Excerpt from “Emerson on Education” Lecture by R.W. Emerson

By Ralph Waldo Emerson

I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret. By your tampering and thwarting and too much governing he may be hindered from his end and kept out of his own. Respect the child. Wait and see the new product of Nature. Nature loves analogies, but not repetitions. Respect the child. Be not too much his parent. Trespass not on his solitude.

But I hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion--Would you verily throw up the reins of public and private discipline; would you leave the young child to the mad career of his own passions and whimsies, and call this anarchy a respect for the child's nature? I answer--Respect the child, respect him to the end, but also respect yourself. Be the companion of his thought, the friend of his friendship, the lover of his virtue--but no kinsman of his sin. Let him find you so true to yourself that you are the irreconcilable hater of his vice and the imperturbable slighter of his trifling.

The two points in a boy's training are, to keep his nature and train off all but that--to keep his nature, but stop off his uproar, fooling, and horseplay--keep his nature and arm it with knowledge in the very direction to which it points. Here are the two capital facts, Genius and Drill. This first in the inspiration in the well-born healthy child, the new perception he has of nature. Somewhat he sees in forms or hears in music or apprehends in mathematics, or believes practicable in mechanics or possible in political society, which no one else sees or hears or believes. This is the perpetual romance of new life, the invasion of God into the old dead world, when he sends into quiet houses a young soul with a thought which is not met, looking for something which is not there, but which ought to be there: the thought is dim but it is sure, and he casts about restless for means and masters to verify it; he makes wild attempts to explain himself and invoke the aid and consent of the by-standers. Baffled for want of language and methods to convey his meaning, not yet clear to himself, he conceives that though not in this house or town, yet in some other house or town is the wise master who can put him in possession of the rules and instruments to execute his will. Happy this child with a bias, with a thought which entrains him, leads him, now into deserts now into cities, the fool of an idea. Let him follow it in good and in evil report, in good or bad company; it will justify itself; it will lead him at last into the illustrious society of the lovers of truth.

In London, in a private company, I became acquainted with a gentleman, Sir Charles Fellowes, who, being at Xanthos, in the Aegean Sea, had seen a Turk point with his staff to some carved work on the corner of a stone almost buried in the soil. Fellowes scraped away the dirt, was struck with the beauty of the sculptured ornaments, and, looking about him, observed; more blocks and fragments like this. He returned to the spot, procured laborers and uncovered many blocks. He went back to England, bought a Greek grammar and learned the language; he read history and studied, ancient art to explain his stones; he interested Gibson the sculptor; he invoked the assistance of the English Government; he called in the succor of Sir Humphry Davy to analyze the pigments; of experts in coins, of scholars and connoisseurs; and at last: in his third
visit brought home to England such statues and marble reliefs and such careful plans that he was able to reconstruct, in the British Museum where it now stands, the perfect model of the Ionic trophy-monument, fifty years older than the Parthenon of Athens, and which had been destroyed by earthquakes, then by iconoclast Christians, then by savage Turks. But mark that in the task he had achieved an excellent education, and become associated with distinguished scholars whom he had interested in his pursuit; in short, had formed a college for himself; the enthusiast had found the master, the masters, whom he sought. Always genius seeks genius, desires nothing so much as to be a pupil and to find those who can lend it aid to perfect itself.

Nor are the two elements, enthusiasm and drill, incompatible. Accuracy is essential to beauty. The very definition of the intellect is Aristotle's: "that by which we know terms or boundaries." Give a boy accurate perceptions. Teach him the difference between the similar and the same. Make him call things by their right names. Pardon in him no blunder. Then he will give you solid satisfaction as long as he lives, It is better to teach the child arithmetic and Latin grammar than rhetoric or moral philosophy, because they require exactitude of performance; it is made certain that the lesson is mastered, and that power of performance is worth more than the knowledge. He can learn anything which is important to him now that the power to learn is secured: as mechanics say, when one has learned the use of tools, it is easy to work at a new craft.

Letter by letter, syllable by syllable, the child learns to read, and in good time can convey to all the domestic circle the sense of Shakespeare. By many steps each just as short, the stammering boy and the hesitating collegian, in the school debates, in college clubs, in mock court, comes at last to full, secure, triumphant unfolding of his thought in the popular assembly, with a fullness of power that makes all the steps forgotten.

But this function of opening and feeding the human mind is not to be fulfilled by any mechanical or military method; is not to be trusted to any skill less large than Nature itself. You must not neglect the form, but you must secure the essentials. It is curious how perverse and intermeddling we are, and what vast pains and cost we incur to do wrong. Whilst we all know in our own experience and apply natural methods in our own business -- in education our common sense fails us, and we are continually trying costly machinery against nature, in patent schools and academies and in great colleges and universities.

The natural method forever confutes our experiments, and we must still come back to it. The whole theory of the school is on the nurse's or mother's knee. The child is as hot to learn as the mother is to impart. There is mutual delight. The joy of our childhood in hearing beautiful stories from some skillful aunt who loves to tell them, must be repeated in youth. The boy wishes to learn to skate; to coast, to catch a fish in the brook, to hit a mark with a snowball or a stone; and a boy a little older is just as well pleased to teach him these sciences. Not less delightful is the mutual pleasure of teaching and learning the secret of algebra, or of chemistry, or of good reading and good recitation of poetry or of prose, or of chosen facts in history or in biography.

Nature provided for the communication of thought by planting with it in the receiving mind a fury to impart it. 'Tis so in every art, in every science. One burns to tell the new fact, the other burns to hear it. See how far a young doctor will ride or walk to witness a new surgical operation. I have seen a carriage-maker's shop emptied of all its workmen into the street, to
scrutinize a new pattern from New York. So in literature, the young man who has taste for poetry, for fine images, for noble thoughts, is insatiable for this nourishment, and forgets all the world for the more learned friend--who finds equal joy in dealing out his treasures.

Happy the natural college thus self-instituted around every natural teacher; the young men of Athens around Socrates; of Alexander around Plotinus; of Paris around Abelard; of Germany around Fichte, or Niebuhr, or Goethe: in short the natural sphere of every leading mind. But the moment this is organized, difficulties begin. The college was to be the nurse and home of genius; but, though every young man is born with some determination in his nature, and is a potential genius; is at last to be one; it is, in the most, obstructed and delayed, and, whatever they may hereafter be, their senses are now opened in advance of their minds. They are more sensual than intellectual. Appetite and indolence they have, but no enthusiasm. These come in numbers to the college: few geniuses: and the teaching comes to be arranged for these many, and not for those few. Hence the instruction seems to require skillful tutors, of accurate and systematic mind, rather than ardent and inventive masters. Besides, the youth of genius are eccentric, won't drill, are irritable, uncertain, explosive, solitary, not men of the world, not good for every-day association. You have to work for large classes instead of individuals; you must lower your flag and reef your sails to wait for the dull sailors; you grow departmental, routinary, military almost with your discipline and college police. But what doth such a school to form a great and heroic character? What abiding Hope can it inspire? What Reformer will it nurse? What poet will it breed to sing to the human race? What discoverer of Nature's laws will it prompt to enrich us by disclosing in the mind the statute which all matter must obey? What fiery soul will it send out to warm a nation with his charity? What tranquil mind will it have fortified to walk with meekness in private and obscure duties, to wait and to suffer? Is it not manifest that our academic institutions should have a wider scope; that they should not be timid and keep the ruts of the last generation, but that wise men thinking for themselves and heartily seeking the good of mankind, and counting the cost of innovation, should dare to arouse the young to a just and heroic life; that the moral nature should be addressed in the school-room, and children should be treated as the high-born candidates of truth and virtue?

So to regard the young child, the young man, requires, no doubt, rare patience: a patience that nothing but faith in the medial forces of the soul can give. You see his sensualism; you see his want of those tastes and perceptions which make the power and safety of your character. Very likely, But he has something else. If he has his own vice, he has its correlative virtue. Every mind should be all owed to make its own statement in action, and its balance will appear. In these judgments one needs that foresight which was attributed to an eminent reformer, of whom it was said "his patience could see in the bud of the aloe the blossom at the end of a hundred years."

Alas for the cripple Practice when it seeks to come up with the bird Theory, which flies before it. Try your design on the best school. The scholars are of all ages and temperaments and capacities. It is difficult to class them, some are too young, some are slow, some perverse. Each requires so much consideration, that the morning hope of the teacher, of a day of love and progress, is often closed at evening by despair. Each single case, the more it is considered, shows more to be done; and the strict conditions of the hours, on: one side, and the number of tasks, on the other. Whatever becomes of our method, the conditions stand fast--six hours, and thirty, fifty, or a hundred and fifty pupils. Something must be done, and done speedily, and in this distress the wisest are tempted to adopt violent means, to proclaim martial law, corporal punishment,
mechanical arrangement, bribes, spies, wrath, main strength and ignorance, in lieu of that wise
genial providential influence they had hoped, and yet hope at some future day to adopt. Of
course the devotion to details reacts injuriously on the teacher. He cannot indulge his genius, he
cannot delight in personal relations with young friends, when his eye is always on the clock, and
twenty classes are to be dealt with before the day is done. Besides, how can he please himself
with genius, and foster modest virtue? A sure proportion of rogue and dunce finds its way into
every school and requires a cruel share of time, and the gentle teacher, who wished to be a
Providence to youth, is grown a martinet, sore with suspicions; knows as much vice as the judge
of a police court, and his love of learning is lost in the routine of grammars and books of
elements.

A rule is so easy that it does not need a man to apply it; an automaton, a machine, can be made to
keep a school so. It facilitates labor and thought so much that there is always the temptation in
large schools to omit the endless task of meeting the wants of each single mind, and to govern by
steam. But it is at frightful cost. Our modes of Education aim to expedite, to save labor; to do for
masses what cannot be done for masses, what must be done reverently, one by one: say rather,
the whole world is needed for the tuition of each pupil. The advantages of this system of
 emulation and display are so prompt and obvious, it is such a time-saver, it is so energetic on
slow and on bad natures, and is of so easy application, needing no sage or poet, but any tutor or
schoolmaster in his first term can apply it--that it is not strange that this calomel of culture
should be a popular medicine. On the other hand, total abstinence from this drug, and the
adoption of simple discipline and the following of nature involves at once immense claims on the
time, the thoughts, on the Life of the teacher. It requires time, use, insight, event, all the great
lessons and assistances of God; and only to think of using it implies character and profoundness;
to enter on this course of discipline is to be good and great. It is precisely analogous to the
difference between the use of corporal punishment and the methods of love. It is so easy to
bestow on a bad boy a blow, overpower him, and get obedience without words, that in this world
of hurry and distraction, who can wait for the returns of reason and the conquest of self; in the
uncertainty too whether that will ever come? And yet the familiar observation of the universal
compensations might suggest the fear that so summary a stop of a bad humor was more
jeopardous than its continuance.

Now the correction of this quack practice is to import into Education the wisdom of life. Leave
this military hurry and adopt the pace of Nature. Her secret is patience. Do you know how the
naturalist learns all the secrets of the forest, of plants, of birds, of beasts, of reptiles, of fishes, of
the rivers and the sea? When he goes into the woods the birds fly before him and he finds none;
when he goes to the river bank, the fish and the reptile swim away and leave him alone. His
secret is patience; he sits down, and sits still; he is a statue; he is a log. These creatures have no
value for their time, and he must put as low a rate on his. By dint of obstinate sitting still, reptile,
fish, bird and beast, which all wish to return to their haunts, begin to return. He sits still; if they
approach, he remains passive as the stone he sits upon. They lose their fear. They have curiosity
too about him. By and by the curiosity masters the fear, and they come swimming, creeping and
dying towards him; and as he is still immovable, they not only resume their haunts and their
ordinary labors and manners, show themselves to him in their work-day trim, but also volunteer
some degree of advances towards fellowship and good understanding with a biped who behaves
so civilly and well. Can you not baffle the impatience and passion of the child by your
tranquility? Can you not wait for him, as Nature and Providence do? Can you not keep for his
mind and ways, for his secret, the same curiosity you give to the squirrel, snake, rabbit, and the
sheldrake and the deer? He has a secret; wonderful methods in him; he is--every child--a new
style of man; give him time and opportunity. Talk of Columbus and Newtonl. I tell you the child
just born in yonder hovel is the beginning of a revolution as great as theirs. But you must have
the believing and prophetic eye. Have the self-command you wish to inspire. Your teaching and
discipline must have the reserve and taciturnity of Nature. Teach them to hold their tongues by
holding your own. Say little; do not snarl; do not chide; but govern by the eye. See what they
need, and that the right thing is done.

I confess myself utterly at a loss in suggesting particular reforms in our ways of teaching. No
discretion that can be lodged with a school-committee, with the overseers or visitors of an
academy, of a college, can at all avail to reach these difficulties and perplexities, but they solve
themselves when we leave institutions and address individuals. The will, the male power,
organizes, imposes its own thought and wish on others, and makes that military eye which
controls boys as it controls men; admirable in its results, a fortune to him who has it, and only
dangerous when it leads the workman to overvalue and overuse it and precludes him from finer
means. Sympathy, the female force--which they must use who have not the first--deficient in
instant control and the breaking down of resistance, is more subtle and lasting and creative. I
advise teachers to cherish mother-wit. I assume that you will keep the grammar, reading, writing
and arithmetic in order; 'tis easy and of course you will. But smuggle in a little contraband wit,
fancy, imagination, thought. If you have a taste which you have suppressed because it is not
shared by those about you, tell them that. Set this law up, whatever becomes of the rules of the
school: they must not whisper, much less talk; but if one of the young people says a wise thing,
greet it, and let all the children clap their hands. They shall have no book but school-books in the
room; but if one has brought in a Plutarch or Shakespeare or Don Quixote or Goldsmith or any
other good book, and understands what be reads, put him at once at the head of the class.
Nobody shall be disorderly, or leave his desk without permission, but if a boy runs from his
bench, or a girl, because the fire falls, or to check some injury that a little dastard is indicting
behind his desk on some helpless sufferer, take away the medal from the head of the class and
give it on the instant to the brave rescuer. If a child happens to show that he knows any fact
about astronomy, or plants, or birds, or rocks, or history, that interests him and you, hush all the
classes and encourage him to ten it so that all may hear. Then you have made your sch
ool-room
like the world. Of course you will insist on modesty in the children, and respect to their teachers,
but if the boy stops you in your speech, cries out that you are wrong and sets you right, hug him!

To whatsoever upright mind, to whatsoever beating heart I speak, to you it is committed to
educate men. By simple living, by an illimitable soul, you inspire, you correct, you instruct, you
raise, you embellish all. By your own act you teach the behold how to do the practicable.
According to the depth from which you draw your life, such is the depth not only of your
strenuous effort, but of your manners and presence. The beautiful nature of the world has here
blended your happiness with your power. Work straight on in absolute duty, and you lend an arm
and an encouragement to all the youth of the universe. Consent yourself to be an organ of your
highest thought, and lo! suddenly you put all men in your debt, and are the fountain of an energy
that goes pulsing on with waves of benefit to the borders of society, to the circumference of
things