

Faith In Life

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By virtue of the nature of our being, we are possessed with an irrepressible instinct to live. This we share in common with all animal life. What that power, that force within us is we know not. We only know that it is. From the first convulsive efforts [of a] human embryo to the last dying gasp of the man who has lived the full allotment of life, we are in the power and the grasp of this mysterious and powerful instinct to live and to grow, to fulfill the functions of our being. This is an ultimate fact of the mystery of being.

But in the hands of intelligent beings such as men are, this instinct to live takes unto itself various characteristics which do not appear in the lower forms of life. In the course of the evolution of man from the instinct-serving animal to the ideal-serving human being, this instinct to live became transformed into a faith in life. So far as we know the jelly fish simply responds to this natural instinct and lives the life of its kind. So also with each form of life; it obeys the instinct to live and conforms to the limitations of its kind. The tree lives the life of the tree; the dog lives the life of the dog.

But in man, by virtue of the fact that he can remember, can reason, can formulate plans, and carry his plans into execution, if they conform to the laws of being, we are presented with another aspect of this instinct. So far as man continues to live, he is true to the animal type. But when he comes to ask himself, "What kind of a life shall I live? What kind of a man shall I become?" he is no longer a blind and obedient servant of the primal laws of his animal nature, but he takes those very laws into his grasp and makes them serve the ideals of the life that he strives to live and makes them contribute to the development of the kind of a man that he wishes to become. That is the deeper meaning of that statement by Jesus, "I came not to

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

destroy, but to fulfill."² We are shot through and through with instincts, so powerful, so pervading, so irrepressible that we cannot escape them if we would. There they are whether we like them or not. We may become their servile and humble slaves, or we may become their regulating masters. We may become the slave of our instinct to love, [and] follow like a servile cur wherever that powerful master may lead us, and finally enjoy the bitterness of being thrown upon the rocks alone, bruised and scarred by the rough and cruel handling that we have received from the master to whom we sold ourselves. On the other hand, we may assert our right to rule; we may become master and command our primal instinct to do our bidding, and it becomes a great and glorious force in our life. Aaron's rod, so long as he held it in his hand and under his control, was a rod of gold. But as soon as he threw it down, gave up his power over it, the rod becomes transformed into a hideous serpent.³ These instincts which we have, so long as we are master of them, so long as they serve our bid, are the sources of power by which we live. But once we let go the lever of control, we become the hollow shells of their tremendous force, to be cast here and there like a frail canoe in an angry storm. The same is true of the great and all-inclusive instinct to live. As its servants, we must obey its imperative commands and follow blindly wheresoever it may lead us. As its masters, by the aid of our knowledge and understanding, by force of our will, we may transform this primal instinct into a faith in life such as will fulfill a great and commanding purpose.

But just because we are men, just because we have some little knowledge gained through experience and preserved in memory, just because enough of the Infinite Will has been breathed into our being to enable us to say, "I will," we no longer deal with the plain instinct to live. You have watched the child as he begins to assert his personality, and begins to show his will power. You are witnessing the development of the supreme force of the universe. Just because man is man he does not deal with the simple instinct, but has to do with some kind of a faith in life.

So the question is, What shall be our faith in life? What kind of a life shall we have faith in? What shall be that ideal that

² Matthew 5:17.

³ See Exodus 7:10.

we see constantly before us, that cloud by day and that pillar of fire by night⁴, that shall lead us through the pleasant fields, that shall accompany us beside the still waters, that shall descend with us into the dark valleys, that shall go with us onto the high and rugged mountains? What shall be the guiding principle for us in those moments when we are brought face to face with some great problem in which we are called upon to decide between a selfish interest and a public duty? What kind of a picture is it that we have hidden away somewhere in the secret vaults of our personality which is the image of the God that we have painted for the God of things as they are? What is the nature, what is the quality, of that faith in life into which we have transformed that primal instinct to live?

To speak broadly, there are three kinds or qualities of faith in life that we may have before us as the guiding principle of our conduct. Into which one of these classifications we may find ourselves determines the totality of our character.

The first kind of faith that one may choose, the one that is nearest to servile obedience to the animal instinct, is faith in the life of pleasure or pursuit of happiness. This does not of necessity mean that the end to which one devotes himself is the satisfaction of the baser sort of animal passions, although such, even in their lowest examples, are pleasure seekers. But it means that attitude towards life that assumes that the fulfillment of desire and the satisfaction of appetites, the feeding of the hungry body, the feeding of the hungry mind, is the end and aim of all life.

Heav'n but the Vision of fulfilled desire,
And hell the shadow from a soul on fire.
Cast on the darkness into which ourselves,
So late emerged from, shall so soon expire.⁵

It matters not whether we find this kind of faith in the life of the sensualist of the most gross type, or in the person who seeks pleasure in [the] world of high thought, fine arts, music,

⁴ See Exodus 13:21.

⁵ This is a stanza from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883) English poet and writer, translated *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in 1859. Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) Persian polymath, known for contributions mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and poetry.

the point of view is the same. It has no active creative purpose, it is simply a dead sea into which the world pours the best as well as the foulest of the waters of human life, and from which it receives nothing in return. To whatever situation such a person may be presented, the first question to be asked is "What pleasure, what fun, shall I get out of it?" Such people, if necessity compels them to work, do their work simply that they may provide the means of satisfying their faith in life. At whatever cost to others, in moral degradation, in physical want, in mental suffering, these seekers of pleasure go in and out among us, grasping, reaching out, forever receiving, never giving, never contributing, never forgetting their own desires. "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die," is the popular maxim for this quality of faith in life. But deeper and truer are the lines of Rubaiyat

Yesterday, This Day's Madness did prepare;
Tomorrow's Silence, Triumph of Despair;. .
Drink, for you know not whence you came nor why:
Drink, for you know not why you go, nor where.⁶

By no more subtle tie is the chasm that apparently separates the degraded outcast who stands on the street corner waiting for some chance passer-by to give him a dime with which to feed his diseased craving for excitement, from the servile slave of luxury who waits for some chance excitement to arouse him from his dead sea of selfishness, ??? that by this tie of a common faith in life.

But just as there is no sharp dividing line between the bottom of the valley and the mountainside, so there is no sharp dividing line between this kind of a faith in life, and the faith in life that takes us into the world of creative activity. But when you are once out of the one grade of life and fairly well into the other, you feel as if you had come into a new heaven and a new earth. The air is more stimulating, you breathe more freely, you feel the subtle influence of an invigorating atmosphere about you. You have come into the world of those who believe in a life of accomplishment. They have the faith in a life of accomplishment. Their instinct to live has been transformed into a faith of creative activity.

⁶ Another stanza from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. See footnote 5.

Here you come into that great company of men and women who have done the world's work, who, through the infinite powers at their disposal, have made the world that we live in what it is. Here are those who have searched out the secrets of nature, those who, with unspeakable labor, have gained the mastery of the great forces, and the natural resources with which the earth is laden, and made them serve the needs of human life. Such as these have chained the mountain stream, and made it do the work of man. Such as these have explored the lands and the seas, stamping upon the whole earth the imprint of the working genius of the human soul. In the record of their lives and in the unwritten record of the countless millions who, forgotten except for the imprint that their work has made upon the accomplishments of a civilized world, is written a large part of the glorious history of the ascent of man. It is a glorious picture, full of inspiring incident, and rich uplifting activity. Such has been accomplished by those who have made their faith in life, the faith of an active achievement, the faith of ambition, the faith of a creative contribution to the work of the world.

But even this is not the highest kind of a faith in life. To one who reads more carefully the record of the faith of ambition, this faith that impels the man to do something, to make something of himself, to stand for some creative work, for some tangible power in the world, to one who reads this record carefully, there is many a dark and cruel page. Many even would say that it is a history written in blood, that it is the picture rather of a powerful and victorious army that has fought its way through tremendous armies of opposition. Many would say that this faith in life of realizing an ambition, has been but a bloody warfare in which might has made right, and strength has preyed upon weakness. It is a plain statement of fact that in this record of achievement, a selfish creative activity has worked a tremendous havoc, has caused an unmentionable amount of pain and cruel suffering. It is not a faith that fulfills the complete requirements of a noble life. It is a faith that is rich in results and defective in purpose, and the defect in purpose has left its imprint upon its history. The deeper nature of man demands something more. It is not satisfied with the plain flat accomplishment and achievement. The full faith in life not only asks what you are doing, and for what end are you doing it, but it goes even deeper than that, down to the very roots of moral purpose, and asks, "For whom are you doing it?"

As we are able to answer this in the deeper purposes of our life, do we declare our relationship to the highest moral idealism. The transition from the faith of achievement to the complete faith in the complete life is not great in itself, but it changes the whole nature and the aim of life. To the man who is accomplishing great things, this faith in the complete life says, "For whom are you working?" If the man replies for the purpose of expressing what is in me, for the purpose of satisfying my creative and productive impulses, the complete faith says, "You have not seen, you have not heard, neither has been revealed to you, the glory that awaits those who love life." If, again, the man replies, "I do this that I may become a famous and distinguished man, that my name may go down to posterity as one who has accomplished great things." Again, says the Complete Faith, "You know me not." Or, if the man replies that he does it that he may amass wealth, and gratify his love for power, or minister unto his friends, the Complete Faith says, "You have not yet achieved the great and supreme faith in human life." How clearly we feel in our own deepest nature, even though we do not ourselves rise to the height of that faith, that any great hero, anyone who in his life transcends the common level must rise to the height of self-forgetfulness, must submerge himself and his interests in the great, broad glorious interests of man. We deprecate that in the public man. How quickly would our respect in Lincoln fall to the very dust, if we imagined that in him was the secret purpose behind all that he did for this nation of so imprinting his name and his influence upon our national life that we should forever regard him as the great president of the American nation? Much rather do we like to think of him dropping on his knees in silent prayer, preparing to take the next step forward, caring not for himself, but caring only for the great principles of life and government to the cause of which he had long since given himself. To the complete faith in life, we demand that the man shall not only do, and accomplish, but that the supreme aim and purpose of his work shall be its ministering influence upon the wellbeing of mankind. We demand the purity of purpose. That this supreme heroism, this noble consecration of man to the great principle of life and the great interests of man has been, and is today, the living faith of many noble men and women, is the basis of our assurance that through the harsh noises of the day, a low sweet prelude finds its way. More and more, we are coming to estimate the life of man by the contribution that he makes to

the common good, by the persistency with which he adheres to the principles of noble living that assure us of the coming of the kingdom. Not in obedience to the law, but in fulfillment of the law is there life. We are coming to see that we are not here for the purpose of self-satisfaction, nor indeed for the purpose of self-expression, but that we may through the growing years of life, become the revealing channels of infinite truth in doing the world's work and in realizing that which is at once the aim of the great Good Will and the life of man.

That I may make more clear just what this complete faith in life is, and just how it works under concrete conditions, let me call to you an incident in the life of Jesus, the one which I read for a scripture lesson.⁷ As Jesus had grown from childhood to manhood he had dreamed the dreams that young men dream. With a keenness that sees to the very bottom of things, he had watched the formal religions of his time, he had observed the kind of lives that men live, and the cruelties and the viciousness of the selfish pleasure seekers, and the men of ambition. He had come to feel that he, and indeed each man, had a mission to perform in life, a truth to which he must bear witness; that the great purpose and aim of life was to love the truth of the living God and to love men in whom that truth was expressing itself. To do this was his faith in life, it was his life itself. As soon as he was relieved somewhat of the responsibility of caring for his mother and his brothers and sisters, as soon as he felt that he was free to do so, he went among the people of Palestine, teaching and preaching the glory of the life that he was living and persuading people to accept the complete faith in life such as he had. He found a response in the heart of the common people, for the faith that he had was the faith that they wished. They welcomed the man who could speak with the authority of the living God in the living soul. Then the multitudes came to him and listened, and were refreshed and strengthened, and went away healed in body and spirit. But in time there arose murmurings of discontent against him because he did teach and preach as did the scribes. In [the] course of months, this feeling of opposition became so strong, and so bitter, that Jesus felt that he must in time come face to face with it. The incident which I have read to you is the incident

⁷ Unfortunately the manuscript does not identify the scripture reading for the sermon. But, in light of the following text, it is likely from Matthew 16:22-26.

in which the consciousness of the result of this meeting dawns upon him. He and his disciples had been away upon a tour in the region about Jerusalem. They were now coming back. Jesus tells them that he must face this opposition, that it will doubtless mean his death. But that was right for it was in obedience to his principle of life. But Peter, who was an impulsive, warm-hearted, generous kind of a person, could not stand the thought of Jesus dying in this way for the principles which they had been teaching. Rather, Peter was anxious that he should live for them. He did not realize, as did Jesus, that there are times when the only thing that can be done is to die for a principle. So Peter said to Jesus,

Be it far from thee, Lord, this shall not be unto thee. But Jesus turned on Peter, and said to him, "Get thee behind me Satan; thou art a stumbling block unto me; for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men. Then Jesus turned to his disciples, and uttered one of the most majestic principles of human life, If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For who soever would save his life, shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it. For what shall a man be profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and forfeit his life, or what shall a man give in exchange for his life?"⁸

What a noble and majestic faith in life. How it transcends the faith in life as a series of disconnected events of pleasure, or the faith in life as fulfillment of an ambition at any cost. To have the faith that your life and mind is somehow a thing of importance to human life, that we are the bearers of a message of infinite worth from the source of all truth to the finite life of man, to feel that it is our work, our joy and our fulfillment of life to deliver that message to man through noble living, or, if need be, through [a] noble death, that is the complete faith in the complete life. In some unspeakable way, we feel that that is the deeper significance of human life, that it is the faith unto which we would attain.

Why cannot we get up onto the mountaintop of a faith in life of service and contribution? Why cannot we build there the fires of an unquenchable faith in the worth of human life, and let the flames from these fires mount higher and higher until they

⁸ Matthew 16:22-26.

become a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night that shall guide those who are still on the rugged mountainside of achievement, and those who are in the deep gulf of pleasure-seeking, up into the clear open heights where life becomes life. More than that, with the beacon lights burning upon the mountaintop of your idealism, leave the heights of transfiguration, go down the mountainside to the world of ambition, go down into the very deepest valleys of selfishness where the mountaintop is hidden by the thicket and the underbrush, and beginning there, clear the way to the top, and lead men into the way and the truth and the light. Carry them by the very strength of your understanding heart, by the force of your mighty purpose, and the power of your indomitable will, up the rugged mountainside of ambition until the very summit is reached, and the things that are seen lose themselves in the unseen, and the finite feels itself calling unto the deep of the infinite with the voice of eternal truth.

Have you that complete faith in life? Do you want it? It is yours for the asking. But you must ask in the language of the whole soul.