

Feed the Whole Man

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Marshfield Hills, MA

August 30, 1903

Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-26.

Text: Proverbs 26:20, "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out;..."

I suppose that we all have days when it seems to us that the fire is almost extinguished. Perhaps we have over-exerted ourselves, and there comes a reaction. We feel listless, apathetic and almost lifeless. The day dawns brightly about us, we see people going to their various interests, in their accustomed energetic way but still we hang back, and do nothing. For the time being our interest is last, and we are willing to stand aside and let the endless procession pass by. We heed not the calls, which yesterday would have aroused us to our most intense activity. The mere physical movements are made only by great effort, and as for our brain—Why! it is simply a blank. Thinking is almost intolerable, not to say impossible. Books, our friends in almost every word, desert us here, and we are content to let the world move past without making any effort to keep pace with it.

On such days we are like the machine, which has been disconnected from the great shafting that transmits the power for the whole factory. All about the machine is activity, bustle, and work. Wheels are turning, the process of manufacture is going on. The raw material is being transformed into the finished product. But still the one machine stands idle.

Such days, I think, appear in the lives of each one of us. If we can recall one of them, if we can make a mental picture of how we feel on such a day, we will then be able to understand the condition into which we allow ourselves to drift for a period much longer than a day, or a week. Sometimes we see a whole life thus passed. Day after day, year after year, a human being leads his listless aimless life, until old age comes upon him, and he can hardly point to one worthy thing well done.

Such apathetic periods are seen not only in individuals, but also in nations. Perhaps it will help us to realize the nature of these strange lapses from activity, and their danger to us if we stop to recall one or two such periods in the familiar history of our own country, and the early history of the people to whom we trace our ancestry.

The Middle Ages, commonly called the "Dark Ages," stand as a most striking example of such a period of apathy in the history of European civilization. During all the period of the Middle Ages men and women lived amidst the very conditions which in later years gave enthusiasm to the scholarship of the Renaissance, and excited the great Protestant Reformation. Old monastic libraries filled with the most interesting manuscripts were open to the public, but there were no scholars to search them out, and give to people literary gems of the past. On all sides were evidences of earlier civilization, but they excited no interest. Monuments with interesting historical inscriptions, half-buried in the earth were not attractive enough to make men unearth them. Paetrarch<sup>1</sup> is said to have been the first man to climb a hill for the purpose of getting a view of the landscape. It was a period of listlessness and stupor.

In our own country of activity and energy we have not been entirely free from periods of listlessness and indifference. We are still in the midst of a period of corruption and mal-administration in our municipal government. In city after city from one end of the country to the other, we read of corruption and jobbery. The periodic attempts at reform, especially the wave of reform in municipal governments, which is now spreading over the country are but indications of our awakening from the apathy in which rottenness becomes possible.

Many a man would stoutly maintain that we are passing into a period of great religious apathy, that the great mass of the people are spiritually and religiously {???) and deadened. They would assert that interest in things religious have become so dull and torpid that the very existence of the church is threatened.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis may refer to the Italian Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) who is sometimes referred to as the "Father of Humanism."

Individually we are in danger of losing ourselves in such periods of semi-sleep, and there is danger in it. Many a man falls into one never to awaken, or to awaken only when it is too late to make amends. The danger of these periods of apathy becomes apparent to us when we see from a distance the dangers and disastrous events in the history of nations during hours and years of relaxation. Proud and noble, Rome never awakened from her age of moral and political corruption. It was too late to mend when Rome discovered that those, in whose hands her safety had been entrusted, were willing to sell their ancient city for a sum of gold. It was too late to avert the Protestant Reformation, when the Catholic Church awoke from her long centuries of bold immorality and commercialism.

Rome gained control of the world, while Greece was lost in the luxuries of her conquests. While Rome, in her time enjoyed the fruits of her victories, the new Gauls from the North stepped into power and became wasters of the world.

While our own great statesmen and men of honor and integrity rested after the intense struggle of the Civil War, men of low aims and selfish motives gained control of local governments, and as we have seen only now are we beginning to arouse ourselves to the great need of honesty and purity in politics.

Likewise is this true in our own lives. Man after man has lost himself in a period of self-indulgence and inactivity. He has awakened to find that his opportunity is gone. Some live active man has stepped in front of him while he has been asleep. The power and influence which he once wielded have passed into other hands. Rip Van Winkle is not the only man who has awakened from a 20-years sleep to find the world changed. It is the natural and inevitable result of failure to feed the fire. "Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out" holds true in the history of nations and in the lives of individuals. "Eternal vigilance is the price of success" says the same thing. It suggests to us our natural and ever-threatening danger.

"Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out." How true that holds in our individual lives! You and I, who are striving to realize a higher plane of life, who are striving after the goal of noble manhood and womanhood know how unerringly this law works, and how persistent must be

our efforts if we are to escape the dull sluggish life of stagnation.

And it is here that we find the cue to our way of escape. If the fire is extinguished because of a lack of wood, it is perfectly evident that our only duty is to supply the fuel.

Think for a moment of this question of the supply of fuel in the case of our bodies. The fire and energy of the body is soon extinguished, unless we keep a generous supply on hand. Disease follows quickly in the wake of physical laxness. Many a college athlete falls victim to some dread disease simply because he fails to keep up the supply of fuel to which his body had become accustomed in college days when his life demanded great physical alertness. Many a strong young man and woman fade away into lives of semi-indolence and languor simply because they follow the lines of least resistance and fail to supply the body with the proper fuel of exercise and nourishment. If we would keep our bodies in proper trim for the strong race of life, we must remember that the fire needs fuel.

Everyone knows how quickly the fire of mental activity will become extinguished, unless a constant supply of fuel is added for the free use of the brain. Gradually the field of thought narrows down to the most commonplace things, and only one or two ideas can be counted upon as our stock of mental equipment. A morbid brain of one idea is the logical outcome of such ill-treatment. Even in this age of specialization, there is little room for "the man of one idea."

"A man behind the times" is another product of poorly supplied brain fuel. How common he is, and what a cold shoulder he gets in this life. Does the market wait for the farmer who does not keep abreast of the times, and have a sharp eye out for every suggestion that will enable him to grow better crops? It does not take great power of observation to see by the general appearance of a farm whether or not the farmer is behind the times. Very quickly, too, does a professional man find that the world understands with what kind of fuel his brain is being supplied. Very quickly a physician, a teacher, a preacher, knows that there is no place in the world for his dwarfed underfed brain, which is trying to do the labor of a fully developed one. He soon becomes "a man behind the times,"

and is forced to take his seat among the mental invalids. As for a businessman, who stunts his brain thus—why! He simply is not a businessman, nor can he ever become one. Yes! We know full well that we must supply fuel for the mind else the fire will become extinguished.

The problem immediately arises as to how we may keep up this supply of mental fuel. Of course that depends upon individual tastes, but there are two suggestions that all of us may follow. The first one is to keep our eyes and ears open. Every moment of our lives, so many wonderful things are happening that it overawes one to think of it. The growth of a plant involves all the marvels of life. A bit of stone will reveal ages of history. Animal life in all its forms is intensely interesting, and will supply the brain with thought for a lifetime. Whatever work one does, however {??} it may be, {??} become the source of high mental activity. Many of our greatest inventions are the product of an active mind observing the processes of most mechanical labor. Then we are constantly surrounded by that ever fresh and interesting human nature. Every life is worthy of study and will yield abundant mental fuel if we but take the trouble to collect it. So the first suggestion is for us to keep our eyes and ears open.

Then in the second place it is always a good thing to compare our own ideas with those of other people. Talking is of course the natural and common way. We are all bound to talk. It is good for us, but it has its limitations, and we seek a wider field of comparison in books. There are many dangers involved here, but if we use books as a means of sifting out and correlating our own ideas into a system, we shall not abuse them greatly. To know what other men have thought, and why they have thought so is a very necessary part of the process of supplying our mental fuel. So our second suggestion is to read. Read carefully and thoughtfully, but remember that fuel with the burning qualities of white oak cannot be found in a growth of swampy underbrush.

After all if life is rational and things are what they seem, the development of the body and mind are only stepping stones to the development of the soul. The soul is the great eternal reality, and it is to the supply of fuel for keeping the fire of the soul burning brightly that we must devote ourselves most zealously. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" So

I say, we must all be spiritually minded. I do not mean that we must lose ourselves in religious sentimentalism, but we must learn to look at life in all its relations and comprehend the greatness of the depth of it.

Prayer is the natural and proper way of feeding the soul, and we have yet to learn the true manliness and nobility of the man who in deepest earnest spends a few moments of every day in prayer. Formerly the habit of family prayers was very common here among our New England families. Each morning before the day's work began, many families used to gather about the family fireside to listen to the reading of a short passage from the Bible, and then in simplicity, which was characteristic of early New England days, these families joined in a few moments of simply prayer. Thus did our fathers feed their spiritual life. I can remember the atmosphere of the morning prayer to which I listened in childhood in the dining room at my grandfather's farm. I wish that this custom were more common nowadays. What more noble and manly way for a family to begin a day's work? Simply to take our common everyday problems up into the presence of the ideals by which we are trying to live, simply to go to the Supreme Wisdom for guidance and instruction. If we have a great duty to perform, how can we get greater courage and inspiration to perform it nobly and manfully than to read of some great noble soul like Jesus or Paul, and then in a few moments of prayer to take our duty, and the story we have read into the presence of God the source of all our power and strength? And then to seek anew the ideals by which we live. Can a man who is carrying daily burdens do a fairer thing than to transfer his thoughts for a few moments from his own burdens to the greater and heavier burdens which others are carrying? Can a man light-hearted and happy in the moment of success do a more noble thing than to spend a few moments in recalling the lives which have been lived in hardship, and under the shadow of apparent defeat, and to remember that his own success but places a greater responsibility on him.

I am not one who believes that all good is in the past, and all evil in the present. I do not look to the past for the "Golden Age." But in this simple custom of beginning the day with family prayers, I am certain that our fathers had a custom which we ought to follow. It tends to simplicity, and simplicity is a luxury in these days of complexity. One can see the courage, inspiration and devotion which one may receive by a simple prayer, if he

but reads that beautiful prayer of Robert Louis Stevenson,  
uttered the night before his death in far away Samoa.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The sermon manuscript ends here. Davis may be referring to the requiem Stevenson wrote for his tomb:

Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live, and gladly died,  
And I lay me down with a will.  
This be the verse you gave for me;  
Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill.

Davis later devoted an entire sermon to Robert Louis Stevenson, "Robert Louis Stevenson, The Man of an Understanding Heart," preached at the Unity Church in Pittsfield, MA, December 12, 1909.