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Earl Clement Davis

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A Man in Search of New Saints

Earl C. Davis

NOW did all this come about? Tell me your story."

This question I flung at a layman one winter afternoon as the sun was dropping down behind the city buildings. We were seated in a curious little cubicle of an office in a large department store that had grown, Topsy-like, about the personality of its owner. The store itself revealed the energy, the worldly wisdom, the groping idealism, the laudable ambitions. The limitations as well as the cherished purposes and far-seeing plans of a person of unusual power and insight were reflected on every hand. Hardly a conversation. I had really been listening to a monologue, the story of a business, the story of a human being. Now one of those rare moments had come when the veil of reserve is drawn aside, and the inner man comes to the front.

As the years have passed, and the rough outline dreams revealed that afternoon have come to some kind of fulfillment, the story of that life—with its high aspirations, its achievements, its disappointments, its limitations—has seemed to me an authentic, indigenous expression of the times from about 1880 to 1929, plus a certain quality that had its roots deep in the past, and reached forward into the age-to-come in undaunted faith. Quite naturally my mind wandered back over the years to this incident, as I sat spellbound by the spectacle of the world's scholars assembled for the Tercentenary of Harvard University. As President Conant drew his picture of prophetic hope and challenge to the world of scholars, my mind was asking this question: "Is there in our time an authentic, unstudied and spontaneous urge to truth? Is President Conant speaking of a pleasant and beautiful concept—a rare and finely chiseled idol worshipped in academic circles on occasion—or is he speaking with the prophetic authority of one who has touched the vital nerve of our modern world, and giving voice to the pregnant hope and purpose of our time?"

From the Harvard yard my mind jumped back to the office of that strangely authentic "uneducated" man. Again I could see the changing expressions of his face, his keen, alert eyes, the evidences of deep enthusiastic beliefs, the wise and realistic restraint. Here was a life—limited, imperfect, in many ways very circumscribed—but an authentic indigenous human plant that was telling us that not only in the world of academic celebrations are great concepts cherished, but that they exist in the rough and ready life of the world, in trade, commerce, on Main Street, in the alleys, and on the farms.

Now the story which he told me as the shadows lengthened, and the stillness of night brooded over the deserted store.

"How did all this happen? My story? I was born in a small country village, with a strain of Quaker blood in my veins. Left an orphan at thirteen and one-half years of age, I came to this city. I got a job as errand boy with the man, my greatest preceptor, who conducted a small store on the ground floor of the

building in which we now sit. I had very small pay; I slept on a shelf under the counter nights; I opened and swept the store mornings; and began to learn the business. From that day to this, my life work has been right here. In time I came to own the store; I have enlarged it as conditions and profits warranted. Last year for the first time we did a business of more than a million dollars. But this does not answer your question. It simply explains one side of my life.

"Life was serious for me. I had had but little education so far as schools were concerned. I was quite alone in the world, no near relatives. I was ambitious and worked hard. I was hungry for knowledge. As I grew older I read a great deal; became interested in science, especially astronomy. Even in reading I had to feel my way.

"Soon I discovered that I was getting strange ideas about life and religion that did not correspond with what I heard in the church and Sunday school where I had been going. This bothered me. I had no one to talk with. The minister treated my problem rather harshly; the people in the church began to avoid me; and in time I quite gave up going to the church. I was very miserable about it, constantly haunted by the thought that the minister might be right, and that I was really a 'lost soul.'

"Just at this time I got up courage to go and talk with a man who was spoken of about town as one 'who believed in evolution and was an atheist.' He listened to my tale with patient and sympathetic interest. A world of doubt and fear rolled off my mind as he said to me: 'You are not a lost soul. You are just naturally sensible. There are thousands of people who believe as you do. In time you will get to know them.'"

A hushed stillness stole into the office as he leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands across his chest, and gave a sigh as of relief. I interrupted to recall him from a moment of meditative memory. "But," I said, "this is not the whole story. Something must have happened to explain your vital interest in your religious life, and to account for what you have done and are doing in the life of the Church of Our Father in this city for which in a large measure you are responsible?"

"Yes," he replied, "something did happen." His face lighted up with a strange wistful expression that seemed to be so deep-rooted and far-reaching.

"You see, when my friend the evolutionist freed my mind from its fears I faced life with new zeal. I continued my reading as best I could; I stuck close to business. I was getting along well; making some friends and quite enjoying it all except for the feeling that something, I knew not what, was lacking.

"I had become a buyer for the store. One day on a trip to New York I fell into conversation with a man who was sharing a seat with me on the train. Hungry for information and insight into what men were thinking about, our talk turned to religion. I told my story to him. As I finished my tale, my unknown friend turned to me and said, 'Did you ever

hear of Unitarians?' I told him that I had not. 'Then,' he said, 'I will have your name put on the mailing list of the American Unitarian Association. From them you will receive some reading matter that may help you. Also I suggest that you read Emerson's 'Essays on Self Reliance and Compensation.' My reply to that suggestion may surprise you. I had to ask who Emerson might be. I had never heard of him before.

"That day I bought a copy of Emerson's Essays. At night after the day's work I read them as a thirsty traveler might drink from a spring of living water in a desert. I finished the reading, and, full-grown man that I was, I threw myself down on the bed and cried myself to sleep out of sheer joy and satisfaction in finding one who gave voice to some vague and fleeting ideas that had been haunting my mind.

"I awoke the next morning upon a new world. I saw that the moral and spiritual qualities of the great leaders of history were one with the scientist; and that each in his own way was trying to discover the world, and the meaning of life. From that day the Heavenly Father of Jesus of Nazareth and the laws that the scientist discovered became one for me. Life took on new meaning, and the hungry, thirsty, feeling of years was finding its satisfaction."

Many will easily recognize the person of the late Milton T. Garvin of Lancaster, Pa., in this incident of human life. Roughly, falteringly, inquiringly, he outlined plans and hopes of embodying in the structure of a church building thoughts, experiences, and principles that were rooted in the lives and convictions of the communicants. It is evident why the lecture hall and social room were named Emerson Hall. Also "The Church of Our Father," the name of the corporate body of worshippers, has its meaning.

The physical structure, a very unpretentious Gothic building, is called "The Chapel of the Emancipators."

A bronze tablet bears this inscription:

To the glory of the children of God. Erected July 4th, 1926. To mark the sesquicentennial of the Declaration of Independence by the American Colonies and in appreciation of the valuable contributions made by Lancaster County to the American Revolution, and to memorialize the men who, in all ages and at all costs, have contributed to the political, intellectual and spiritual liberation of mankind. This church pays tribute to these bearers of light and truth by placing upon its pulpit and in its windows the names and records of the foremost of the procession of the Emancipators.

A partial list of the "foremost" of the emancipators betrays at once a local coloring, perhaps some limitations in judgment, as well as a genuine catholicity of spirit. Among them we find: Emerson, Socrates, Thomas Jefferson, Galileo, Columbus, Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, Channing, Parker. There are many others in all fields of human endeavor. New saints.

In the rear of the body of the church and almost a part of it, is a parlor, a homelike room with a fireplace, known as the Woman's Memorial, with windows dedicated to well-known women of history, grouped under the following inscriptions: "To all mothers who lend their sons unto the Lord"; "To all who gladly learn and teach"; "To all ministering angels"; "To those who break the bonds of affliction"; "The Pioneers in Suffrage"; "The Struggle for Education"; "The Conquest of Nature."

The whole structure, simple and beautiful, bespeaks a just attempt at appreciation of the past, a catholicity of spirit that knows no boundaries of race or creed, and an enrichment of local coloring, that seem to give it a character of its own. Another, perchance, of those unstudied growths that spring out of the soil of human need and experience, and that point the way to a new universality of the age to come.

Religion in a Liberal American College

William Henry Denney

IT is the earnest concern of the leaders of Rollins College that her present ambitions and future aspirations shall be as firmly grounded on vital religion now as when it was founded by those aggressive Congregational leaders. It might be said without reservation that those institutions that have made a singular contribution to American education were founded on genuine religion. It is indeed possible for the modern college to gain the whole world and lose its own soul.

There are a few definite things that one might say about religion in this liberal college. In the first place, every effort is made to make religion the hub of the wheel of life in Rollins, and not an added interest on the periphery of existence. If science is to sponsor the creative and beneficent and healing forces of the physical world, then her basic religion must determine it. If the politics of the future are to be an artful servant of sovereign democracy, and not a racket of various dictatorships, then the youth of our colleges must go forth with the moral fire to make that possible. Our sincere intention is to make religion relevant to all

of life, personal and social. No one in spiritual leadership aims to impress his faith on any student. Our aim is to have everyone associated with our chapel, and to develop a working faith that is vitally his own. The teaching ministry of the chapel promotes every effort to make clear and appealing the great convictions that have held men with force and value through the ages. Rollins always honors worthy traditions not by antiquity nor authority, but by judgment of their inherent truth and meaning. In every instance, however, this liberal college seeks to voice those worthy traditions in the language and spirit of the new world and the new days. Those in spiritual leadership are determined that religion in this institution will never sell out her heritage "for a mess of pottage."

The spirit of religion in Rollins can be characterized by the words of the great German interpreter who said, "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Everywhere in the Christian Church today is the evident longing for a central course of faith and action. That is what Rollins desires to work toward in the