

What Go Ye Out To Seek?

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I want to tell the tale of the plain human soul, to ask the century-old human question that men have always stopped to ask when they have had a moment's relaxation from the grinding pressure of insane activity. I was standing the other evening watching the approach of a majestic storm. The black roiling clouds, obedient to some unseen power, were making their irresistible flight across the sky. An awe-inspiring darkness was creeping down upon us, the low, and almost angry hiss of the approaching wind seemed but a signal, bidding us beware the approach of the storm, in which there lurked so much of the possibility of both good and evil. From every nook and corner, millions upon millions of famishing bits of vegetation were panting for the first drop of the promised rain, that their thirst might be quenched, and new life and new growth might be able to throw off the grip of an untimely death. Yet one could not fail to feel, as one always does, the wonderful sublimity of the power and the majesty of the storm. It was so in keeping with the whole situation to have someone utter the old Psalmist's poetic question, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"<sup>2</sup> Such a thought, such a prayer, it might almost be called, springs pure and fresh out of the very depths of humanity, and in one moment we feel pulsating through our whole being the one great questioning aspiration that has forever hovered about the inquiring spirit of human life, and links us of today with the child of the forest, as he stands transfixed with fear in the presence of the uncontrollable power of nature. The difference between the savage and the man of today, in the presence of the great powers, is that, through the process of the ages, a blind superstitious fear has been transformed into an un-fearing sense of awe and dependence. Yet in spite of all the power in the midst of which we find ourselves, and to which we pay obedience there is the irrepressible conviction, more or

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 8:4.

less clearly defined, that somewhere in the maze of things there is the possibility of freedom, that we share somewhat in that creative spontaneity of life that gives to each the possibility of producing in the garden of real life some reality, which is a distinct contribution to the reality in which we live, and which shall have a modifying influence upon all the life of man. No man was ever so buffeted by circumstances, so crushed and defeated in the exhilarating game of life, but that he arises from his defeat, though bruised and torn from the fray, to give expression with that defiant heroism which distinguishes the man from the brute, to that eternal human conviction beneath these words of William Ernest Henley,

Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond the place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How changed with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.<sup>3</sup>

Those lines state briefly the wisdom that has been gleaned by the thousands of years of human life that separates the savage from the man of today, and the conviction that grows out of that wisdom. We know some of the literal limitations of our powers, but we do not know, and never shall know, the infinite scope of

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<sup>3</sup> William Ernest Henley (1849-1903) English poet, writer, critic and editor. This is from his poem "Invictus," written in 1875 and published in his first volume of poems, *Book of Verses*, London: David Nutt, 1888, under the title, "Life and Death, IV," pp 56-7.

the possibilities both in thought and in action, that call us from the humdrum conventions of life into the real conflicts where,

    Around the man who seeks a noble end,  
    Not angels but divinities attend.<sup>4</sup>

Even as in days of yore, so today, when there comes from the terrible majesty and power of the storm, that searching question, What is man that thou art mindful of him? -or when the same question comes from the cyclonic whirlwind of adversity, the man in whose veins flows the red blood of humanity, the man in whose soul the divine spirit speaks, hurls back into the very teeth of the storm, into the very face of his adversity, the triumphantly defiant challenge, 'I am man, man, man. This power, this adversity, even though it crush and cover me with the blackness of night, it crushes a being greater than itself, the genius progeny of its own womb.' Proudly and triumphantly the true man says, "In the fell clutch of circumstance, I have not winced nor cried aloud."<sup>5</sup> It is the exhilarating conflict, the effort to overcome the limitations, to worm the truth out of the universe in the diversified experiences of the wild rush of red blood under the control of a strong heart and steady brain that gives to personality its hope, its possibility and its dignity, its depth and its richness. But you say what irreverence, what blasphemy, what foolhardiness, what bold effrontery, to hurl that defiant challenge into the face of the infinite. Should I not rather resign myself to my fate, should I not worship and adore the creator, should I not sing psalms and praises, and bring proper sacrifices upon his altar? And is not the humble and contrite heart the true and the only sacrifice that is acceptable? Why then this bold upstart effrontery?

Listen. The very spirit in us that defies the worst that circumstances can do, and sends out its boldest challenge in the face of the oncoming storm, is the spirit of the infinite in us, the spirit that has defied the chaos, and out of the chaos has evolved a world in which there is truth and goodness and beauty.

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American writer and founder of American Transcendentalism. This is a stanza from his "Fragments on Nature and Life," in *Poems*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1867, p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> W.E. Henley, "Invictus," *Book of Verses*, London: David Nutt, 1888, p. 56.

Were it not for the fact that men have put aside their fears, they have stood firmly on their feet, and declared that they would face the most terrible mysteries, send the probe of their doubts, and their truth-searching capacity into the very marrow of life and nature, we would even now be trembling like a whipped cur in the presence of the all-absorbing beauty of nature. That spirit that defies the fate of circumstance, and plunges boldly and fearlessly into the very heart of the mystery-enveloped thicket, and searches in every corner, and inquires at every turn the reason why such poisonous cruelty should come forth from the thicket, is the spirit of God in the soul of man. You go back to the days when men looked with superstitious awe upon the cruel ravages of deathly disease, and dared not touch or even attempt to penetrate its mystery, and you come upon, not the spirit that makes for good, but the spirit that makes for evil. In Balzac's *Country Doctor*<sup>6</sup> you have a picture in which the formal reverence, based upon fear and ignorance, is pitted against the divinely human reverence, which seeks to penetrate the mystery in the thicket. The ignorant superstitious peasant worshipped with holy fear the imbecile degenerates of an unhealthy life. The fearless doctor, he has the advantage of those who have had the courage to face the mystery of power, and ask of the overpowering circumstances, 'By what right do you crush and destroy us.' He had learned that the dread malady was due not to any strange supernatural trick, but was simply the natural result of conditions under which the people lived. Remove those conditions and lo, the long-feared evil disappears with them. That is what we are here for, to search, and find out truth, to ask at every turn and corner of life, the why and the wherefore, to dispel the mystifications, and press with all the power and the force of our might against the black wall of mystery which surrounds us on all sides. Never hesitate to let your passion for truth, for wisdom, have its free full sway. It may lead you into dark and gloomy thickets, or into the midst of the approaching storm, but never fear, it is the spirit of the infinite, in your seeking for the spirit of the infinite without, as deep calling unto deep with the roar of mighty waters. Travelling along a variety of ways we come to truth, and to life.

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<sup>6</sup> Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) French novelist and playwright. His novel, *Country Doctor*, was originally published in 1833.

When we hear the voice out of the very depths of our nature, asking that old human question, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" We answer back in the clear voice of manhood, "He is the child, born of infinite travail and pain out of the womb of the earth. In him lives and moves and has its being that same spirit that has evolved the universe in which man lives, of which he is a part, and to which he is tied by all the ties of life and hope. He is that being about whom all the life that is attends when he but seeks his noble end. He is that being in whom, as he grows in wisdom and stature, fear gives way to confidence, superstition to knowledge, and servile obedience to a sublime and glorious self-assertion, and the sense of depravity and helplessness gives way to that noble feeling of dignity and moral responsibility born of the conviction that we are creative producers of reality.

In life thus conceived, there are two principles to be forever sacredly guarded and cherished. One is the principle of freedom, and the other is the power of aspiration, which manifests itself in the conventional forms of life in the habit of worship.

In spite of all the arguments to the contrary, men feel a certain conviction of freedom that through knowledge, or the capacity of knowledge, we have the power to direct the forces of the universe to that they shall contribute to the ends for which we are striving. Given the possibility on the one hand, man has the power to realize it. We know full well the limitations of that freedom, and cling firmly to the practice, if not always to the intellectual conviction, of original capacity and moral responsibility. That freedom that is ours by the very nature of the universe, cannot be denied us, but the force tends to destroy it and belittle its efficiency, and eliminate it from the practical standards of conduct, is that same old fear, that stands transfixed before the extraordinary event in life. One of the most childish and disgusting facts of life is the attempt to limit by artificial restraint the scope of a man's thought, and his privilege of utterance. Those who in the past have attempted thus to restrain the growth of man and forestall the development of the universe, have but led themselves and all concerned into error, and bloodshed. In our own day, many are recoiling from the principle of free-thought, because they fear that such thought will leave behind it some of the ideas that a former generation has declared. What folly? If those ideas are true they are but the more firmly established in the victory gained

over error in a free contest, and if they are false for our day and generation, what folly to attempt to prop them up in such a childlike fashion? We are told that Christianity is in danger of being swept away by the wave of free thought, we are told that we must protect and preserve it from the onslaught of truth-seekers, and such dangerous people. What puerile folly? If it is true, no amount of investigation can alter its truth, or dislodge it from human life. If it is false, we do not want it. A very strong tide of reaction against freedom is setting in all about us. Guard well your ground. With a great price was this freedom purchased for us. We must beware lest we again sell ourselves into slavery. For we came out to seek, not forms, not things, but truth and the more abundant life; not the truth of yesterday, for that has already been found, but the truth of today and the truth of tomorrow, which is forever alluring us to the fresh fields and bidding us to sit down beside the still waters. The attempt to limit our freedom is the serpent that will drive us from our Eden, if we but listen to his word.

The second principle is the power of aspiration. I spoke of that last Sunday. We may be bound by the power of circumstances, but in thought we are free, and thought in time registers itself upon, and modifies, the conditions under which we live.

I am not poor, but I am proud,  
Of one inalienable right,  
Above the envy of the crowd,—  
Thought's holy light.

Better it is than gems or gold,  
And oh, it cannot die,  
But the thought will grow when the sun grows cold,  
And mix with Deity.<sup>7</sup>

That gives the truth, the necessity of human life which is back of all formal attempts at true worship, and which is the spontaneous cause of all pure worship. Worship is not at all the attempt to pay tribute to some Deity, or to purchase favor from him. Rather, it is the essential impulse, which is [in] our very nature itself, the impulse to think the structural thoughts of

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) This is his 1823 poem "Thought," in *Poems*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1867, p. 380.

the universe, to measure its ideal achieving capacity, to enter into its inner secrets, to penetrate its deepest and purest purposes, and feel ourselves caught up into the grasp of its onrushing majesty, and know that we are a part of its creating and developing power. That is aspiration, and when that aspiration comes to its moments of conscious relationship in the infinite, it is worship. It is the fundamental fact of life.

I am the owner of the sphere,  
Of the seven stars and the solar year,  
Of Caesar's hand, and Plato's brain,  
Of the Lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain.<sup>8</sup>

In the presence of the majesty of the storm, in the midst of the glory of the sunshine, we ask the same old human question, What is man that thou art mindful of him, and we get the same old human answer:

His tongue was framed to music,  
And his hand was armed with skill,  
His face was the mold of beauty,  
And his heart the thrown of will.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). This is a stanza from his poem "The Informing Spirit," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Complete Works*, Delphi Classics, 2015, loc. 2630.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). This is his "Motto to 'Power,'" in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Complete Works*, Delphi Classics, 2015, loc. 3506.