subjects for reflection, and tend to call you out of yourself, and away from the petty cares of the school-room, or the gossip of the village—a matter of no inconsiderable importance. That sleep is sweetest and most refreshing, which is taken with the mind in a quiet state, destitute of cares or disturbing thoughts, which generate unquiet dreams: so exercise, enjoyed without the intrusion of distracting thoughts, or of objects foreign to the scene around, is not only most agreeable and recuperative, but that alone which is worth the having.

Exercise should, if possible, be taken in the daytime, in the broad sunlight. Everything that grows needs this. The esculent that sprouts in your cellar has no vigor, no greenness, no flavor; it needs the air and the sunshine to give it these. Fishes that are found in the
pools of caves, where the beams of the sun never smile, are destitute of eyesight. It is the light and warmth of the sun that cheer, embellish, and bless. Make it a point, therefore, that your exercise may be truly useful to you, to take it, as here indicated, under circumstances as advantageous as possible; but be sure, at all events, to secure daily a needful amount of it.

Attention to these suggestions will do more than anything else within your ability to present you, each day, to your responsible charge with that preparation so indispensable to complete success.