

The Great Tradition becomes The Great Faith

Earl Clement Davis

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Readings: Luke 9:28-36

Thoreau's Journal: Page 270 for May 12, 1857²

These two passages, one from the Gospel of St. Luke, and the other from the Journal of Thoreau, whose adventurous life found its satisfactions along the banks of the placid Concord river, deal with essentially the same thing, the eternal hunger of human beings for values that are good enough or true enough, or beautiful enough to command our complete allegiance and

¹ According to a note attached to the sermon, "This Sermon, first used in Pittsfield, Mass, during the month of June in 1918. At least that is the nearest date that I can determine as of July 15, 1951. Used in the Petersham Church on July 15, 1951." This sermon was also used in Petersham November 12, 1939, as reflected in the sermon notes for that date.

²A portion of the passage from Thoreau's journal for May 12, 1857: "May 12: ... While dropping beans in the garden at Texas just after sundown (May 13) I hear from across the fields the note of the bay-wing, '*Come here here there there quick quick quick or I'm gone*' (which I have no doubt sits on some fence post or rail there) and it instantly translates me from the sphere of my work and repairs all the that we jointly inhabit. It reminds me of so many country afternoons and evenings when this bird's strain was heard far over the fields, as I pursued it from field to field. The spirit of its earth-song, of its serene and true philosophy, was breathed into me, and I saw the world as through a glass, as it lies eternally. Some of its aboriginal contentment, even of its domestic felicity, possessed me. What he suggests is permanently true. As the bay-wing sang many a thousand years ago, so sang he tonight. In the beginning God heard his song and pronounced it good and hence it has endured. It reminded me of many a summer sunset, of many miles of gray rails, of many rambling pasture, of the farmhouse far in the fields, its milk-pans and well-sweep, and the cows coming home from pasture." H.D. Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau Journal*, vol. IX, August 16, 1856-August 7, 1857, edited by Bradford Torrey, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906, pp. 363-

fidelity; to give purpose and dignity to our life beyond the mere motions of animal existence.

Several years ago, Walter Lippman touched a tender and diseased nerve as he was examining [the] body of our modern world. Said he:

Something quite fundamental is left out of the modernist creeds. At least something which has hitherto been quite fundamental has been left out. That something is the most abiding of all the experiences of religion, namely, the conviction that religion comes from God.

(Page 47)³

In order to penetrate the barriers of ignorance and certain superstitions that are characteristic of our "Moderns," so that they may grasp the meaning of that passage, it is almost necessary to re-write that last sentence so that it will read somewhat as follows: "That something is the most abiding of all the experiences of life, namely, the conviction that life-values have their roots in the very fiber and structure of the universe." We discover them, and make them our own, and in the process, we enter into the enduring values and enduring satisfactions of living. We touch the garment hem of the Great tradition, and behold, there arises in us the Great Faith.

The story of the Transfiguration in the life of Christ, properly understood, has a particular meaning for us in the hurricane age when storms of terrific force are sweeping across the world, destroying, uprooting, and leaving in ruins many old familiar, not to say, beloved trees and structures in the gardens of human life. The story itself, and the larger events of which it is a part are the product of just such an age as ours. Such ages as they were going through, and as we are going through, are of necessity involved in the life process of which we are the products and participants. What is the larger setting which surrounds this little mountaintop scene of conversation between four men about a definite concrete situation of life that they faced?

Remember the Jews of the dispersion; remember the golden age of Israel as a nation of power, now departed; remember the growing doubts of the Jewish people in the truth and dependability of their religious creeds and customs; remember the humiliations and frustrations of a proud and prosperous

³ Walter Lippman, 1929, *A Preface to Morals*, New York: The Macmillan Co., p. 47. Walter Lippman (1889-1974) American writer, journalist and political commentator.

people, but now subject to the rule and whims of the arrogant but decaying Roman Empire.

Remember also the Greeks of the dispersion, to whom Paul in years to come was to make his appeal, refugees of a great and dying culture, scattered over the world, slaves of a Roman power that could not know the intellectual and spiritual wealth that the Greek refugees carried in their hunted bodies.

Remember the countless creeds and cults of what we contemptuously call pagan religions, offering their promises of immortality in the world to come as a reward of support of their ceremonies and sacrifices amid the splendor of a powerful but dying age. These religions were no more pagan than much that passes for religion in our day, and they are remembered today only by those who seek to reconstruct a dead past.

But there is the general setting of the story of the Transfiguration: memories and survivals of days that are gone; the glory that was Greece; the proud and faithful followers of "the one true God," the God of ancient Israel. If the survivals of History, whether its legends, its poetry, or its heroic figures are any test of truth, then amid all this splendor, and glamorous life that was the Roman Empire, the most important incident of the day was not taking place in the great places of authority, nor even in the temples where the sacrifices and prayers were being offered to dead gods and dying hopes. There on the hilltop for these four young men was reborn and established the faith that was dying with their ancient creeds, and which Walter Lippman says is left out of the creeds of us moderns, namely that real great things in life are grounded in the heart of the universe, in the heart of God.

Get a closer view of this mountaintop scene. Out of the obscure corner of Palestine had come this unknown youth, with the fire of faith and hope on his eyes, purpose underlying his every word and act. You have been looking for a great messiah to restore you to glory, to recapture that which was lost. Things don't happen that way. God's blessings come not as gifts, but as discoveries and achievements. We have to fulfill the Law and the prophets. Come, follow me. I will lead.

So, the people listened and heard him gladly, for he spoke as one having authority, the authority of faith and conviction. In increasing numbers, they gathered about him. A new life and a new faith flowed through their beings. The few became many; and many became a multitude. The tide was rising. But so also was

opposition; so also was fear. Just a few days before this incident, Jesus had told his followers that danger was ahead; the chief priests, the scribes were after him. Arrest, trial for blasphemy or treason; conviction and crucifixion were in the offing. Here was a concrete situation, not an abstraction about loving god or your neighbor. Just a plain cold fact to be faced.

So, these four young men who had been working together, talking together, eating together, drinking together, they go off by themselves to talk the thing over to think the thing through. This is not just an event in history, something that happened about 1906 years ago. It is much more than that, even though we may judge that on that hilltop in Palestine the direction of human history took a turn toward a new order. That story describes in graphic poetical imagery a process that is constant in human life. No person escapes it; every institution is judged by its exacting questions, and plus or minus answers. Forward into the alluring land of hope and promise, or away into some corner of oblivion. Consider the detail. Jesus, as many a youth has done before, and is doing today, nurtured in the heroic stories of a great past, profoundly moved by the Great Tradition of the race, had dedicated himself to a new and great faith of a better world of tomorrow in which the rule of God, the father of all, should come to its full realization. Alone amid the down-hearted and discouraged, the defeated and frustrated men and women among whom he lived, with a clear understanding of the past, a wise penetrating knowledge of human beings, he faced the future with hope and courage. The response had been tremendous. The multitudes followed. Now the hounds of mammon and the established, decaying order were on his trail. Already he could hear their dismal and threatening baying, altogether too near for comfort. What was in his mind as he and the three close disciples climbed the hill away from the crowd? What would be in your mind under similar circumstances? What is in your mind when you come face-to-face with similar but less forbidding situations?

First, am I right? Are the judgements that I have made on the present sound, true and just? Are my pictures of the heroic past valid? Are my hopes for the future well-grounded? Is my faith in the nature of life and its destiny supported by all that I know and feel? Has life a meaning beyond the common round of food, raiment, shelter, mating and pleasure? These questions become real and pressing when the hounds are baying at one's heels.

Second. The second question is much more personal. Having answered all the variations of the first question in the

affirmative, the next question is, Have I the moral courage to carry through, sealing with my life itself my faith in the convictions that I have talked of to the disciples and the multitudes? Am I the real thing, or just an idle babbler? Such were the questions in this self-chosen, or God-chosen youth.

Then you turn to the three disciples that were with him, the impulsive Peter, the beloved John, and James. What was in their minds? Precisely the same questions that are in our minds day in and day out, as we seek to understand the spirit and temper of our times, and the men and women to whom in one way or another our attention is called. We might translate their thought into words. Is this man whom we have been so closely associated, who has stirred our sluggish minds with hope and courage, is he the real thing, or just one of those empty vessels of words and sounds? Brought to a test will he carry through, or will he turn back, just one more disappointment to leave us more disillusioned than before. Have we pinned our faith on a true man, or a self-seeking exploiter of our spiritual miseries?

The graphic, poetic language of the story in Luke just lives with the background of their discussion and conversation over the situation. As it became clear to the disciples that this man, Jesus, upon whom they had pinned their faith, really intended to go through clean, really determined to face the situation without side-stepping or flinching, then to them that scene on the hilltop began to take on an epic character. They saw not alone Jesus, with whom they had climbed the hill, but in the background their imaginations pictured the great heroes of the race, Moses who had led them from one bondage to a promised land, and Elias, and the prophets, here they were face-to-face with one in whose veins flowed the blood and spirit of the Great Tradition. It is good for us to be here. Life is at full tide here above the world, on the mountain among the clouds. This is the kind of man we have been seeking. This man whom we have known so intimately, talked with, eaten and drunk with, our own friend, he is of the Great Tradition. In him we feel the pulse of the race at its best, in a moment of test. The very clouds seem to cry out as with the voice of God, "This is my beloved son; hear him."

So from this mount of Transfiguration, they went down to the multitudes and the turmoil of life, each to his destiny. As we look back on the scene, we have a conviction that, perchance, that incident was the most important event of the day in the Roman Empire. One man had been tested and had not been found wanting. Three men had caught a glimpse of the Great Tradition;

had their faith in life not only restored but confirmed and established. Back they were going to redeem an age, and lay the foundations of a new era in human history, even in the midst of the crumbling Roman Empire, and the decay of outworn creeds and cults, to re-establish a faith in the meaning and responsibilities of human living, to re-assert its divine character, to declare again and yet again that thy God Reigneth, and that he reigneth, not in some far off kingdom, but that he becomes flesh and dwells in our midst.

That was 19 centuries ago, not long when measured in terms of a million years of human history in this planet. But we jump the centuries to the quiet scene of the regions of the Concord River where Thoreau, another young man, tramped the fields on a May day, in his search for the permanent and the stable and the important in life. The song of the Bay-wing gave him [the] answer: As he sang many a thousand years ago, so sang he tonight. In the beginning God heard him and pronounced the song good. Hence it has endured. That is the answer of the ages, as it was the answer on the mount of Transfiguration, so it is on the banks of the Concord, the enduring values of life are not the products of the fleeting ingenuity of man; they are rooted in the very nature of life and the universe, in the heart of God, to use the poetic language of religion: They appear, they endure, they meet the tests of life, they survive the storms and changes, not because man imagines they are beautiful, and good and true, but because they are the very essence of life itself, they are the nature of the living God. They are the conditioning forces in the midst of which we daily move.

This process of sifting the permanent from the transient, of discovering and responding to the appeals of the Great Tradition is constant in our lives. We see it in the dramatic, epic setting and imagery of the story of the Transfiguration. Such events are not the everyday incidents of our common life. True they are more frequent than we imagine, or than history records. I suppose that if we could see the vast army of men and women who have been faithful even unto death to their deepest convictions and their unfaltering faith, we would be surprised at its vast throng as they come marching up from undated time along the highway of human history. Grateful are we for their gifts or heroism and courage to us. Our prayer and secretly cherished hope might be that we also might come through clean.

Our task is more simple, perhaps, certainly less dramatic, but not less insistent than theirs. It boils down to a very definite thing that we have to face, in ourselves, in our homes, in our

occupations, in our relations to the various institutions that the Great Tradition of faith and courage has created that life might become increasingly rich.

Constantly the dramatic episodes of the Transfiguration are being repeated. Now and again each one is in the position of Jesus, upon whom the penetrating eyes of the disciples were turned. How often we see our children looking thus at us, wondering whether we really cherish our alleged values, and could face a real test? Can we come through clean in these ordinary everyday tests? How frequently we are strengthened as we see our friends and neighbors meet their difficulties, carry their burdens, and give us a feeling that it is good for us to be here. With what anxiety and concern we follow the lives of public men, wondering whether they can meet the test of baying hounds, or stand the terrible test of popular approval, or the still more exacting test of personal ambition and greed. How we have shuddered in these more recent years, as we have seen men, honored of their fellows, given public trusts and responsibilities, only to betray them. Yes. The process is continuous; and like the hound of heaven, these tests pursue us "with deliberate speed, and majestic instancy."⁴ The three disciples heard the voice out of the clouds saying, "This is my beloved son. Hear him."⁵ But had the answer of Jesus to his test been negative, out of the same clouds, might have come the fatal words, "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

We live in a period that is witnessing the crumbling of many ancient, and long-established institutions, customs, and interpretations of life. The world is filled with refugees, not alone from lands where freedom is perishing, but refugees from lands of thought and belief where creeds are dying, where the enduring values of life seem lost amid the falling debris. You here in the Church have inherited the fairest product of the Great Tradition, that man has ever known. A Free Church, in a free state. No over-lord to compel; no inquisitor to force the bended knee; no one to say thus must you say so must you act. By

⁴ This quote is adapted from Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven," in *Poems*, London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1893, pp. 48-54. In more context, the line is:

Deliberate speed, majestic instancy
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

Francis Thompson (1859-1907) English poet and Catholic mystic.

⁵ Luke 9:35.

a long tradition of hundreds of years made glorious by thousands who have been faithful to the last bitter end, you have in your hands the Great Tradition. That responsibility you cannot escape. You are not under the compulsion of any law or any authority. But the eyes of the spiritual refugees of our age are upon you. Like the disciples on the mount of transfiguration, or Thoreau listening to the song of the Bay wing, they want to know whether or not you have felt the pulse of the great tradition, and out of its life-giving spirit, have earned a great Faith for the world of tomorrow.

We cannot pass this by. We are on the spot. It matters not whether we are four or ten, a hundred or a thousand. That is not the question. Have we the spirit of the great heroic past and have we the faith in the great heroic future that will build out of the vital forces of today a yet more glorious world.

At the moment we are under no compulsion of the law, or of authority. We are still freemen, at least in the world of the spirit. But the hounds of authority, power, and compulsion are at large in the world. Not since our ancestors fled their cruel exactions to lay the foundations of the New World in Freedom, have the forces of authority been so truculent and assertive, or so dangerous. We cannot escape the test. The clouds of the spirit that over-shadow the world of men, "All things betray thee, who betrayest me," or men will begin to feel that it is good to be with us, and that out of the clouds will come the ancient words, "This is my beloved son; hear him."