

## Chapter 6

From the life of such a man much instruction may be gathered by all, but especially by the young. For the benefit of this latter class, we shall notice some of the more prominent traits of his character, hoping to impress upon the youthful mind the importance of those virtues which he practiced--of those principles of action which he adopted, of those great and noble objects which he pursued, and of those unremitting exertions which, through a long life, he made to promote the welfare of mankind, and which in combination rendered him a blessing to the world and an ornament to human nature.

The endowments of his mind were originally good, but perhaps not superior to those of many others who pass through life in comparative obscurity and uselessness. The great secret of his progress and of his attainment, like those of other distinguished men, was *judicious* and *unremitting application*. He began early, and he labored indefatigably.

We will not say that every young man can accomplish as much as he did or reach by any means the same distinguished eminence. But who shall prescribe a limit to the progress of anyone who industriously applies himself in any of the professions of life? God has never said to the immortal mind, "Thus far shalt thou come, but no farther." And the example of such application, and the effects of that application as are witnessed in such a man as President Dwight, instead of discouraging should operate as a powerful motive to exertion in any business of life which is undertaken. No one can tell, until he has made the effort, what he can accomplish; but from what others have done, he has reason to anticipate great and growing success.

If in any one particular President Dwight excelled other men, it was in the better discipline of his mind. His stores of thought were arranged in an exact method. Everything was in its place, and every faculty was ready at his call. Never did we know a man more at his ease, so far as his investigations had been carried on any particular subject, nor was it possible at any time to surprise him. He knew precisely the department in which was lodged his knowledge on a particular subject. He could resort to it at any moment, and all within it was arranged and at hand. Hence he excelled most men in being able suddenly to form a plan; and when that was formed, all the vigor of his mind could be applied in the execution. Hence he was often brilliant and powerful beyond others who were as learned as he, but whose thoughts were not as easily arranged.

The advantage of a well disciplined mind is inestimable; and to the attainment of discipline, the efforts of every young man should be long and powerfully directed. The attainment may be difficult, but is of paramount importance if one would reach the highest distinction. And the secret of such attainment lies in *reflection* rather than in the hours devoted to *reading*. For ourselves, we have long believed that the partial loss of the use of his eyes was not a calamity to President Dwight, considered in relation to his literary character or to his usefulness in the world.

Had he retained the use of his eyes, he would doubtless have read more, but he would have reflected less. He might have explored a greater extent of the field of science, but his knowledge would have been less accurate and minute. To himself, his loss must have been felt to be a deprivation; and, in view of the intense pain he often suffered, it was doubtless an abridgment of his happiness. But he early saw the importance of an increased attention to what he heard read. He fastened upon principles and upon facts with a stronger grasp; and in his subsequent meditations, [he] revolved these principles and these facts in his mind until they were emphatically his own. A power of retention was thus acquired which was unusual, and rarely did anything which he deemed important to be treasured up escape him; and so well did he know in what part of his mind it was stored, that he could summon it in a moment.

For many years President Dwight employed an amanuensis, being unable to use his eyes to write more than a few minutes at a time. By this means a habit of regular connected thought was acquired and a fullness and variety of language attained, which probably would never have been his good fortune had he been able to hold the pen himself. The writer of these pages has entered his [Dwight's] study when he was dictating to his amanuensis and at the same time was shaving himself, both of which were continued while he entered into a free and easy conversation [with me]; and in the meantime [he] was called to an adjoining apartment to give directions about some secular concern. On going out he gave a part of a sentence to his amanuensis, and on [re]entering the room gave him the remainder, and then continued the conversation [with me] at the same time proceeding to finish the begun operation of shaving. Such was the discipline of President Dwight's mind, and such the process by which that discipline was attained.

To the young man just entering upon a literary career, the above hints may be employed to a useful purpose. He may learn the importance of reading less and reflecting more; of reducing his thoughts to method, and of becoming so familiar with them as to command them at pleasure. Were this course more universally pursued, our literary men would become far more accomplished in those branches to which they attend.

It is not uncommon that men distinguished for their talents and acquirements carry the appearance of pride and distance. At least they find it difficult to become interested in the concerns of the passing day. Hence, although their minds are enriched with the most valuable knowledge and their writings abound with the most interesting facts, their conversation is cold and spiritless. They are poorly qualified to enliven the social circle, and by the young especially their society is rather shunned than coveted.

To such an unsocial state of mind there appears to be a strong tendency in those devoted to mere literary pursuits. It is not, however, a necessary unsociableness, and therefore every young man entering upon a literary career should avoid this state by every means in his power. He should avoid it because, besides diminishing his own personal happiness, it must necessarily much abridge his usefulness. We have known not a few who by their

fund of knowledge might have eminently contributed to the pleasure and benefit of an extended circle of friends and acquaintance, had they not fallen into this abstract and philosophical state of mind; the consequence of which has been that in respect to one important part of man's duty--the *social*--they have been nearly as though they had no existence.

Quite the reverse of all this was true in respect to President Dwight. Few men, indeed, were ever more dignified; perhaps we should say *so* dignified. Yet few at the same time were ever more affable and polite. In the family and social circle he was preeminently easy and cheerful. On this account he was greatly beloved by friends, and we scarcely remember one whose society was more sought by the young. In respect to the latter, even at a late period of his life he entered with deep interest--with almost the interest of a father--into their plans, their views, their wishes, their feelings. And as it were by a kind of intuition, he seemed to know how to adapt his remarks to them so as to instruct and at the same time to please.

Seldom did he fail, if the occasion justified, to arouse the youthful circle gathered around him to the highest pitch of animation by some amusing story, some vivid description, some sally of humor; and at the same time he never for a single moment lost his hold of their admiration and respect. Such an ascendancy over youthful minds is, indeed, rare. Had his power in this respect been uncontrolled by moral and religious principle, it would have endangered all who had chanced to come within its influence. But consecrated as it was to high and virtuous ends, fortunate were those who enjoyed his instruction and counsel.

In respect to the employment of the above talent, President Dwight was a pattern to others. Not that everyone possesses that talent in an equal degree; but in general, man is a social being, and his social character is susceptible of improvement as well as the faculties of his mind. And when improved, as it may be, it may render him much more useful than he otherwise would be. To the young, this subject is invested with no small importance.

It is not consistent with our limits to dwell minutely on the variety and amount of his labors under the sun. But this may be said in truth of him, that our country has produced but few who in the same period of time have brought so much--and brought it so well--to pass. Everything done by him had the appearance of completion. There was a finish about it that indicated that the hand of a master had been upon it. The habit of doing things in this manner was doubtless commenced at an early period and enabled him to accomplish far more than would otherwise have been in his power.

This was an important trait in his character; and to this love of seeing things done well--of seeing them achieved in order and accomplished in time--the world is indebted to a vast amount of labor which would otherwise have been left undone.

It cannot be doubted that President Dwight found pleasure, and even a high reward, in

pursuing the various objects of his attention so systematically and so thoroughly. Yet we must believe that he was actuated by a still higher principle. He pursued the business of life thus from a sense of duty. He could accomplish more, and he could accomplish it better. And as he practiced, so also he inculcated upon others. This subject was often presented with great power to the young men who came under his instruction, and very happily as he has expressed himself in his advice to the farmers of the land:

Let order o'er your time preside  
And *method* all your business guide.  
One thing at once, be still begun,  
Contrived, resolved, pursued and done;  
Ne'er till tomorrow's light, delay  
What might as well be done today.

The languishing state of the college at the time of his accession to the presidency has already been noticed. To resuscitate it, to enlarge the sphere of its operations and to sustain it in full vigor, was of itself labor sufficient even for an uncommon mind. In this work he had indeed the assistance of others; but without detracting from their merit in a cause so noble, upon President Dwight devolved not only the task of planning but much of the labor of executing. But besides this labor, it should be recorded that he officiated as professor of theology, preaching twice every sabbath during nearly the whole term of his presidency.

Besides this he delivered and published numerous occasional discourses; contributed to several religious periodical publications; revised the version of the psalms by Dr. Watts; assisted in the formation and maintenance of various literary, charitable, and pious institutions; traveled for the purposes of relaxation and observation more than 20,000 miles; and left in a complete state of preparation for the press eleven large octavo volumes, which have since been published, the aggregate of whose pages amounts to more than six thousand. And it is understood that manuscripts are still in possession of the family, which would increase considerably the preceding statement. All this was the labor of the short term of twenty-two years, the period of his presidency.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Were it the object of the writer to illustrate the *literary* merits of President Dwight, it is obvious that he would not content himself to speak in the above brief and general manner of the productions of his pen. These were greatly diversified, and in them he displayed an extended acquaintance with theology and metaphysics, proved himself an accurate observer of the works of nature, and intimately conversant with men and the great principles by which their conduct is governed. "As a poet," a writer remarks, "Dr. Dwight was distinguished for sublimity of thought, brilliancy of imagination, and purity of sentiment. His descriptions are rich and strong, his versification sweet and harmonious." In his *Conquest of Canaan*, written before he was twenty-four years of age, will be found not a few specimens of high poetical talent; and in the other efforts of his pen in this department of literature, as well as in every other in which he was engaged, it is apparent that the standard at which he aimed was one of uncommon excellence. Few, it is believed, exercised a higher, or wider, or happier influence in the department of letters than President Dwight, or contributed more to elevate the views of his countrymen on the subject of literature in general.

Allowing the rapidity of his genius, it is nevertheless obvious that no ordinary diligence was absolutely essential to the completion of such an amount of labor. In constant and useful employment, he felt himself in the way of duty. He felt also that he was contributing to his own personal comfort. He was often heard to say in substance that one of the most benevolent commands given by God to man was that he should be "diligent in business." Without employment man sinks to the insignificance of the sloth, or to the brutality of the sot. One of the maxims of his life was the sentiment so well expressed by Rousseau: *Vivre n'est pas respirer, c'est agir* -- "Life does not consist merely in breathing, but in *action*."

We ought to apologize, perhaps, to our readers for extending these remarks to such a length, especially after an intimation that it was our intention to be brief. But the importance of the subject will, we trust, form our justification. Such examples of diligence can scarcely fail to exercise a beneficial influence, especially upon the young man. Surely, if he wishes to pattern after the wise and good, if he wishes to prove eminently useful in the world, if he would lay the foundation of an enduring and honorable fame, if he would be found in the end of all things to have been a faithful steward in respect to the talents entrusted to him here on earth, [then] let him follow closely examples like that presented in the life of President Dwight.

Had others who possessed similar talents but who have prostituted them to objects of a sordid character--to the purposes of avarice or ambition, to the enjoyment of the pelf of this world, or to the pleasure of wearing a star, a coronet, or a crown--had they used their talents as he did, by how much would the amount of guilt set down to the account of this world have been diminished, how much greater the number who would finally have escaped the pollutions of a sinful state.

Excited then by such a noble example, let the young enter upon the great duties of life adopting as one of their mottoes (and adopting it not as does the epicure of this world but as one who is actuated by nobler principles): *Dum vivimus, vivamus* -- "*While we live, let us live.*" Or as the sentiment has been well drawn out by a Christian divine and poet:

"Live while you live," the epicure would say,  
"And seize the pleasures of the present day."  
"Live while you live," the sacred preacher cries,  
"And give to God each moment as it flies."  
Lord, in my views let both united be,  
I live in *pleasure*, when I live to *Thee*.