

## The Spiritual Realities of Everyday Life

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Just at present there is another one of those waves of religious enthusiasm rolling in upon us. They come about every generation, rolling in upon the beach of everyday life, break, and roll out again into the deep. Just how much good they accomplish is very difficult to estimate. But that question is not to the point anyway. The waves of intense religious feeling are facts of life. We must deal with them as facts, involving somewhat abnormal conditions of religious enthusiasm. Nor must we condemn them just because they are abnormal. In this life, and the conditions thereof, we are compelled to deal with the abnormal as well as the normal, with the exceptional as well as the commonplace. Life itself would be but a humdrum affair if there were not times of intense enthusiasm, if there were not times when the commonplace is forgotten in the exciting pursuit of the particular and the spectacular. In our individual lives we are compelled by the nature of our being to intersperse the plodding of everyday affairs, by periods of intensity in which we respond to the enthusiasm of the moment, give ourselves up to its delight, rise to the full height of its intensity, then the tension breaks and we fall back somewhat exhausted by the excitement but ready to take up the old plodding tasks with renewed vigor and zest. This same necessity holds true equally well in the common life of the social order. Thus do we progress. True, then, to the nature of our lives, we are witnessing the rise of one of those periods of intensity that are essential, speaking broadly, to the spiritual life of man. Aside from the particular form in which it happens to mold itself, and the stimulation that it will give to the intellectual problems and the moral questions arising from it, and indeed, quite aside from the particular centers of intensity where people feel directly its intoxicating influence, and where people become a part of the mob thus intoxicated, there arises a question of no small import to those who by temperament will not

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give themselves up to such spectacular and excessive period of intensity of religious feeling.

The tendency during such periods of intensity is to reaffirm the old distinction between the sacred and the secular, to see the Infinite in the special and the particular, and to fail to him in the common and the ordinary, to see him in the terrific storm, and not to see him in the sunshine and the gentle rain of life; to see him in the volcano pouring its great clouds of vapor and lava, and not to see him in the mountain rising majestic and sublime, bathed in the soft lights of its common beauty; to see him in the terrific destruction of the earthquake, and not to see him in the quiet, obscure transformation of a growing world; to see him in the quick, convulsive efforts of revolution, and fail to see him in the long slow process of evolution that makes its quiet preparation in solitude. These periods of intensity move always in the direction of making people feel that, in their own lives, the only time that they come into the presence of the infinite is when they are under the pressure of excitement, and, wrought upon by their feelings, they find themselves in the grip of [a] deep sense of piety. When, thus stimulated and lifted up, they overlook the divine in the commonplace, in the plodding duties of everyday life. I do not mean to affirm that the divine is not in the spectacular and the special, but I wish to point out and reaffirm the thought of the spiritual realities of everyday life. There, if anywhere, in all the events of this glorious human life, does the infinite breath into the life of man its breath of majesty and grandeur. I suppose that some people would call me foolish and sentimental because of the fact that I feel as I do about the sanctity of the common things of life, nevertheless, it is to me one of the deepest joys to feel and see the glowing light of the infinite in all these little commonplace things that make life what it is. In them I find the spiritual realities that link us together in the mysterious bond of human life, and tie us by the alluring ties of spiritual kinship to the great unseen life about us.

May I illustrate a little more in detail what I mean by the spiritual realities of everyday life. No small part of the total experience of life comes from our relations with nature. In fact, we are organically a part of nature, blood of her blood, and bone of her bone. In us there is all that there is in nature, and more. Out of the lichen, clinging to some rock high

up on the mountainside, out of the flower blossoming in some obscure corner of the meadow, out of the wild animal lightly leaping through the underbrush of the forest, out of the life of the prehistoric man, standing in dumb awe before the majesty of nature, out of all these we see the fine spun lines of association and descent that link us by the subtle ties of blood, we might almost say, to all the barren twigs, to all the growing leaves, to all the daintily colored, and beautifully carved flowers, to all the gentle, as well as the most ferocious, animals, from which, together with ourselves, the life of nature is made. It is all a part of us. Sometimes we feel it with such intensity, with such delicacy of touch as to be quite inspired by it, as when Emerson wrote his famous lines to the Rhodora. In these lines we find expressed the deepest and the best of the mysterious relationship by which we feel ourselves bound to the common things of nature.

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,  
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,  
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,  
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.  
The purple petals fallen in the pool  
Made black water with their beauty gay;  
Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,  
And court the flower that cheapens his array.  
Rhodora! If the sages ask thee why  
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,  
Tell them, dear, that, if eyes were made for seeing,  
Then beauty is its own excuse for Being;  
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!  
I never thought to ask; I never knew;  
But in my simple ignorance suppose  
The self-same power that brought me there, brought you.<sup>2</sup>

Delicate as is the touch of tribute to the obscure beauty of the hidden flower, no less appealing to our deeper nature is the tacit assumption of relationship between the flower and the poet that rises almost to the height of personality. It suggests, rather than teaches, that sublime truth of things wherein we find the spiritual significance for our life of the common things of the world in which we live. The self-same power that

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<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American writer, poet, founder of American transcendentalism. His poem, The Rhodora, was published in 1847 in the first of two volumes of his poetry.

brought the flower here brings you and me. That which is beauty in the color and the form of the flower, that which is growing and expanding life in its seed germ, is in us also life, thought, reason, hope, aspiration, love, consecration, and all that makes human life sublime. Whether we consider the lilies of the field that toil not or spin, or the heavens that declare the glory of God, the firmament that showeth his handiwork, or the Rhodora giving forth its beauty by the side of the pool, it is all the same tale and the same message, speaking the spiritual reality of our relationship to the common things of nature.

Yet not all of nature is equally sacred in our eyes. To everyone there are spots endeared to our life by some sacred association. Who has not some spot in the hills, or some quiet nook by the riverside, which is alive with the teeming thoughts of hallowed memory. Perhaps some great thought, some great hope, some great passion, has there opened up to us the vast possibilities of human life. We become transfused and would fain erect there a temple to the spot that has now become a part of us. Each one of us, as we grow more and more into the fullness of life, sets aside his little secluded spots wherein he has seen the burning bush of hope, or friendship, or of love. Though all the world may stop and look upon those very same spots, they cannot enter the secret temple of the most high, that temple not made with hands, eternal in the soul, that we have erected there. Let us not forget that here in these endeared holy-grounds of ours we have heard the call of the Infinite beckoning us to all the glorious possibilities of human life. In these spots particularly we feel the sense of the spiritual realities of the ties that bind us to nature and to each other.

In what I have already said I have not been able to eliminate the second source from which we get our revelations of the spiritual realities of everyday life. Whatever else in life may seem cold and unmeaning, none of us can escape the mysterious influence of personalities. Herein is the great spiritual reality, upon which we lay our most violent hands, and in so doing destroy the very richest things of life. All about us, from those who are nearest and dearest to us in life, to the far away stranger who has never crossed our path, the world is alive with these strange mysterious human beings. In them are all the passions, all [the] possibilities, all the half-expressed hopes and longings, all the hungerings and thirstings after life and

life's meaning that there is in each one of us. I would that I could put into poetic form the thoughts that arise in me when I think of this transcendent fact of human life. Never yet has its glory and its beauty been sung. How belittling and degrading has been [the] attempt to condemn the mass of mankind, and to exalt, and deify the few chosen ones. That is a fatal error, not only in thought, but in morals, which confines the idea of the incarnation to its manifestation in one historic personage. We do not always realize the full significance of that remark that God is no respecter of persons.<sup>3</sup> It may be that one may play a more conspicuous role in the affairs of life, but it is not certain that one plays a more important role than another. The incarnation of the spirit of the living God is not alone in the prophets, and the Christs, but in the millions who have lived their lives, have stumbled and fallen, only to rise again. Can we rise to the height of thinking of the incarnation of the infinite in humanity? Let your imagination and your sympathy break down the barriers that shut you from the spiritual realities of the human soul as they should exist for you in the lives of the men and the women among whom you live. Be big enough, and broad to apply to the human beings live among you that thought which Emerson addressed to the Rhodora, "The self-same power that brought me there, brought you."

Do not judge everyone by your own standards, but try to judge righteously, that you may see the world as others see it. The broken fragments of the temple of human fellowship blindly destroyed, over which we plod a weary way, is the saddest sight that one faces. Let us not damn its failures, but with a clear and open soul raise on high the standard of the universal sanctity of human life. I know not how to express to you feelings on this thought, but I hate arrogance, and snobbishness; I hate that "holier than thou" attitude of mind, which draws away the hem of the garment fearing lest we may be soiled by the blemish of ignorance or sin. Let us be ourselves, free and clear, and take men as they are. If we do not find the rugged healthy blossom of a nobility such as we desire, let us at least be honest enough to assume that under the same circumstances we too might have failed. I did not mean to let this criticism appear, but we so rob ourselves and everyone else of the great spiritual reality of human fellowship, but our intellectual and moral snobbishness, that we mar the lives of

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<sup>3</sup> See Romans 2:11-16.

all and ruin the lives of many. Yet here before us is the possibility of a spiritual reality that would transform life into a veritable paradise. Consider the deeper meaning of Lowell's interpretation of the search for the Holy Grail. Not in that far-off prophet, or Christ, not in the living man of great intellect and influence, alone, but in the nearby person lying at our very door under the burden too great to carry, is to be found that holy grail of life.<sup>4</sup> Humanity is sacred as a whole, and so is each least individual. Out of the great mass that you cannot know, but as chance and the deeper feelings of life permit, gather together the sacred few of your friends. Become transfigured with them in lofty purpose, and high aspiration, and through them and your understanding of them, honor and love and respect the human soul. Then wherever you come upon the man you know not, his life instantly becomes alive to you in interest and profound sympathy. Feel yourself drawn to it, and give what is in you. That love and honor which men have been told to shower upon Christ of two thousand years ago, let us shower upon the Christ of today, whether he be wearing himself away under the burden of labor, or ignorance, or sin. The spiritual reality of life takes its tone and coloring from the way and manner in which we relate ourselves spiritually, in the things of truth, goodness and beauty, to those among whom we live.

Out of this conception of the relationship with men arises the sublime thought of life, the spiritual reality of our ideals. We know not whence they come, and hardly do we know whither they goeth, but there they are, the supreme facts of life. Out of all that vast world of thought and experience, stretching behind us for ages and ages, has been gleaned the wisdom, and the knowledge that we have. We stand here today the acme of things accomplished, the container of things to be. These ideals, these dreams, these visions of a new heaven and a new earth, for ourselves and the world in which we live, are the supreme forces that link us to each other, to the Infinite and eternity. In them we put all the gleanings of the past and that last touch of spontaneous originality that each one brings into the world

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<sup>4</sup> James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) American poet, critic and diplomat. He published the poem, "The Vision of Sir Launfal" in 1848. The poem describes a knight who decides against taking a journey in search of the Holy Grail after coming to understand from a dream that the real meaning of the Holy Grail is charity.

through his life. Strange mysterious alluring dreams in which we have felt a Presence that disturbs us with a joy of elevated thought. In our own visions, in our own dreams, in our own ideals to which we consecrate ourselves in simplicity in honor and in integrity, is the voice of God sending us down into some Egypt to free some children of Israel from bondage. They hover about by day, they brood over us by night, they condemn our weaknesses, they give us strength, they fill our life with the overflowing richness of its all-absorbing spiritual realities in the everyday things that we do.