



# The Training of Observation

by

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Most of those who have to do with education today come rather sadly to the conclusion that children are becoming more and more limited in their powers of observation. Within a certain field they are keenly awake, but they are blind and deaf to much that used to delight most of us when we were young. One can be put to shame by a child of six or seven when there is a question of the make of cars or of airplanes, but the average child of today has no interest for trees, flowers or birds and passes by the many aspects of nature with unseeing eyes.

Yet if we are willing to examine ourselves carefully, we will find that our own observation is but too often at fault. We are generally attentive only to that which has some practical use for us. We can be correct enough in taking in the main landmarks along a road that we need to travel, or in making a mental note of the appearance of someone whom it is important for us to recognize again. But is this observing? Is it not rather a collecting of characteristics? A true observing needs to be a living process.

If we watch a very young child, we see that he experiences the world around in a much more alive way than those who are older. Whether he is enchanted by the dancing of the sunlight on the wall or whether he is busy with the taking in of his food, he is entirely absorbed in his sense experiences. We may say he observes with his whole being. Or if we consider an older child of, say, eight or nine years, who has not been too much spoiled by a town life, we see that new experiences can often grip him with great intensity; that the meeting with new people can impress him so that a very strong liking or disliking is felt; and we are often astonished at the vividness with which children can recall certain details which were to us unimportant, and how these can be associated with great delight or horror. For the sense perceptions of the child of this age are very much bound up with his whole feeling life.

The grown-up has necessarily freed his power of observing from the intimate connection either with his organism, as is the case with the very young child, or

with his sympathies and antipathies, as is the case with the child over seven; but only too often he has lost something of his connection with life as well. In our attempt to be objective and impersonal, we have dissociated ourselves from the world around. Observation has become an annotating process; it has ceased to be a living experience.

It is generally recognized in schools that observation should be trained. But it is our own powers which first need rekindling if we are to awaken those of the children. It is of little help if we teach them to collect specimens and make notes of various characteristics of stone, plant and animal, if we ourselves cannot experience the powers of nature and life by which these are surrounded. But such powers cannot be understood through an abstract intellectual thinking. We need to develop a certain attitude. If, for instance, we watch the sky day after day, the realization dawns: "Mighty powers are manifesting themselves, forever changing in cloud and light, in shadow and color." If at night we follow the solemn procession of the countless stars, then we feel within ourselves: "Here is expressed a wonderful harmony. If we follow these movements with devoted love, then more and more their nature is revealed."

Here our observing is an entering with our innermost being into that which is observed. We are not swayed by our sympathies or antipathies or by the influence of our organism; we selflessly make ourselves at one with what is around. We enter into the dynamic of the movements of nature, of the transforming life of the plants, of the sensations of the animal world, and of the riddles of human personalities. Here we cannot measure, weigh and count, for there is a point at which every measurement fails. It is not by means of the thermometer that we know the many qualities of warmth—from its powers of softening and dissolving to those of purifying and destroying, from its manifestations in human anger and indignation to those of generosity or love. These can be known only through an observing which is a being at one with the whole warmth activity.

Children by nature are able to enter these experiences, though more in a dream-like way. It is the life around which soon hardens them. It is important that as teachers and parents we strive to re-awaken such faculties within ourselves that theirs may also be rekindled.

The senses were once regarded as the twelve gateways to knowledge; but today many of these gateways remain closed. We do not wish to make the effort to seek for knowledge but would like to have it ready-made, given to us by others. Of how these ways may lead once more to an active thinking, it is necessary to speak another time.

**Note:**

This article came from Great Britain and was made into a pamphlet in 1975 by good friends Nathan and Yolanda Melniker who ran St. George Imprints. The clarity and value of the contents suggest that it come to the attention of contemporary readers.