

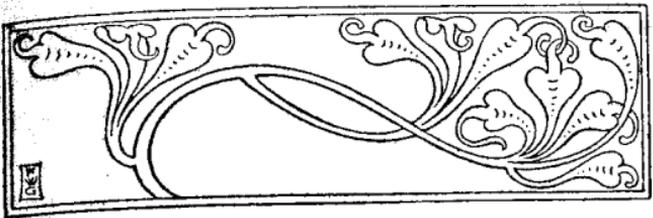


THE VALUE OF
MENTAL  
IMPRESSIONS
IN THE  
TREATMENT
OF DISEASE 

BY
WILLIAM
THOMAS
BELFIELD

CHICAGO
LITERARY CLUB
1896

Sept '36



THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS IN THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE



AN intelligent discussion of the value of mental impressions in the treatment of disease presupposes an agreed conception of mind and of disease. These I shall endeavor

briefly to define in terms of biology.

Many years ago I was taught by one who, though not a biologist, was the best of mothers, that the Creator endows each of his human creatures with a triple nature: soul, mind, and body. Although — thanks largely to the personality of that teacher — my belief in a soul has survived a long

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

residence in Chicago, yet I am constrained to admit that the soul, however distinct its image to the eye of faith, is not visible to the eye of physiology, and is hence beyond the pale of this discussion; and to further admit that those phenomena which, from habit and convenience, we call the mind, are manifestations of force inherent in living matter, and are different in no wise, except degree, from the phenomena displayed by the lowliest creatures that have received the divine afflatus — life.

For to the biologist a man is not an individual, an entity which begins in the cradle and ends in the grave; he is rather an instrument for the reception and transmission of force; a link in the endless chain of life; an atom in an Atlantic cable, vitalized for an instant by a force received from his predecessors, and lapsing into repose as that force passes on to his successors. The unit of life is not the man, but the race; the individual is merely an atom of the species; the first law of nature is

the preservation of race, not of self. The woman who willingly dies that her child may live, the man who cheerfully challenges prison-bars and bullets to gratify his passion for a woman, are familiar examples of the fact that the individual is subordinate to the species; that the chief instinct of life is reproduction, not nutrition.

From this view-point, and from no other, can we understand the relations of the mind to the bodily functions, in health as well as in disease. Those functions of the body which are necessary to reproduction, and incidentally to the individual, such as digestion and circulation, are the property of the species, temporarily entrusted to the individual — that is, provided with arms, legs, a reasoning faculty, and other conveniences for their maintenance. These essential functions are endowed with an intelligence of their own, independent of the conscious, individual mind; that is, from the standpoint of this conscious mind, they are automatic. This

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

automatic intelligence — which is plainly the inherited, crystallized experience of countless ancestors in the preservation of the race — we call instinct when exhibited by other animals, emotion when displayed by ourselves.

The egoistic mind of man, his conscious memory and his reason, whereby his instinctive mind establishes communication with the outside world, is biologically merely the servant of this instinct; it is the dog leading the blind man, but only a dog after all.

My main proposition in the biological definition of mind is, therefore, that the instincts are the essential mind, the transmitted intelligence of the race, and that they directly control the vital organs; while the conscious intellect is the subservient mind, which has no direct communication with the essential organs.

From this proposition three corollaries may be properly deduced:

1. The instincts directly, the reason only indirectly, influence the vital bodily func-

IN THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE

tions; hence mental impressions which either cause or cure disease must appeal to the emotions, not to the reason.

2. The instincts as well as the essential bodily structures attain higher development in woman than in man, because in all animals the female is the principal, the male only the subordinate, receptacle for the vitality of the race.

3. Mental impressions are, therefore, notably valuable in the treatment of disease due to emotional disturbance; and such disease is most frequently exhibited by women during the period of emotional activity — that is, the child-bearing age.

That the emotions are directly, the reason only indirectly, associated with the vital bodily functions needs no demonstration, because illustrations are familiar to all. Thus, no man can at will strengthen or weaken his heart-beat, accelerate or retard his pulse, blanch or redden his cheek, arrest his digestion, evacuate his stomach, or increase the secretion of his sweat-glands; yet when dominated by the in-

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

instincts fear, anger, grief, etc., he regularly does one or other of these things, even against the dictates of reason. This absolute control of the instinctive, as opposed to the rational, mind over vital organs is nicely shown at the first surgical clinic of a medical college term, when one or more freshman spectators on the benches become faint or nauseated so soon as the teacher of surgery spills blood in the arena. That a mental influence which so completely dominates vital functions can, by excessive or prolonged activity, derange those functions, is both plausible and demonstrable; and it is equally true that an arrest of such emotional activity may be followed by a restoration of normal function.

That the instincts attain in woman a higher development than in man is common knowledge; but that her physical structure likewise exhibits a demonstrably higher type is less generally known. It is a fact, however, some of the proofs of which I shall presently mention; and this fact, by the way, attests the impossibility of

discussion, from the standpoint of biology, as to the relative mental status of the sexes. The vaunted excellence of man's mind over woman's—of reason over instinct—is the superiority of the dog to his blind master; and the more loudly he barks of his superior vision, the more widely he proclaims himself just dog, incapable of perceiving what he cannot see.

The student of biology who might never have met nor dissected a woman would predict her better mental and physical equipment from the simple fact that she, like all other female animals, is the conservator and type of her race. Even woman's loftiest instincts—of parental love, of chastity, of self-sacrifice, of affection, of piety—are plainly the mental complements of her physical functions, her inheritance from long lines of female animals. For in the earlier types of animal the male is merely an appendage of the female, always inferior, and sometimes insignificant, though his degradation is his misfortune rather than his fault. Let me explain.

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

In the simplest animals reproduction is asexual, a fragment of the parent being simply detached as a new being; a little higher in the scale, certain portions of the parent animal are set apart as germ-cells, which are detached as offspring; still higher come the hermaphrodite animals, like the tape-worm, each of which produces in its own body two sets of germ-cells, which we may call male and female, and which fertilize each other within the parent body; a little later we find the bisexual animals, like the earth-worm, leech, and oyster, each of which possesses perfect male and female organs, and which reproduce by the reciprocal impregnation of two individuals; and finally appears the differentiation of sex in the higher unisexual animals, including man — each individual possessing only male or female organs in full development, although, so strong is the habit of ages, that even in these each male animal possesses the female organs in a rudimentary state, and each female the undeveloped male organs.

Among the earliest unisexual animals, the female far exceeds the male in size, strength, and capacity; indeed, the male is in some species actually a parasite on the body of the female, deriving his sustenance from her because incapable of making his own living. Further along, he is sufficiently developed to maintain an independent existence, which is, however, brief and inglorious as compared with that of his mate; indeed, among some of the smaller animals the thrifty female, after she has been fertilized by the male, devours her conjugal partner—her only way of persuading him to contribute to the support of his family. Even among the highly organized bees, you know, the males—drones—are much inferior in size and development to the female queen; and after enjoying the masculine prerogative of flirting with the handsome queen, they are ignominiously stung to death by her slaves, the workers. She evidently considers it more economical to make some new cheap males the next spring

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

than to board the old ones through the winter.

If, therefore, the new woman shall realize the current newspaper jests, if a few years hence the gatherings in this room shall be composed of our wives while we croon to the babies at home, we shall be mournfully consoled by the knowledge that we are not the first martyrs at the shrine of masculinity.

However, as the feminine mind was developed through the ages, it evolved a better plan for utilizing the male than merely eating him — namely, to put him to work ; and with the assistance in bread-winning that he became capable of affording her, she was enabled to devote more of her energies to her reproductive function, and thus produce a better grade of offspring. Upon the male animal gradually fell the duties of bread-winner and protector, while the female was busy with her young ; hence among the higher animals he has developed the larger frame, the stronger muscles, the better weapons for attack and

defense; and, as a result, in at least one species the male has acquired the habit of considering himself quite the superior of the female. Yet, though he has closely approximated the type; even in the human species the female remains unmistakably the incarnation of the race, the biological type of mental and physical development.

The mental superiority of woman needs no exposition to an audience of married men. Her physical superiority is plainly demonstrable in two most essential particulars: first, her greater vitality, and second, her more uniform attainment of the highest structural type.

Her greater vitality is shown by many facts known to physiologists. I shall not emphasize her greater average longevity, although she alone suffers the dreadful mortality directly and indirectly attendant upon reproduction; nor shall I exploit the common experience of surgeons that women survive severe surgical operations and injuries more often than do men; for both of these are complex propositions requiring

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

lengthy elucidation. But I do call your attention to the fact that although 105 boys are born for every 100 girls, and although during the first four years of life both sexes experience identical conditions of existence, yet at the end of this period the surviving girls are just as numerous as the surviving boys: a well-attested fact which permits only one explanation — the greater inherent vitality of the female as such.

The more general attainment by woman than by man of the highest anatomical structure is also proven by several observations, of which I shall mention only one — namely, the distribution of color-blindness. Now the perception of colors is the latest and the highest acquisition of that complex nerve structure, the retina — a function with which many of us are not endowed. The examination of many thousands of individuals shows that out of 400 males, sixteen are color-blind; of 400 females, only one. In other words, men fail just sixteen times oftener than do women to attain the complete development of the retina.

Now, if the perception of colors could be acquired by the individual, through the continuous inspection of dress patterns and ribbons, the argument would be void ; but since color-perception is a congenital endowment due to anatomical structure, which can no more be acquired than can a sixth finger or a second nose, it follows that the average development of the retina is in women distinctly nearer perfection than in men.

A necessary deduction from this fact is also attested by direct observation—namely, that while color-blindness is a hereditary defect, it is transmitted almost exclusively to the male descendants, their sisters attaining perfect development. Thus a color-blind man may have sons several of whom are color-blind, and daughters all of whom have perfect color perception ; these daughters again, marrying men of normal retinal development, give birth to sons some of whom will inherit the grandfather's defect. Thus the imperfect development of the grandfather, though

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

plainly impressed upon, because transmitted by, his daughters, is in their persons supplemented by the superior capacity inherent in the female; they follow the type, and not the defective specimen who called them into existence.

To summarize: woman is demonstrably favored beyond man in her physical equipment; hence we must admit that, from the standpoint of racial needs and requisites, her mind, in so far as it differs from man's, is a higher type than his, even though she will persist in alighting from a moving car with her face to the rear. But her wisdom is largely inherited, not acquired; and the feminine ancestors from whom she inherits had no experience with street-cars.

Disease, so far as we know its source, may be classified in two categories: (1) *organic* disease, due to parasites, poisons, etc., and accompanied by appreciable change in the structure of different organs; and (2) *functional* disease, due to emotional disturbance, and not accompanied by any (as yet) appreciable change of structure.

IN THE TREATMENT OF DISEASE

I may now weave the scattered threads of this rambling discourse into our theme, as follows: mental influences are valuable in the treatment of disease in so far as they secure a proper balance of the patient's emotions, and through these normal bodily functions. Mental influences have, therefore, a theoretical increment of value even in organic disease, since by calming the fear of death or other strong emotion, they may improve digestion, circulation, etc., and thus enable the body to battle more vigorously with the invading microbe of pneumonia, diphtheria, or other parasitic disease. That the aid afforded through the patient's mind against such tangible foes is, however, trivial, is illustrated by the familiar observation that the consumptive's confidence in his ultimate recovery often increases as he approaches the grave. The physician whose cheery, confident presence rivals the sunshine in the sick chamber, secures the patient's affection, but not his recovery, thereby. Yet the popular belief that in cholera epidemics dread of the disease increases the

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

liability to it, is supported by the following facts : The cholera microbe, which produces its poison only in the intestines, must reach this canal by way of the mouth and stomach, with the food or drink. Now the secretion of the normal stomach can destroy the cholera bacilli, and thus protect the individual from harm by them ; but the stomach of a man laboring under intense emotion, such as fear of cholera, does not usually produce a normal secretion, and may thus fail to destroy the microbes. Hence we may on *a priori* grounds believe, though it has never been proven, that the fear of cholera predisposes to the disease.

Mental influences are of demonstrable value, however, in the treatment not of organic, but of functional — that is, emotional — disease. *This* is the field in which mental suggestion — whether called by its proper title or misnamed Christian science, faith cure, animal magnetism, Divine healing, hypnotism, or the bone of a saint — does unquestionably cure an occasional

patient whom physicians, drugs, and reason have failed to relieve.

The subjects of these diseases and cures are emotional ; they are, therefore, oftener women in the child-bearing age than men ; and are far more frequently women whose conjugal and maternal instincts are ungratified than the mothers of families. Physicians include such emotional states under the general term *hysteria*. Now this word does not mean, as the average layman thinks, merely an alternation of senseless laughter and tears ; nor does it imply, as the average physician thinks, conscious deceit on the part of the hysterical patient. Hysteria means any functional derangement due to emotion, and displays affections of all parts of the body, such as dyspepsia, paralysis, rigidity of joints, spinal curvature, the trance, even blindness ; and these derangements may be just as honest and real, just as far beyond the control of the conscious mind, as are the nausea, faintness, even vomiting, induced in many men by a ghastly sight or a disgusting odor. Any

influence which will restore the emotional balance of such a patient will thereby rapidly cure a hysterical disease, even blindness. Physicians, busied with the obvious ravages of organic disease, but too often ignore the subtle influence of the emotions; and their negligence is the opportunity of the charlatan. Though it has been my fortune to see a woman who had suffered the agonies of strangulated hernia and peritonitis for five days under faith-cure treatment snatched from death by the surgeon's knife, and to see a horrible ulcer which for six weeks had been eating away the nose of a young matron under Christian-science treatment, promptly arrested and healed by remedies for syphilis; yet such ignorant—yes, criminal—failures to influence curable organic disease do not in the least argue against the power of mental suggestion over functional disease. That it is the one remedy for disease of emotional origin is exemplified in the following personal observation.

Some years ago an unmarried lady about

thirty years of age was afflicted with an apparently fatal disease; at the time this observation began she had been bedridden for a year; had become emaciated and too weak even to feed herself; one leg was partly paralyzed; for months her eyes had been unable to endure the faintest ray of light. Her room had been kept absolutely dark, and to this dungeon had been admitted only her mother, her nurse, and her physicians, whose skilful ministrations had, however, failed to check her gradual decline. The most exhaustive examination failing to reveal any organic disease, an emotional cause for her bodily ailment was assumed, although inquiry in her family disclosed no trace of a faithless lover, cruel parent, nor other orthodox agency in cardiac fracture. The following plan of treatment was instituted: she was told that her ailment was due to sewer-gas, and that her removal to a sanitary dwelling would at once start her on the road to recovery. I may say, incidentally, that the popular faith in sewer-gas, malaria, and more recently the

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

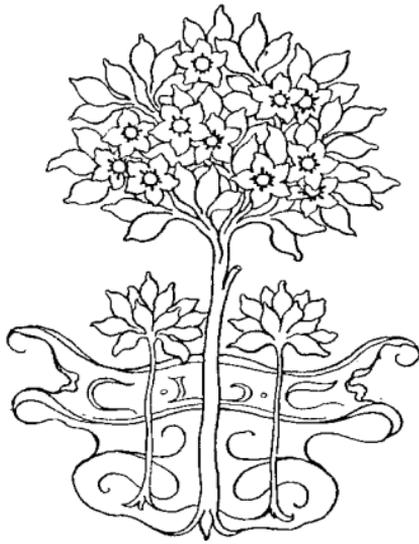
grippe, as the explanation of all obscure ailments, smooths down many rough places in the path of the physician. Accordingly on the appointed day her eyes were thickly bandaged, she was lifted into a closely curtained stretcher, carried carefully to a covered wagon, driven a half mile to a railway, where a special train, including a tightly curtained Pullman sleeper, awaited her; transported in this car to an adjoining suburb, driven in another wagon to her new home, and finally deposited, almost dead from fright and fatigue, in her carefully darkened chamber. The new residence possessed, besides its freedom from sewer-gas, two attractive features: from its windows were visible on the one side the buildings of the White City, even then beginning to unfold the glories which later charmed the world; and on the other side were often displayed, on the person of a young lady neighbor, some of the "swellest" gowns in town. The charms of these rival expositions were casually but continually dinned into the ears of the patient,

because high in the category of feminine instincts stand curiosity, envy, and love of display. Three weeks after her removal, the lady was sitting at her window, admiring the mighty buildings and criticizing the dry goods; and some weeks later she was promenading the Fair-grounds and leading the rush line at Field's bargain-counter.

Now, what ailed this woman, and what cured her? Her disease was plainly a derangement of her physical functions caused by an ungratified instinct, although which of her emotions was the active agent can be even now only conjectured; indeed, she may have been herself unconscious of its identity. Her recovery would have been ascribed to the drugs administered, to Christian science, Divine healing, holy relics, or animal magnetism, had her physician so proclaimed. It was actually a successful struggle against her ungratified, unidentified instinct by her other emotions,—faith, curiosity, and love of approbation,—which were aroused to the unconscious strife by the suggestions of her physician; and she

THE VALUE OF MENTAL IMPRESSIONS

is to-day a healthy and happy example of the value of mental impressions in the treatment of *emotional* disease.



THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE
CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND WAS
READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON THE
EVENING OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH
DAY OF FEBRUARY MDCCCXCVI
THIS EDITION CONSISTS OF ONE
HUNDRED AND SEVENTY COPIES
PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR MEMBERS
OF THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB BY
THEO. L. DE VINNE & CO. NEW YORK



DECEMBER, 1896