

For the Joy of Living

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You all feel that life should be joyous; that the feelings, the thoughts, and the activities of each day should bring to you a deep and abiding satisfaction in the very fact that you are living. You like to feel at the close of each day a certain sense of thankfulness at the very joy of drawing the breath of life, of feeling human feelings, of thinking noble thoughts, of useful things. You like to lie down to rest at night, filled with the joyous expectancy of the day to which you shall awake from a restful and refreshing sleep. You would like always to feel that deep peace in life that is said to pass all understanding.

Somehow you feel that such a rich satisfaction in life belongs to you. You know that when a day has passed in which you have not taken delight in your feelings, thoughts and actions, you cannot escape the conviction that in some way you have been cheated out of what rightfully belongs to you. On such days you feel a kind of an aching void in your being. You cannot tell just what it is that you have missed, but there is the witness to the lack of something that is and of right should be a part of your life. By virtue of the very nature of your being, you know that there should be joy in living. If perchance you do not find that satisfying joy in the life that you live day by day, you somehow nourish the conviction that somewhere, somehow you will come upon that peace that passeth all understanding.² That there should be joy in the very fact of living—is a conviction that cannot be driven from or crushed out of the mind of man.

The truth of your convictions is confirmed by all that we know of the history of humanity. That legend which tells us that Moses went down into Egypt and freed the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, and led them up into the promised land, is a

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from May 24, 1908 to August 9, 1908.

² See Philippians 4:7.

great human document. Whether it relates the true history of actual events does not matter. It does give a glorious and an enlightening picture of the deepest instincts of humanity. Carroll D. Wright³ understood the meaning of the story and understood [the] meaning of our modern life when he spoke of Moses as the great walking delegate, and the flight of the children of Israel as a great strike.⁴ Both the legend of the children of Israel and the unrest of modern times together with all the intervening history of the human race go to convince you that your conviction that life should be joyous in the living is true and is grounded in the very nature of your being.

I might also show you that all the events and the conditions that make life unhappy, that bring unnecessary suffering, that produce the fruits of evil, discontent and cruelty in our times, as in all times, are the fruit of this same impulse, this same hungering and thirst for that which satisfies. But because of ignorance and lack of discipline the ceaseless search for that which satisfies brings many to that which satisfies not, even to that which destroys and crushes life and ends in bitterness, and cruel want.

³ Carroll D. Wright (1840-1909) was an early statistician and was the first U.S. Commissioner of Labor from 1885 to 1905. In 1893 he was placed in charge of the Eleventh (1890) census. In 1902 he published *Some Ethical Phases of the Labor Question* with the American Unitarian Association. Also in 1902 he was appointed President of Clark College—the undergraduate school at Clark University (my current employer) in Worcester, Massachusetts—a position in which he served until his death in 1909.

⁴ In his 1906 book, *The Battles of Labor* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co, pp. 27-8) Wright does describe the story of Exodus as the first great strike, led by Moses. The phrase describing Moses as the "great walking delegate" I can only find in a report of the National Social and Political Conference that took place in Buffalo, June 28th through July 4th 1899: "On Organized Labor Prof. Robert E. Ely spoke first, urging use of Union label goods, and was followed by J. R. Sovereign, ex-Master Workman of the K. of L. who made the main speech. He referred to Moses as the great walking delegate to lead the Israelites on the first great strike because they had to make bricks with straw." *The Direct Legislation Record*, Newark, New Jersey, Volume VI, No. 3, July 1899, p. 37.

Browning⁵ not only touches the deepest beliefs of the individual, but also he gives expression to humanity's ideal, and the very nature of things, in these words:

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good, shall
exist;
Not its semblance, but itself: no beauty, nor good,
nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the
sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by and
by.⁶

But there lurks even here in this beautiful passage of Browning's the shadow of that gaunt specter that is always making mischief in the life of Man. With what persistency does the notion that the life we live is, so mean, so small, so evil, that we must forever dispense with the joy of living in the present, and postpone the satisfactions of life to some far off time or eternity. I hate and despise that idea that life is so compassed with limitations that human nature is so base and vile that we cannot live good, noble, joyous lives each day that we draw the breath of life. If it were true that there is a devil who is striving to bring to degradation and destruction the men and women who live this life or ours, he could not have instituted a doctrine that would have better served his purpose than the doctrine that human nature is depraved, and that man may come to his own only through the intervention of some supernatural power. We let the ghost of this evil notion still linger with us day after day when we excuse our mistakes and follies and continue to be led by them saying to ourselves that it is our nature. We do not know what our nature is, if we for one moment think that we are bound to a life that must, by necessity, express itself in evil. That is mock humility, that leads us to think that we render homage to God when, like

⁵ Robert Browning (1812-1889) English poet.

⁶ Robert Browning, "Abt Vogler," 10th stanza, 1864. Georg Joseph (Abt) Vogler (1749-1814) was a German composer, and in this poem Browning imagines him older and meditating on the purpose and value of his life.

whining curs, we declare our incapacity and inability to live decent and satisfying lives. There is not one natural impulse, there is not one ingrained aspiration of human life that has the least tinge of evil or wickedness in it. Only as we fall victim to the accursed notion that we are puppets to be led hither and yon by the chance caprice of those impulses and passions and appetites that should be our servants instead of our masters, does human life take on the aspect of evil and hideous tragedy. People think that they honor Christ by drawing a sharp contrast between his perfection and their own imperfection, by declaring that they can live the good life only as they receive help from him. Let us dispense with this mock humility, and stand on our feet like the men that we ought to be, and declare our faith not by word, but by deed, and a living conviction that life should be joyous in the living, and the fruits of life should be nobility and strength, and goodness even on earth as in heaven, even in reality of events as in the dreams of moments of consideration.

Your very soul hungers and thirsts for the life that satisfies, for the life that shall bring joy and deep returns as each day passes, and accumulates a potentiality for life that shall make you feel that it is worthwhile to be immortal. If you would realize that satisfaction, banish from your mind from this time forth and forevermore the idea that you are forever a victim of evil. In you is the divine life to be unfolded and disclosed in days that shall be joyous as they pass, and by their fruitfulness shall link themselves to eternity and infinity.

But there is another aspect of this joyous life that is very much misunderstood. To be sure it is only another side of that pernicious doctrine that we are base depraved beings. We have been taught that human nature is essentially selfish and self-seeking. In the background of all the religious teaching of centuries has lurked this idea that man is essentially and solely a self-seeking animal. Analyze as you will the doctrines of salvation in the Catholic or in the Protestant churches and you cannot find one single suggestion of unselfish generous idealism. The faith was to be accepted in due form, in order that one might escape the terrors of punishment, and enjoy the felicities of eternal happiness. One was to acknowledge himself as a believer in salvation through Christ for the same purpose. But rarely do you find the evidence of that great a generous

conception of an unselfish interest in the human being such breaths in the whole atmosphere of the early Christian church. To be sure there has always been some place for the deeds of charity that were looked upon as the expression of the regenerate life. But there has always been that suggestion of mock piety in connection with these charities of the regenerate that has cast a very black cloud of suspicion over them. Were they the evidence of a real and human interest in a fellow man or were they a part of the price that one must pay in order to assure himself of the enjoyment of his own life. Great have been the professions of love for Christ but those expressions of love have not always been free from the suspicion that this alleged love for Christ has only been a concealed self-love. But I think that those who have appealed to the generous love of a man for his fellow man have been nearer to the truth of the human soul than has the church in its appeal to the self-seeking schemes of a personal salvation. Do not your own deeper feelings bear witness to a big and generous interest in the life of your fellow man? Is not the record of history written quite as much in the blood of those who have given themselves and their all to a large broad and noble-minded service to the wellbeing of mankind, as it is in the blood of those who have purchased what they thought to be their own good at the sacrifice of others? Is it not true also that even those who have sought their own good at the cost of another's downfall have been compelled to do it under the cover of some alleged disinterested service? Do not your own feelings of remorse and your sense of your own meanness at your selfishness bear witness to your natural capacity for a large and generous service for the life of Man? If you have ever been led into any kind of activity in which you have entirely forgotten your own interests, and given yourself up with a whole-souled abandonment to the interest and the life of another, did you not notice how much it seemed as if you were completely fulfilling your function in life?

This idea that we are essentially selfish, which has been indirectly taught us by the doctrines of the church, has of late apparently been confirmed and strengthened by the teachings of modern science. In the doctrine of evolution we have been taught that the instinct to self-preservation is the first and primal interest of Man. Under the guise of the supposed meaning of this doctrine, we have allowed ourselves all kinds of liberties, and excused ourselves for all kinds of follies. The struggle for existence and the survival of the fit in a world of selfish

self-seeking [individuals] has been the patron saint of our modern life. It has been a cruel and a fierce school, but it is teaching us not alone the error made by theology in assuming that the end and aim of human life is self-preservation either here or hereafter, but it is teaching us one great and fundamental truth that is only now coming to be clearly seen. True, indeed, it is that self-preservation is a fundamental instinct of human life, but we must distinguish between the instinct for self-preservation as an end purpose in human life, and self-preservation as the method or means for [the] realization [of] a great purpose. Make this distinction clear in your mind. Self-preservation is not the purpose of life. The propagation of the species, to use a term of science, is the purpose of life, and self-preservation is the method by which we realize that end. To carry the same idea from the science of biology, we do not seek for the health of the body simply for our own end, but that we may the more efficiently carry out our purpose of maintaining a high efficiency of human life. We do not seek knowledge for the purposes of self-culture as an end, but we seek knowledge and wisdom that we may the more efficiently propagate our species. We do not seek goodness as a means of satisfying our own selfish interests but for the greater and more noble purpose of making human life richer and better. Self-preservation is indeed a primal instinct, but it is not an instinct of purpose it is an instinct of method. The primal instinct of purpose in men is the instinct of the propagation of the species. And this instinct of the propagation of the species, when translated into the large language of human life and human relationships becomes the doctrine of brotherly love, which in its best and truest expression means the recognition of the worth of the individual not for itself as an end, but as a means and a method of rendering service to mankind as a whole.

Herein lies the second secret of the joyous life. Richness and satisfaction in life comes only in the fulfillment of life's functions. The fulfillment of life is measured, not by what you accumulate for yourself, but by what you give to the life of Man. Your personality is of worth, not because you have been training and disciplining yourself for your own good as the end and aim of life, but because you have been disciplining and training yourself for the service of man, in truth, in goodness, and in beauty. That which we call brotherly love, or altruism, is not a feeling or a characteristic that is foreign to the

natural man. It is not an artificial coat of piety with which we sometimes cloth ourselves to satisfy a deeper hidden selfishness. It is indeed the high and the fundamental purpose of human life. The primary and instinctive purpose of animal life which appears under the form of the desire to propagate the species, becomes in the process of evolution the large broad and generous feeling of brotherly love. Broadened by an enlightened self-consciousness, purified by the power of selective reason, transformed and transfigured by the wide and sympathetic experiences in human life, that which appears as but a blind instinct in its earliest forms, becomes a great broad large-minded purpose. Self-interest defeats its own end, and brings to one only loneliness, isolation and bitterness, simply because it does not fulfill the function and purpose in human life. Seek to find the secret of life of that person who finds life satisfying and rich, who takes delight in every breath that he draws, who is rich in human experience, who is charged with a powerful dynamic of purpose. You will soon see that his satisfying life comes not from what he has, but from what he is able to give, his wisdom seems of value only as something that he may give; you will find that all his life, all his thought, all his activity, is focused on the great objects and purposes of mankind. Where his treasure is, there will his heart be also. He who seems greatest and happiest among you, or rather he who is greatest and happiest among you, becomes so because he has become the servant of all. Because he has become the servant of all, he is fulfilling the great purpose [and] function of human life, and in the fulfillment of life's function is the satisfying joy and the peace that passeth all understanding. That teaching of Jesus in the sermon on the mount which says that man should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,⁷ is not the dream of a sentimental religious fanatic, but, indeed, it is the sane and sensible utterance of a sane and sensible man. Insofar as one follows it, life will be rich and satisfying and that dismal hungering vacuity which drives us from hiding place to hiding place will disappear. We are sometimes told that Jesus was giving the advice of folly to the rich young man who has asked him what he must do to inherit the life eternal. Jesus told him to go and sell all that he had and give it away. It was sound and sane advice. Jesus saw that the young man had tied himself to a stake in a dismal swamp, and the only way to get out of the swamp was to pull up stakes and

⁷ Matthew 6:33.

get up onto the mountaintop. Wealth as a means of increasing the service one may render to the life of man is a great blessing, but wealth as an end and aim in life, is certainly the root of all evil. It would be well for the joy and the satisfaction of many if they should take their wealth and dump it into the nearest river, and go to work at something that is worthwhile for the life of Man as whole.

You think that your life should be joyous and satisfying. So do I. But if it is not, if you feel that you have been deprived of something that the very depths of your being requires, just remember that the divine law of life is that you must live to fulfill life's function in the service of mankind, and in that life shall come the peace that passeth understanding.

Do you not feel that the demands of life today afford you a great and a noble opportunity to do a work, to make a contribution of your best thought, of your highest consecration, of your noblest self, to meet its needs and to minister unto the moral, the social and the spiritual wellbeing of humanity? Can you not feel the potential joy in throwing your whole soul and your whole being into the work that shall be the work of the ages, that shall free human life from the terrible evils to which I called your attention last week, that shall make it possible for people to live for the joy of living? Do you really wish to live the satisfying life? Throw yourself into glorious service of Man that we may purify the temple, the only temple of the living God, the soul of man. And I say unto you that whosoever shall lose his life for the sake of humanity, for the sake of the living Christ that is now being crucified on the cross of our selfishness, shall find it. Give yourself body and soul to this eternal work of Man, and the satisfying joy that you have been seeking in every nook and corner except the right one, will follow as the shadow follows you.