

Our Growing Hunger for an Absorbing Service

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Pittsfield, MA

November 6, 1908¹

I wish to speak this morning upon a theme that seems to me so pressing and so vital that even every thought and act of our modern life betrays its presence lurking in the background. I have taken for a subject, "Our Growing Hunger for an Absorbing Service." I suppose that if I had chosen to use a more strictly religious or theological phraseology I would have call it, "Our Growing Hunger for the Living God." That statement suggest perhaps a little more deeply what I wish to say, yet I want to deal with the more apparent aspects of the theme. I am sure that if you stop to think of it you will see clearly what I mean when I say that almost every aspect of our social life today [is] a manifestation of an underlying feeling of hunger for some relationship of human life that we lack. Believing, as I do, in the essentially divine character of human nature, I cannot view certain aspects of our modern life without reflecting upon their deeper and hidden meaning. Perhaps I should say upon their unconscious meaning. I am certain that beneath the surface of unrest and change of our time there is the deep and all-powerful stream of human aspiration carrying us nearer to the great ocean where freedom and purity shall be the elements in which we shall navigate our little crafts.

As an evidence of this underlying hunger for that which we have not, we have only to call to our mind one or two of the characteristics of our conventional weaknesses. Take for example our reading. It may be an evidence of our advanced culture that we demand so many books and do such a vast amount of reading. But if you go into a book store and look over the list of the popular books, and take a sample taste or two from their heterogeneous mass and what do you find? It reminds me of nothing so much as it does of a lot of hot water highly seasoned and served for soup to satisfy the needs of a hungry man. You get a lot of sickly sentimentality, mixed with a fair amount of

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

more or less improbable adventure. All of this is padded with a diluted mess of incoherent moral preachments. Yet these books are bought by the thousand and read by people who are looking for food for thought. I do not mean to say that all people read these books. Yet it is safe to say that the publishers are not putting them on the market as a missionary enterprise. They keep coming and a hungry public ravenously grabs for them, rushes through their insipid pages, and still hungry and dissatisfied reaches out for more. Apply the same line of thought to the popular magazines. Suppose that we fed our bodies with food similar in character to the insipid stuff that we offer to a hungry mind.

Or think for a moment of the wild popularity of that modern theatrical production, the Vaudeville. To be sure, it is a delightful kind of a relaxation to watch such a diversion in the way of public entertainment. Yet how can you account for the fact that a town of this size gives the patronage to so much of this sort of a thing as it does unless there is a hungering unrest for something that people want and do not know how to find?

There is yet another aspect of this evidence of hunger that is all too apparent. In the current number of the *Atlantic Monthly* there is a very interesting article under the title, "Anthropomania."² Here again, if you stop to think of it, is an interesting suggestion. The public lecture is no longer popular unless you can bring before the public a man who is famous for something. After he has come and gone you can hardly find a man who has [anything] to say about the ideas which the lecturer presented, or the way in which he treated the subject in its relations to our great problems. Men will comment upon his personality, upon his influence as a personality, upon the audience, and his pleasing effect as a speaker, but to get them to go into the permanent or abiding value of the address is the most difficult. We delight in the experiences of the man, and in the striking nature of his personality. But when we have come away from his presence, the whole thing has become but another hour of passive pleasure in which we have obliterated our own personality as a creative and constructive force.

² Wilbur Larremore (1855-1918) "Anthropomania," *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 102, 1908, pp. 668-674.

Is not this a confirmation of the idea that is suggested by the theme for this morning? As a whole have we not obliterated our sense of personal worth as creative and responsible beings? Is it not just because we do not find in ourselves that which we would find, that we rush off willy-nilly flowing to every chance personality who has done something, and still more prostrate ourselves before him, and drink from his experiences an imaginative imitation of that which we are not, but would be. Is it not for this same indefinable reason that we pour over the commonplace books that we may satisfy our instinctive craving for life which we do not get ourselves and which we are thus trying to get out of books, and poor books at that. All this hungry drinking of second-hand emotion and second-hand sentiment, and second-hand aspiration, and second-hand piety, is but a too apparent confession that we are looking for some real emotion, real sentiment, real aspiration, real noble consciousness of life in its deepest and its most satisfying significance. However hard we may struggle against the fact, do we not have to admit to ourselves at times this feeling of the relative unimportance of our individual personal lives? Does not this hungering sense for a more absolute service and work in life grow out of the fact that we have largely obliterated our sense of the value and the importance of human life?

Now let us see how we have arrived at this situation. Take it first in the industrial world. Time was when a workman at his trade worked in such a way as to be able to stamp his personality upon his work. He did a perceptible bit of productive work. Our word, "shoemaker," is a survival of the time when a man made a shoe from beginning to end. He took his few tools and patterns and his pieces of leather to his task and out of them he produced with his own hands the complete finished product of a pair of shoes. Today the word shoemaker refers to any one of the hands who has done a very small bit of the work in the production of a shoe. The shoe passes through more than fifty hands, and goes to the store a finished product, but it is an entirely impersonal thing. This tremendous change has been of great value for the consumer, but it has destroyed the possibility of any hope of the enlargement and expansion of the men who make shoes. This is but an illustration of the entire change that has taken place in the industrial world. The fact is that in a great part of the work that is being done, while a certain amount of skill is required, the great factor of personality has been almost entirely eliminated. A dozen or a

hundred men may be working along, side-by-side, doing the same job in precisely the same way. Each one knows that, so far as his work is concerned, his death would be hardly noticed. A new man would go on the next day and in a day or two everything would go on as before. Every workman knows this situation, and it tends to minimize his sense of personal worth. It creates a feeling of despairing unrest in him, and makes the work by which he earns his daily bread seem to him to be irksome and uninteresting. Hence, his discontent and hunger for a more absorbing service.

Very naturally under such conditions men come to measure themselves by the rate of their wages. This tendency to measure men in terms of money has become so common that we can hardly avoid it. Not long since a minister was coming to this city to deliver an address and he was advertised as a minister who gets [a] \$5,000.00 salary. Pray, where would Christ stand if he were measured on that basis? A man dies and we ask how much he left in money. A new person moves to town and the amount of his salary or his income is whispered abroad, and he receives his rating on that basis. Perhaps I am stating this too strongly, but can you say that we are free from this vicious standard of measure?

What does it mean? It means that we have dethroned personality, and instead of measuring things in terms of personality, we have reversed the process, and measure personality in terms of things.

Thus I might go on to point out to you the fact that we have carried our individualism to such an extreme that we have produced a few monstrosities in the way of financial captains and buccaneers, and also certain literary and social elephants about which we talk, concerning whom we read, and to see whom we rush. The rest of us have forgotten that we have any personality, and we drop back into the great mass of poor and the commonplace. We forget that our next door neighbor may be a far greater personality than the monstrosity upon whom we long to set our eyes. Do you suppose that the people of Israel ever imagined that the poor Herdsman of Tekoa³ would ever be looked upon as the great prophet and that his words would ever be spoken three thousand years after he uttered them? Do you think

³ See the Old Testament book of Amos.

that Jesus was looked upon by the people of his time in any other light than that of a poor ignorant peasant? Yet history shows that he was the great personality of his time. He found personality among the poor fishermen of his town.

Now it is just because we have overlooked the importance of our own personality, and have allowed ourselves to be obliterated by the mass, that we have this hungry feeling of the inefficiency of our lives. Not having faith and confidence in our own worth and our own responsibility, not rising to the height of really living a creative productive life which shall absorb and direct the control [of] all our actions, we fall back upon the expedient of getting our experiences secondhand from the reading of books and the listening to the lectures and addresses of men and women who have really done something. Tired of this, we fall down to the plain of passive inactivity, waiting listlessly for the accident of some incident that shall send a thrill of life through our bodies. Thus the devotee of social pleasure, and the sensualist. Not having the faith in life that makes men and women, they inevitably revert to the lower forms of savage life, depending upon the tickling sensations of the body, and the vanity of display to satisfy the deeper aspirations of the great human soul. And still we hunger and thirst for a deeper bond, a more absorbing sense of life and the value of the daily living in the great welfare of the human race. We still long to think that we are of importance to the welfare of humanity and the great world process. With wistful eyes, and hungry souls we wander about in a half-dazed condition like Lear, lost in storm and the threatening murmurings of humanity. How shall we satisfy that hunger? That is the question.

Go to those very men upon whom we feed our very being by the ever-flowing strength which comes from the very abundance of their lives. What did they have more than you and I? You say that they were geniuses. Perhaps they were, but genius is not such a strange thing. It consists largely in two things, which you and I may have if we but choose. It consists first of all of the fact that in every human life there is something of infinite worth to the world. And it consists in the faithful adherence to the work of giving to the world that which is within.

Take the illustration of the life of Jesus. In him we see that sublime self-assertion which declared to the world, "To this end

have I been born and to this end have I come into the world that I should bear witness to the truth." He does not say that he came to make money, to get on [in] the world and lift himself from the working class to the loafing class. That was not his point. He came to bear witness to the truth. That was his one fundamental truth. So completely was he filled with this idea that human life as a whole, and in the individual, has an infinite significance, that he declared to the astonished people, "I and my Father are one."⁴ In him was the infinite wisdom and the infinite truth. You say that to do that would be the act of a fool. Yet consider what it means. We live in a world ordered in intelligence. Through experience we come to an understanding of that intelligence. Our experience is of value, our life is a necessity to the world, it wants our contribution. More than that, even if our experience is not such as to render any great contribution to new thought and to new purpose, we must always realize that the ideals of any time are ahead of the actual conditions. The world needs our ideals transformed into living realities. Thus we may become creative and living forces working together with the infinite in the unfolding development of the universe. Let that give us a sense of worth and importance. We come from the infinite bearing a message to the finite. It is a work and a duty that floods our life with a radiance of infinite worth. Let us not assume that we have as important a message as Jesus had to bear, but at least let us realize the apparent fact that we...⁵

⁴ John 10:30.

⁵ Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, incomplete.