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The power of self-suggesti...

Samuel McComb

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To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine

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**THE POWER
OF SELF-SUGGESTION**

THE POWER OF SELF-SUGGESTION

BY

REV. SAMUEL McCOMB, D.D.

Associate Director of the
Emmanuel Movement



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TO
WILLIAM GRAHAM
Friend, Teacher, and Critic

A FOREWORD

THE substance of this little book has been given in the form of a lecture. It is now offered to a wider audience in the hope that it may prove useful in helping some to know the power of a larger life.

BOSTON, April, 1909.

**THE POWER OF SELF-
SUGGESTION**

“How profound are the sufferings of those unhappy persons who allow their imaginations to become fixed upon some disease which threatens them or from which they even imagine they already suffer! . . . The physiologist easily explains this fact by informing us that the constant transference of a nervous current into any organ must at last be followed by change in the condition of its nutrition and consequently by disease. . . . And can we doubt that the power capable of plunging man into such deep distress can also render him happy? If we are ill because we believe ourselves to be ill, why should we not have the power of keeping ourselves in health by the firm conviction that we are healthy?”

—*Feuchtersleben.*

“The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.”

—*Milton.*

THE POWER OF SELF-SUGGESTION

ONE of the classical methods in modern scientific psychotherapy, and a method which is also unconsciously employed by unscientific healing cults, is that which goes by the name of "suggestion." This term is often used in a loose and vague way, even by good writers, to express the method by which one mind influences another, whether the method employed is argument or explanation or an idea offered in some indirect way, either through the personality of him who offers it or by some technical device. The history of the word, however, as well as scientific convenience, indicates that it should be limited in psychotherapeutic usage to the psychical and physiological activity of ideas which work, not in the clear light of

consciousness, but in the subconscious mental region that lies in the shadow. The word "suggestion" comes from the Latin through the French. The Latin verb meant originally "to put something *under* something else"; then it came to signify in a general way "to offer" or "to provide" something. In post-classical Latin it took on a figurative signification,—“to offer an idea,” “to instigate,” or “to insinuate.” It was this usage which determined the meaning of the noun “suggestion” in French from which the word was taken over into English. Finally, it is used by careful writers on psychotherapy to signify an idea offered not to the conscious but to the subconscious element in mind. When we try to persuade a person or to re-educate his reason or his will, we appeal to conscious, rational processes. The ideas which we would communicate do their work in the clear light of consciousness. When, on the other hand, we “suggest” to a person, we seek to influence that region of the mind which lies, as it were, below the threshold of consciousness and

which we now know exercises a profound influence on our entire mental and moral life. The agencies by which the influence is exercised are various. Perhaps it is through the spoken word or through a gesture that an idea is communicated; perhaps, it is by some form of electricity or mechanical therapeutics; perhaps, it is through the subtler power of personality. These are merely the means by which suggestion operates: the essential note of suggestion itself is that it works in a subterranean way in the person influenced by it. We shall do well, then, to reserve the word "suggestion" for the subconscious and unconscious activities of ideas in us, whether the ideas come from ourselves (auto-suggestion) or from others (hetero-suggestion). How the subconscious activity works and how it is related to the physiological apparatus of brain and nervous system, we do not know. All we know are simply external, empirical facts. We know that certain ideas offered by another can unlock pent-up energies,

remove mental and moral inhibitions, unify dissociated states of consciousness; but as to *how* these things are done, we must say in the famous phrase of Du Bois-Reymond, "Ignoramus," and perhaps also, "Ignorabimus."¹

Mysterious as is the power of suggestion when offered by another person, equally mysterious is it when offered by one to one's self. This latter type of suggestion is called "auto-" or "self-suggestion."² A recent German writer, in the course of his discussion of mind-cure procedures, comes to deal with the power of auto-suggestion and dismisses it in the spirit of Dean Swift's famous essay on the fountains of Holland, which consisted of one line, "There are no mountains in Holland." According to this scientific authority, auto-suggestion is impossible.³ This is true if by the term is meant an idea created as it were out of nothing through the sheer force of one's own will. But that is not the meaning of the term as used by those who are concerned with

the therapeutic value of suggestion. The term is intended rather to express the power of the mind unconsciously to build, upon a hint from the outside or upon the erroneous interpretation of a special sensation, a whole morbid superstructure, which creates a nervous disorder; and also its power to receive a good suggestion or a hint offered from the outside, or in the course of one's own reflections, and unconsciously, as in lighter states of sleep, to amplify it and so narrow consciousness upon it that it sets up a healing process. Cure by self-suggestion rests upon the fundamental dogma of modern physiological psychology that mind and body constitute a unity, that for every thought and feeling, however slight, there is a corresponding nervous event. It follows that, within limits, as is the mind so is the body. Our thoughts concerning our bodies are not inert, dead things; they are living forces that tend to find expression in corresponding physical states. This is not a speculation; it is a fact established by

abundant observation and experiment. It is the overseeding of this truth, and the neglect of the complementary principle of the influence of body on mind, that has given birth to the quasi-theosophical mental and spiritual healing systems so rife in our time. But the over-emphasis on a true idea need not drive us to a denial of its relative significance and value. Dr. George B. Cutten puts the matter correctly when he says: "However the thought of cure may come into our minds, whether by external or auto-suggestion, if it is firmly rooted so as to impress the subconsciousness, that part of the mind which rules the bodily organs, a tendency toward cure is at once set up and continues as long as that thought has the ascendancy." 4

We all know from experience the power of self-suggestion to originate morbid conditions. The heart beats automatically; but some night, lying awake, we become conscious of its strokes. Should some slight pain in the region of the heart supervene at that time, we may, if we are suggestible,

leap irrationally to the idea that we are suffering from heart disease, and this erroneous notion will serve to increase the slight functional irregularity through automatic repetition of the idea. In psychological terms, we are here building up either subconsciously or unconsciously an abnormal instead of a normal complex of ideas. A good illustration of this process is afforded by the case of a gentleman who called upon me recently to get some advice as to the method of regaining his self-control. It appears that he had been reading Professor Percival Lowell's lectures on the conditions of life in Mars, and he had been profoundly impressed by the fact that in that planet water is very scarce and the inhabitants suffer from perpetual thirst. Then he argued, on the basis of this observation, that the Deity who could tolerate such conditions in Mars might regard with complacency the same state of affairs on this earth. Then he began half consciously to visualize the state of this earth when everybody would be suffering from

thirst, and so the process of morbid brain activity went on until he became a nervous wreck. Had he realized just what he was doing, the morbid process would have been nipped in the bud by a hearty laugh.

Many disorders spring from a tendency to dwell upon morbid fancies, the product of an undisciplined imagination. Hence many nervous sufferers suffer not from the disease which they imagine themselves to have, but from a disease of a drifting, uncontrolled imagination. The hypochondriac, for example, who, conscious of some pain in the back, arrives suddenly at the fixed belief that he is suffering from kidney disease, is not really suffering from this disorder, but is in truth the victim of a powerful auto-suggestion. Or, again, take some types of stammerers. Frequently we observe that when the stammerer is engrossed in a subject or has his mind diverted for the moment from his weakness, he speaks fluently and easily; but when he recalls his trouble and is seized with a fear that he is about to stam-

mer, then he begins to stammer. Here the stammering has a purely psychical origin. He is the victim of an auto-suggestion. Or take the fear which goes by the name of "stage fright." The sufferer is possessed (he knows not how or why) with the idea that when he ascends the platform or the pulpit to deliver his lecture or sermon, he will become nervous and perhaps lose the thread of his discourse and suffer the humiliation of a breakdown. Remove this apprehension from his mind, and he stands up calm and self-possessed and utters his words with freedom and ease. This is a type of an isolated fear, which may arise in an otherwise well-balanced and healthy mind.

A thought which is the subconscious creation of our own minds may lead us into error concerning even the existence of a fact, and may thus give rise to a purely suggested sensation. It is well known, for example, that in answer to hypnotic suggestion—following only, of course, upon the deeper hypnotic states—a

man may become paralyzed, or he may experience a headache, or he may be cured, for the time at least, of the most excruciating agony. So, too, by sheer self-suggestion he may unconsciously produce a pain in any part of his organism, or he may derange his digestion, or he may deepen a sense of fatigue, or he may lose the power of speech. The idea, once originated, acts, as Charcot says, like a parasite and exercises an influence over the whole mental realm and even over the physiological functions. We know that in neurasthenia or as it is popularly called "nervous prostration," self-suggestion plays a great rôle. The neurasthenic seems often in a state of utter exhaustion; yet the breathing is normal, the pulse is regular, the muscles are well developed, and there is no trace of paralysis or of real muscular fatigue or weakness. He will tell you that he cannot lift the smallest weight without a sense of fatigue; yet if you divert his mind from that particular movement, you will soon discover that he is capable of a great

amount of physical exertion along other lines. His sense of fatigue is owing to the intervention of an auto-suggestion quite unrecognized by the patient. It is what is known as a "habit fatigue," a sort of false fatigue which differs from normal, healthy fatigue in that it is not helped as a rule by rest. The truth is, the neurasthenic, when he is about to put forth an effort, expects to be fatigued, and this very expectation brings about the sense of exhaustion. It is another illustration of the power of expectant attention.

Dubois, the Swiss specialist, tells of a patient whose trouble started in this way: On one occasion, it was his duty to carry some potted geraniums to another flower border in the garden where he was at work. Following this effort, he was taken with an agonizing cramp in the region of his stomach. He soon discovered the reason of this strange sensation. It was the red of the geraniums which brought it on. That was his theory, and he found confirmation of this theory in the

fact that ever afterwards bright red always produced this effect upon him and the reaction was just in proportion to the intensity of the red, so that if he took up a book with red edges, the sensation of pain grew to its maximum when the book was closed and decreased if the intensity of the color was lessened by turning the leaves over. Dubois pointed out to him that he was simply the victim of an auto-suggestion. Possibly cramp came on the day he first felt it through the attitude of bending the body or through some physical fatigue or perhaps because he had eaten something that had disagreed with him. One could not tell exactly what was the cause. It could not have been the red color, however, that made such an impression upon his organs and caused the sensation, because there is no inherent connection between any color and stomach cramp. That the red always acted in the same way afterwards did not prove anything. He was suffering from the effect of an auto-suggestion, and as a mental

suggestion creates a sensation just as long as it is not dissipated by a contrary auto-suggestion, so the patient had remained under the power of his self-produced trouble until he understood its *modus operandi*—the source of its hold on him. This, brought to light, began his cure.⁵

It is well to remember that auto-suggestion can in many instances cure as well as create nervous disorder.⁶ Its restorative powers, indeed, are limited and often it can produce mischiefs which it seems powerless to heal. In these cases, suggestion offered by another or some other psychotherapeutic procedure is necessary. For example, experience leads us to deny its utility in the morbid impulses and strange, abnormal sensations characteristic of psychasthenia. No amount of self-suggestion will restore to the sufferer a sense of the reality of the world or of the concreteness of events. "Dread of open spaces [agoraphobia]," says Moll, "is nothing but an auto-suggestion. The patient in this case is possessed by the idea

that he cannot step across some open space. No reasoning is of avail here. The patient acknowledges its justice without permitting it to influence him, because his auto-suggestion is too powerful. As a rule, logic is for the most part powerless over these auto-suggestions." ⁷ The cure lies in a process of re-education administered by skilled experts in psychological medicine. It is powerless, too, for the most part, against drug addictions, those moral mischiefs that root themselves profoundly in the mental and moral mechanism. The reason is that the psychical powers are too much involved in the given disorder to admit of the formation of good auto-suggestions. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to deny, as some writers do, its value in certain milder forms of trouble. It has special significance when the condition of the nervous sufferer is balanced between the normal and the abnormal, so that good self-suggestion offered systematically and with belief may succeed in tipping the scales in the right direc-

tion. As a well-known English physician puts it: "A man outside a baker's shop may be just balanced between stealing or not. Hunger prompts the one way; principle the other. Now, if an emotion-idea is presented to his mind of his starving family at home, he takes a loaf and becomes a thief. If, on the other hand, a vision of prison, or the verse, 'Thou shalt not steal,' rises forcibly in his brain, he walks away. In the same way, in many nerve affections, a comparatively slight self-suggestion will enable us to do what we otherwise could not, and so overcome some nervous dread. For instance, a person with some unreasonable fear that is poisoning his life may—besides removing any contributing cause and besides combating it with his will power—actively employ auto-suggestion by bringing his reason to bear on it, and show its folly to himself by *saying* aloud at the most impressionable time, when just awaking or falling asleep, how unreasonable the fear is, by *thinking* similar thoughts, by

seeing in print the folly of his fears described, and by *hearing* others say the same." ⁸

There are exceptional cases on record, in which a profound upheaval of the subconscious life has been able to effect revolutions in habit and character which were beyond the scope, apparently, of any method that could appeal to the ordinary consciousness. A medical writer has recently published a story, for the authenticity of which he vouches. It was the case of a young man who had contracted the morphine habit. As is well known, morphinism is one of the most tenacious of moral slaveries and is exceedingly difficult to break up. This young man was devoted to his mother, who had been dead for some time. One night he had an exceedingly vivid dream, in which she appeared to him with all the verisimilitude of life. She sat by his bedside, the tears streaming down her cheeks, her voice broken with sobs, as she implored him to give up the habit that was ruining his life.

So vivid was the dream and so profound was the impression it made upon his mind that he awoke, and, rising from his bed, he took the bottle containing the drug and the morphine syringe, and breaking them in pieces, he from that moment experienced deliverance, nor had there been any relapse up to a few months ago when the incident was brought to my knowledge.⁹

But of course such incidents are rare and cannot be commanded at will. Their occurrence depends upon subtle and inexplicable and, so to say, accidental causes. Nevertheless, they do show that sometimes the subconscious element in mind, when profoundly moved, is capable of working wonders which, apparently, are not possible to the normal waking consciousness. It is more useful, however, to reflect that there are certain minor troubles against which self-suggestion, which is within our own control, is powerful, and it is about its curative influence on these that I now pass on to speak.

We know that certain types of pain are amenable to self-suggestion. Pascal is said to have cured himself of a severe toothache by applying his mind to the solution of a mathematical problem. During the passive state of reflection, his attention had ceased to sustain the painful sensation which he had experienced, and hence the pain disappeared. Immanuel Kant was subject to oppressive palpitations of the heart, but he triumphed over his misery by transferring his attention to intellectual work. He was able to put himself very quickly into a somnolent condition, which enabled him, while concentrating his mind, to lose consciousness of his physical sensation.¹⁰ And in our own time, Professor Forel, of Zürich, reports that though he has suffered for the last six years from ringing in the ears caused by a chronic dry catarrh of the middle ear, yet he has succeeded in diverting his attention so completely from it that, as a rule, he no longer hears it except when he thinks directly of it through association. My col-

league, Rev. Dr. Worcester, tells me that by self-suggestion he has cured a recurrent headache; and other instances of the same kind have come to my knowledge. There is a headache which is mainly psychical in character and may be called a "habit headache," which arises through a kind of mental reverberation of past experience. Against such pain, auto-suggestion is of distinct value.¹¹ So, too, with constipation, not dependent on organic disease. It is well known that many persons suffer from constipation originating in auto-suggestion, and perpetuate it by the continual use of laxatives, which interfere with the automatism of the central nervous system and the normal innervation of the bowels. In this case, what auto-suggestion causes, it can also cure. From a letter which lies before me and which was written by a sufferer from this trouble, I quote these sentences: "I have done something for myself through auto-suggestion. I have practiced this faithfully now for over six months, and have cured my constipation

and have practically cured my sleeplessness." And this statement is typical of many others.

Or take worry, which is simply a vicious mental habit kept up by vicious self-suggestion. Dr. Saleeby calls it the "disease of the age," and certainly ninety per cent. of nervous sufferers complain of this mental misery. Said one of these sufferers to me once, "I worry about small things, and I worry about great, and then I worry because I worry." Where the worry is not the symptom of some profound mental disturbance, it can be met and mastered by the worrier. Of course, it is useless to say to one's self, "Don't worry;" and especially is it useless to utter this negative with vehemence and impatience. This style of dealing with the trouble will only intensify it. The better plan is to wait until one is in a relaxed, calm, and passive state, as in the minutes that immediately precede falling asleep, and then gently impress upon the mind the idea that on awaking the mind

will be at perfect peace with itself, full of hope and harmony.

One who has suffered much from worry and depression of spirits writes to me as follows: "I have been using auto-suggestion for the eradication of depression and to correct defects of character. It may seem amusing to you that a man of sixty-four should begin at that late day to correct defects of character, but I am surprised and pleased to note that I am making progress. . . . I am actually startled sometimes at the vividness and clearness with which the suggestions given at night come into the mind during the day when I am engrossed in business matters. It actually seems at times as though a voice from the sky spoke to me. From my own experience, I believe anyone of ordinary intelligence and *persistency* can re-educate or make himself over."

Mr. Charles G. Leland (of "Hans Breitmann Ballads" fame) tells us how he overcame in this way both false fatigue and worry. He had read in works on

hypnotism how patients were made to believe that they were monkeys, or madmen, or umbrellas, or criminals, at will. Then the thought occurred to him that he might develop this power for his own moral benefit. He suggested to himself while in a somnolent condition that he should apply himself to literary or artistic labor without once feeling fatigue. His suggestions he found were realized, though he was a man of advanced years and therefore, presumably, more easily tired. His next step was to will that he should all the next day be free from any nervous or mental worry, that he should preserve a hopeful, calm, well-balanced state of mind. He adds: "I had my lapses, but withal I was simply astonished to find how, by perseverance, habitual calm not only grew on me, but how decidedly it increased. I most assuredly have experienced it to such a degree as to marvel that the method is not more employed as a cure for nervous suffering and insomnia." ¹² Mr. Leland wrote those words

about ten years ago. Much has happened since then; and now the psychologically trained physician preaches the virtue of self-suggestion to the unhappy victim of worry, lack of self-confidence or of nervous irritability, ultra self-consciousness, stage-fright, psychical fatigue, and insomnia. Formulate and silently repeat some such proposition as this: "To-morrow I shall awake with a free, clear conscience, glad in the thought that I can do whatever work Providence assigns me. I will, therefore, be happy and cheerful. I will be master of myself. I will not only be happy myself but will seek to make others happy." Before many weeks have passed you will be conscious of a change. Worry will begin to loosen its grip, everything will take on a happier guise, and the whole personality will be lifted to a new level of freedom and efficiency.

Especially is its value to be emphasized in bad or broken sleep. Much of the curse of insomnia is due to the belief or to the fear of the sufferer that he cannot

sleep. Once this apprehension is broken down, he sleeps. It is not so much the insomnia as the worry about the insomnia that does the mischief. Hence the sufferer will do well if he suggests to himself, and repeats the suggestion over and over again: "If I sleep—well; if I do not sleep, I will at least gain rest by keeping my mind calm and my body relaxed." Whether we sleep depends on the state of mind with which we go to bed. If we allow the cares and worries of the day to haunt our pillow, then we need hardly expect to sleep. Mr. Gladstone was once asked if the fate of some Parliamentary bill which absorbed his attention did not obtrude itself in the hours of rest. He replied, sensibly, "No; what good would that do?" Men who have performed great tasks have performed them largely through their ability to dismiss care and anxiety from their minds when it was safe for them to do so.

As illustrating the influence of self-

suggestion, in producing sleep, Dr. George L. Walton, the Boston neurologist, recommends the following experiments: First, place yourself on the face and from this point turn rapidly in a complete circle backwards from right to left until you are again on the face. Pause several times and say to yourself rapidly, I cannot sleep in this position. The result of the experiment is practically uniform. The rapid movement and the suggestion prevent sleep. Secondly, start in the same position as in the first experiment. Traverse the same circle, prolonging each pause with body relaxed, and substituting at each pause the suggestion, I can sleep in any position, repeated a number of times deliberately and as if you meant it. The restful pause and the suggestion generally induce sleep long before the circle is completed.¹³ In a word, the secret of getting sleep is to assume the external physical attitude which corresponds to sleep, to relax every muscle, and let it stay relaxed, to breathe lightly

and regularly, to call up the image of a sleeping person, to talk and think sleep to one's self, to repeat silently and in a quiet, dreamy fashion such a formula as this,—“ There is no reason why I should not sleep, therefore I can sleep, therefore I shall sleep. My body is relaxed, my mind is at peace, sleep is coming, I am getting sleepy, I am about to sleep, I am asleep.” *

There are many who groan under the burden of evil and degrading habits of mind, of body, or of both, and their cry “ O wretched man that I am ! ” is seldom heard with sympathy or insight. One peculiar form of mental misery afflicts many nervous people. They are obsessed with thoughts which they abhor, thoughts that seem to them unutterably degrading but which, try as they will, they cannot get rid of. Sometimes such sufferers become melancholy and depressed and even imagine that they are in a hopeless condition morally and spiritually. They try by recreation or change of

* See Additional Notes—A.

scene or by sinking themselves in some piece of hard work or by prayer and reading religious books, to get relief from the insistent and recurring idea, but the moment the mind is at liberty, off it flies to the forbidden object. What are such sufferers to do?

Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine of the seventeenth century, has written words of wisdom on this subject which ought to comfort those haunted with ideas they recognize to be wrong.

“Though we cannot,” he says, “in many cases think always of what we would—nay, though we cannot hinder abundance of thoughts from coming into our minds against our will, yet it is always in our power to assent to our thoughts or to deny our consent to them. If we do not consent to them so soon as we are aware of them, there is no harm done. Should we be haunted with blasphemous thoughts and cannot get rid of them, we must consider that our thoughts are no further ours than as we choose them; that all sin lies

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in the will, and all will implies choice; that those thoughts, therefore, which are not our choice, which we reject with a settled aversion and abhorrence, will never be placed to our account. . . . Notwithstanding what I have hitherto said concerning the diligence with which we are to keep our hearts, yet this is always to be remembered, that with our diligence we must be careful to join discretion. My meaning is this: we must have a care not to extend our thoughts immoderately and more than our tempers will bear, even to the best things, and the way to do that is *not to put them too much or too long upon the stretch at any one time, but to relax them when there is occasion and to let them run out and entertain themselves upon anything that comes to hand so long as it is innocent.*"¹⁴

We now know what Baxter did not know, that by saturating the mind with good self-suggestions when body and mind are in a relaxed condition, the force of these vicious self-suggestions can be van-

quished. Those who are troubled with mental obsessions of a painful and shameful character ought to reflect that they are suffering from a morbid condition of the mind and that there are energies moral and psychical, within themselves, which, once released, will sweep away inhibiting weaknesses, wretchednesses, peccancies, and which will unify and harmonize their inner world. And one of the means by which these forces may be released is self-suggestion.

Here I would call attention to the close connection between self-suggestion and prayer. "When persons go into a house of worship," says Dr. R. C. Cabot, "put themselves into a time-honored habitual position, relax themselves, turn away their minds and their attention from all outside cares and thoughts, and make themselves, so far as they can, receptive to the truth that is to be spoken to them and by their own lips, I do not see how we can fail to see that something is going on akin to what I have

called suggestion in the relaxed condition." ¹⁵

This, of course, does not explain the mystery of prayer, nor does it cover all that is meant by prayer. For self-suggestion is itself a mystery, and appears to point to some wider self of which our ordinary, everyday self is but a fragment. But it does make intelligible to us the established fact that prayer works reflex benefits in the mind of him who prays, such as the feeling of strength, power, peace, and insight into the course of action to be pursued. It is significant that many men of action, such as Mohammed, Luther, Gladstone, and General Gordon, have been men of prayer. We must remember, however, that if we would have the reflex benefits of prayer we must believe that He to whom we pray is, and that "He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." If prayer were believed to be only self-suggestive or reflex, few would be found to keep up the practice.

The two great principles on which the method I have been expounding is based are first, the unity of mind and body in virtue of which mental and nervous states are parallel and proportional, so that, for example, not the slightest feeling or thought can exist without at the same time a change small or great in the physical organism; and, secondly, the complexity of mind, involving as it does elements that are conscious and elements that are unconscious, or "subconscious."

Now, the older psychologists made mind and consciousness practically coterminous: whereas modern students regard consciousness as only one of the manifestations of mind. There is a great region of mind that lies below or outside the sphere of consciousness. This is variously named the "subconscious," the "subliminal" or the "transliminal." Some go so far as to make personality dual, and speak of our having two selves, an "objective" and a "subjective." We need not commit ourselves to such a doctrine; enough to say

that one and the same mind has a "subconscious" region of activity. In the mental sphere profound differences are quite compatible with a still profounder unity. We mean by the "subconscious" mental activity not accompanied by consciousness. To the belief that there is a subconscious activity of mind the following writers, among others, have given their adherence: O. W. Holmes, Hack Tuke, Wundt, Fechner, Paulsen, Janet, Forel, Freud, Scripture, Hyslop, Myers, Stanley Hall, Coriat, Morton Prince, Sidis, James. These writers agree as to the *fact* of a subconscious activity; they differ as to the type of phenomena to which the term "subconscious" should be applied.*

You resolve to awaken at a certain hour determined on before going to sleep. Sure enough, about the given time you open your eyes. What internal clock sprang its alarm at the given moment? Or take the familiar difficulty of recalling a name. We rack our brains to find the forgotten word but to no purpose. When we cease from our efforts and turn to something

* See Additional Notes—B.

else, suddenly the name flashes on us without any apparent reason and we wonder at the experience. The state of abstraction produced by turning to something else, is the device by which the name flashed into consciousness. In psychological terms the *dissociated* name has become *synthetized*. Everyday abstraction is a type of a normal dissociation of consciousness. Doubtless the explanation is that in the endeavor to find the name, a subconscious process is set up, which, acting automatically, in due time stirs into consciousness what we seek to know. Many of our choices which we regard as self-caused or accidental are really the fruit of, it may be, a long and complicated series of subconscious processes which because they are subconscious hide from us the real causes of our acts. This is one of the proofs of subconscious activity in everyday life. The influences which determine us to take one of two paths equally convenient for bringing us to some point we desire to reach, are often hidden in the subconscious

realm, and if we were asked to state the reasons for our choice we would almost infallibly give the wrong ones. Or take the phenomena of dreams. Here we are wholly in the region of the subconscious. Certain organic sensations of a morbid kind give rise subconsciously to dreams that in the light of after events seem strangely prophetic. The physician often gains valuable hints in this way as to the nature of the disease that is now beginning obscurely to declare itself. Popular thought is prone to regard some dreams as if there were something supernatural about them. You dream, for example, a strange and thrilling drama of battle, murder, and sudden death. One of the actors is a man whom you have never seen in your conscious life. A few days later the man takes his seat beside you in theater or church. You are struck with amazement and know not what to think. As a matter of fact, however, upon inquiry you discover that you have passed this individual on your way to your office regularly

every morning for a considerable period without, however, consciously recognizing him. Your eye, falling upon him while perhaps you were abstracted, thinking of other things, conveyed no conscious impression to the mind, but it did convey a subconscious or subattentive one. And in the subconscious dreaming state this impression was reproduced.¹⁶

Now, there is a large class of physiological processes which are under the control, not of the conscious, but of the subconscious mind—such processes, for example, as those of the circulation of the blood, the assimilation of food, the peristaltic action of the bowels, the secretion of the glands, and in general, the vital chemistries of the body. It is the subconscious that controls the action of the vital organs, regulates the healthy rhythm of the forces of life, and reigns in the mental and moral region where habit has the seat of its strength. If we can in some way reach the subconscious so as to enlist its powers in the interests of health, it is obvious that

we have made a great step forward in the restoration of nervous balance and self-control. And that we can do in a measure in the few minutes preceding sleep.

The psychological basis of the method which I have expounded is that, as we now know, every one of us, in passing from the waking to the sleeping state, or from the sleeping to the waking state, must pass through an intermediary condition, half sleeping and half waking—the “hypnagogic state,” as the psychologists call it. This intermediary or transitional state is semi-hypnotic in character. Simple suggestions formulated and repeated mentally in this condition, are found by experiment to be powerful. No doubt people differ in their mental constitution and in their measure of suggestibility, and so it happens that some do not react well to this method. Still, in the majority of cases, there would seem to be, as has been well said, “some magic virtue in sleep,” as if it preserved and ripened our wishes

in ways unknown to us. We seem to be justified in asserting that auto-suggestion, seriously, persistently, systematically, and skillfully applied, can vanquish many of the smaller miseries of life that yet interfere with our happiness, can lessen or remove many inhibitions, can make available for use psychical energies and resources. Of course, what auto-suggestion really is, how it is possible, as has already been said, no man knows. It is only in recent years that attention has been called to the relations of mind and body and to the psychological mechanism by which nervous disorders are produced and by which they are healed. When as much time and energy have been spent on the solution of these problems as have been given to the purely natural sciences, we may hope for discoveries that will astonish our minds and revolutionize our theories. Meantime, we need not wait for a full theory or philosophy of the method before applying it to the removal of semi-nervous and semi-moral troubles and to the restoration of that peace and

self-control which form the secret of nervous health.

Suggestion is much more valuable and powerful if it is reinforced and sustained by ideas that act in the full light of consciousness. When attempting to remove, for example, a false auto-suggestion—say, a fear of disease—we are far more likely to succeed if we do not content ourselves with injecting a new and more useful auto-suggestion into the hidden stream of our subconscious life, but try also to explain how the harm arose and how similar mistakes can be avoided, not only by counter-suggestions but by side-tracking the whole miserable affair and by letting a new interest occupy the mind. To crowd out fear by the heat of interest in new work or in our friends, is also to give ourselves the best chance of receiving helpful suggestions by the way. Keeping in mind, therefore, this proviso, I venture to offer a few practical hints:

1. Except in purely moral and spiritual troubles, it is inadvisable to try

to cure one's self by auto-suggestion without at the same time benefiting by the advice of a physician. The physician, however, ought to be a man who has received a training in abnormal psychology. The physician who is pre-occupied with physical and organic diseases as a rule has no time for delicate psychological analyses. He probably has never heard of "strangled emotions," "unconscious automatisms," or "dissociated states of consciousness."

2. The suggestions to be offered by one's self to one's self should be simple in character, consisting of a few brief, clear sentences.

3. It is better not to begin with a statement which your mind rejects as untrue, but to paint such an ideal condition as one may reasonably hope to realize in a short time.

4. The suggestions should be repeated, not with anxiety or with vehemence, but very gently, so that one may fall asleep while repeating them.

5. The more faith the subject has in the suggestive method, the better results he may expect. Therefore, he should first of all convince himself theoretically of the power of suggestion by reading a sound scientific discussion of the subject.¹⁷

6. The sufferer ought not to allow himself to be discouraged by failure at first. Beginnings are always difficult, and especially is this true in the case of habits. Let him be patient and systematic in the use of self-suggestion, and he has every reason to hope for the dissipation of the milder nervous states, or for the development of unsuspected moral and intellectual qualities. Emerson has said that the education of the will is the object of our existence. Self-suggestion is one of the most powerful agencies at our disposal for the development of will-power, and will-power is the secret of success, of true happiness, and of influence over our fellows.

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APPENDIX

NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

1. "We do not know *why* a subject obeys any suggestion that may be made to him, or *how* he obeys it. We do not know this even when the suggestion bears upon some easy external matter. Still deeper is the mystery when the suggestion is an organic or therapeutic command. . . . I define suggestion as *a successful appeal to the subliminal self.*"—"The nascent life of each of us is perhaps a fresh draft,—the continued life is an ever varying draft,—upon the cosmic energy. In that enviroing energy—call it by what name we will—we live and move and have our being; and it may well be that certain dispositions of mind, certain phases of personality, may draw in for the moment from that energy a fuller vitalizing stream. . . . There will be effective therapeutic or ethical self-suggestion whenever by any artifice subliminal attention to a bodily

function or to a moral purpose is carried to some unknown pitch of intensity which draws energy from the metethereal world." (Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, Vol. I., pp. 153 and 218.) *

2. The word "auto-suggestion" is a barbarism, being a mixture of Greek and Latin. A linguistic purist would say "ipse-suggestion." "Self-suggestion" is more convenient and intelligible.

3. Marcinowski, *Im Kampf um Gesunde Nerven*, p. 100.

4. *The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity*, p. 213.

5. Dubois, *The Psychic Treatment of Nervous Disorders*, p. 167.

6. At the basis of the phenomena of faith healing in all its forms, Pagan, Jewish, and Christian, from time immemorial, must be recognized an element of self-suggestion. One striking example is given in the New Testament in the story of the healing of the woman with an issue of blood. Matt. ix. 20-22; Mark xxv. 34; Luke viii. 43-48. The sufferer in this case shared the superstitious notions of her time, that healing virtue belonged to the garments which the Great Physician wore. If only she could

* See Additional Notes—C.

touch the hem of His garment, she felt she could be made whole, and this belief so powerfully acted on her psychical energies that she was made whole. It will be observed, however, that Christ will not allow her to go away with this superstitious idea. He would have her trust in Himself and His gracious message, not in His clothes. A striking parallel to this incident is found in the Talmud, where a woman suffering from an issue of blood is told to seat herself at the cross-roads, and to cry aloud, "Let thine issue of blood be stopped."

7. *Hypnotism*, 5th ed., p. 70.

8. *Nerves in Disorder*, pp. 123, 124.

9. Dr. M. L. Holbrook, Editor of the "Herald of Health," in a letter dated July 30, 1884, writes: "In the spring of 1870, I had an attack of acute bronchitis, which was very severe, and from the fact that I had had a similar attack every winter and spring for several years, I felt considerable alarm and believed it would ultimately become chronic and perhaps terminate my life. . . . In this depressed condition, I fell into a sleep which was not very profound, and the following circumstance, which is still fresh in my mind, appeared to take place. My sister, who had been dead

more than twenty years, and whom I had almost forgotten, came to my bedside and said: 'Don't worry about your health, we have come to cure you. There is much yet for you to do in the world.' Then she vanished and my brain seemed to be electrified as if by a shock from a battery, only it was not painful, but delicious. The shock spread downwards, and over the chest and lungs it was very strong. From here it extended to the extremities, where it appeared like a delightful glow. I awoke almost immediately and found myself well. Since then I have never had an attack of the disease." (Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, Vol. I., p. 370.)

The power of dreams to *cause* nervous troubles is an established fact. "I have seen paralysis of the right arm occur in a little girl who dreamed she had defended her dog when attacked by a cow, and had struck blow after blow at the aggressor." (Dubois, *Psychic Treatment of Nervous Disorders*, p. 374.)

Comp. also Tuckey, *Psychotherapeutics*, p. 39.

10. *Thérapeutique Suggestive*, by A. A. Liébeault, pp. 17-37.

11. The Rev. Dr. L. W. Batten, the well-known Old Testament scholar, writes me under date February 4, 1909:—"I used to get up

probably on an average of three times a week with a troublesome headache and at times it would prostrate me for the day. For many months I have been almost relieved of this trouble. The relief was due to two things: first, a firm conviction that the headaches were unnecessary, and, second, the cultivation of a serene spirit, *especially at bedtime*. Self-suggestion, when the headache was actually in evidence, worked pretty well."

Johannes Müller, perhaps the greatest physiologist of the nineteenth century, stated the principle of expectant attention thus: "Any state of the body which is conceived to be approaching, and which is expected with certain confidence and certainty of the occurrence, will be very prone to ensue as the mere result of the idea if it do not lie beyond the bounds of possibility." Quoted by Hack Tuke, *Illustrations of the Influence of the Mind upon the Body*, p. 36.

Dr. Cutten, who quotes Müller, adds: "Notwithstanding this shrewd observation, a quarter of a century passed before much or any use was made of it as a therapeutic agent, and even today, although the evidence is overwhelming, some people look upon it as a superstition,"

Psychological Phenomena of Christianity, p. 213.

12. *Have You a Strong Will?* by Charles Godfrey Leland, pp. 32, 33, and 34.

“It is an easy matter to create a strong will or strengthen that which we have to a marvelous extent; yet he who would do this must first give his *attention* firmly and fixedly to his intent or want, for which purpose it is absolutely necessary that he should first *know his own mind regarding what he means to do*, and therefore meditate upon it, not dreamily or vaguely, but earnestly.”

“There are millions of people who suffer from irritability, want of self-control, loquacity, evil in many forms, or nerves, who would fain control themselves and stop it all. Moralists think that for this it is enough to convince their reason, but this rarely avails. Man may *know* that he is wrong, yet not be able to reform. Now, what he wants is to have his attention fixed long enough to form a new habit. Find out how this can be done, and it may in many cases be the simplest and the most mechanical thing in the world to cure him.”

“Resolve before going to sleep that if there be anything whatever for you to do, which re-

quires will or resolution, be it to undertake repulsive or hard work or duty, to face a disagreeable person, to fast, or to make a speech, to say 'No' to anything, in short to keep up to the mark or make any kind of effort, that *you will do it*—as calmly and unthinkingly as may be. Do not desire to do it sternly or forcibly or in spite of obstacles—but simply and coolly make up your mind to *do it*—and it will much more likely be done. And it is absolutely true—*crede experto*—that if persevered in, this willing yourself to will by easy impulse unto impulse given, will lead to marvelous and most satisfactory results," pp. 17, 22, 37.

13. *Why Worry?* pp. 159, 160. Compare Lyman Powell's *Art of Natural Sleep*.

14. *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* and the *New Whole Duty of Man*. Quoted by Winslow, *Obscure Diseases of the Brain*, pp. 529, 530.

15. See *Psychotherapy in Its Relation to Religion*.

16. See Freud, *Psychopathologie des Alltagsleben*.

17. The reader may be referred to Tuckey's *Psychotherapeutics*, Chapters II and III, and Note 11, and to Chapters III and IV, and Appendix, in *Religion and Medicine*.

A. Stage-Fright.

There is a form of misery (already referred to as "stage-fright") to which many preachers, actors, musicians, and others who do their work under the public eye are particularly prone. In the majority of cases it is purely episodic in character, arising in a mind otherwise normal and healthy, and is to be carefully distinguished from those systematized fears which spring out of profound psychical weakness. Yet it is distressing, humiliating, and intensely embarrassing to its victim. Moreover, it induces a feeling of helplessness which accentuates the trouble. The sufferer resolves to be stronger and to play the man the next time, but the next time finds him as great a coward as ever. He tries the virtues of fresh air, gymnastic exercises, drugs of the "nerve tonic" variety; but all to no avail. He forgets that however the stage-fright may have originated it has now become a pernicious trick of the mind. He is frightened now because he was frightened before. Once the sufferer grasps this fact he has made the first step in the process of self-cure.

B. The Subconscious.

On the other hand, some psychologists, and among these notably Professor Hugo Münsterberg in his recent work on "Psychotherapy," while not denying the phenomena to which the name "subconscious" or "co-conscious" is given, yet seek to explain them in terms of physiology. Subconscious ideas are not existent as ideas but as "dispositions" of the brain-cells. When these cells are excited again, the ideas once more become conscious. The whole process is mechanical and physiological. This is not the place for a discussion of the problem. I content myself with saying that of the two hypotheses, that of a subconscious activity of mind best covers the facts, such as, for example, the facts established by positive experiments that subjects in an "abstracted" or hypnodial state can originate compositions and concoct highly complicated stories—an utterly impossible feat on the physiological theory. Moreover, the doctrine of the subconscious is in harmony with the accepted view of the relation of mind and body, whereas the physiological doctrine is not.

C. On the Meaning of "Suggestion."

For a good discussion of the psychological use of the term "Suggestion" see J. M. Baldwin, *Mental Development in the Child and the Race*, pp. 104-169. "The fundamental fact about all suggestion," he says, "is, in my view, the removal of inhibitions to movement brought about by a certain condition of consciousness, which may be called 'Suggestibility'" (p. 109). Suggestion as applied to individuals may roughly be defined as the process by which one person directs the ideas and feelings of another when this other's ordinary critical judgment is more or less in abeyance. An extreme example is that of hypnotic suggestion. But suggestion is also possible in the waking state and is a well-known therapeutic method. Then we have suggestion as applied to an "organized crowd" or collection of individuals dominated by a common idea. Gustave Le Bon has worked out this theory in his *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. "The most careful observations seem to prove that an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself—either in

consequence of the magnetic influence given out by the crowd or from some other cause of which we are ignorant—in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer ” (p. 11).

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