

Growth and Salvation

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Pittsfield, MA¹

No Date

Scripture:

Text: "For with the heart man believeth unto
righteousness."²

Lessing, the great German philosopher, once said,
If God should hold all truth in his right hand,
and in his left only the ever active impulse to
the pursuit of truth, although with the condition
that I should always and forever err; and should
say to me: Choose! I should fall with submission
upon his left hand and say, 'Father give! Pure
Truth is for thee alone.'³

Indeed Lessing might well have said, "I could only choose
the ever active impulse to the pursuit of truth." for there
is something [in] our very nature, some power, which is the
very foundation of our physical, mental and moral make up
that always would bid us, yes compel us, to choose to
search out a truth, to grow up into a truth, rather than to
have the truth handed over to us without any struggle on

¹ While this manuscript has not date, an incomplete earlier
version of this sermon, "Irrepressible Impulse to Growth,"
shares a sheet of paper (its last page on one side is the first
page of another sermon on the other side) with a sermon, "The
Richness of the Religious Life," that bears similarities in
subject and treatment with yet another sermon, "Obedience to the
Will of God," that was pretty certainly given at the Unity
Church in Pittsfield, MA.

² Romans 10:10.

³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), German philosopher. This
quote has been translated from his *Eine Duplik Schriften*, Vol.
V, p. 147. It is possible Earl Davis took this from a more
contemporary history. Several I have found include versions of
this quotation (with differences likely due to differences in
translation). For example, K. R. Hagenbach's 1870 *History of the
Church in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, London: Hodder and
Stoughton, 1870, p. 288.

our part. Mankind as a whole has too fine a moral nature to be willing to accept gratuitously that for which he ought to grow. As a matter of fact no way has yet been discovered by which we can arrive at any truth except by that slow commonplace method of experience. The father cannot hand out to his son the wisdom which he has become the possessor of through his years of experience, but the son has not had the experience that would make clear to him the meaning of his father's words. Man's moral nature has always been much more keen and sensitive than his intellectual nature in accepting the Bible as a mechanical Revelation of God, and Christ as an atonement for sin. Even while he has outwardly accepted both these ideas, he has never the less interpreted the Bible in terms of his own experience and Christ's atonement in terms of his own atonement. His inherent moral nature has overridden his intellectual error, and he has kept himself essentially true to this fundamental characteristic of his being that he is endowed with an irrepressible impulse to grow.

See how this impulse manifests itself even when we are entirely unconscious of it. We go to some familiar New England town, expecting to find the same town today which we left ten years ago. It is not there, the people have changed, some are dead, others have left the town, babes have become children, children have become men. Even the vacant and deserted farm is a monument to man's growth, the cast off shell of less ambitious days. Try to find common ground upon which to meet a friend that we have not seen for years, and we soon become conscious of the vast change both in him and in ourselves, as we compare the strained difficult attempt to become again as we were in the old days. It brings home to us with a pungency that is startling, the truth that the impulse to grow has been constantly asserting itself. Only last year I knew of a man who had been seeking his fortune in a foreign country and had come home to his native town to live the remaining years of his life among his old friends, and amid familiar surroundings He arrived in the morning, found his old friends gone, not one in all the town that he knew, the very town itself so changed that he knew it not. He left in the evening, sad and disheartened, still wondering why it had changed.

These few facts suggest to us that while we may forget that we are living under the pressure of a power so tremendous that we can no more stay its activity than we

can stay the flow of a mighty river. We may check it for a moment but soon it breaks out with as great intensity in new channels. But the irrepressible impulse to grow is in our natures, and it must, and will express itself.

Yes, but does it express itself? What do we see about us?

(1) If the veil were lifted, what bells would glow?

Redly revealed to arrested eyes.

Burning unquenchable below

Life and its commonplace disguise.

(2) If the veil were lifted, what splendors too.

Would burst their prison like flowers released.

Surely they lurk in us, me and you.

Man the angel and man the beast.

(3) Man that grovels and roots in mire,

Trampling pearls with the greedy swine

Man like the sting of a God-smit lyre,

Thrilling with resonance divine.⁴

We can see how man, like the string of the God-smit lyre, thrilling with resonance divine, can be manifesting this divinely given impulse to grow. But how? How can man that grovels and roots in mire, trampling pearls with greedy swine, how can he be in any way giving expression to that divine impulse to grow? Can it be that the degraded victims of life, who fill our houses of correction and our prisons, can it be that they are human souls that have felt the impulse to grow, to expand, to be lifted up higher?

Put a lily bulb into your cellar where there is no light and air, and that same bulb which in the free out-of-doors air would grow into a strong healthy plant flowering in due season, will in the darkness of the cellar grow up into a pale sickly plant without strength and without beauty. Shut a human soul out of the light of knowledge and the warmth of high ideas, deprive it of its freedom, its right to seek these ends towards which its growth impels it, and that human soul will grow into forms of the most sickly sin, and most loathing criminality. The drunkard whom we meet on the street may be what he is because he has sought to express his social nature when the only opportunity he had was the saloon, and the only form of social intercourse he knew was the low vulgar buffoonery of the street. You and I have had better opportunities, and knew a higher plain upon which to exchange our interest with each other.

⁴ This poem is printed without attribution in *The Spectator*, January 21, 1905, p. 86.

Look at the French revolution, and see the half-crazed mob, seeking in its blind ignorance to assert its rights and demanding with the frenzy of a wild beast the destruction of its persecutors. The Divine impulse to grow? Yes, but undirected, untrained, the stored up power of that enslaved force burst like a whirlwind across the political history of France and demanded at the point of the knife its right to grow. The blood from a similar outbreak in Russia is hardly cold. Of all the terrible scenes that the Russian revolt presented, the most pathetic, the most pitiable, was that of the thousands of vodka-crazed workmen rushing blindly through the city streets, bent upon pillage and slaughter, as little able to use properly their momentary freedom, as a child. To think that men have been so deprived of the rights of education, and freedom of speech and thought, that in a moment of freedom they become as a drove of wild animals. God grant that not one word of censure may pass from our lips, but let us forgive them for they know not what they do.

It takes a Balzac to see the Divine spirit working in the simple peasant life of Europe.⁵ It takes a Victor Hugo to bring out the beautiful soul from [the] wronged life of Jean Valjean the galley slave criminal.⁶ Hawthorne to see in Hester Prynne, an injured bruised soul trying to find its way through sin to God.⁷ Only Dickens could picture the terrible deeds of the French Revolution so that man could see the irrepressible impulse to growth manifesting itself in these terrible days.

Somehow, even the man that grovels and roots in the mire, and tramples pearls with greedy swine, is working his way out of darkness, ignorance and sin into the light of freedom, and it may be, it may be that you and I are as much at fault as they of the mire.

But what shall we do? Shall we leave them to find their way out as best they may? No, we cannot do that, the irrepressible impulse to growth is in us also. We cannot stem the impetus which is carrying us beyond the horizon of

⁵ Honoré Balzac (1799-1850).

⁶ Victor Hugo (1802-1885); reference to his 1862 novel *Les Misérables*.

⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864); reference is to his 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*.

our own selfish interests and forcing us to regard the good of others. Already the ideals are in our minds which must carry us in sympathy and service to help the less fortunate over the rough places and through the darkness into the ways of life, where sin gives way to virtue, where high and noble thoughts drive out the low and vulgar, where peace and happiness and opportunity for free growth supplant want, and pain and crippled conditions.

A few years ago one of the most interesting feats of modern engineering was accomplished at the mouth of the Mississippi river. The great strength of the river current was constantly bringing down to the mouth of the river vast quantities of sand which was deposited at the mouth of the river as the river widened and the strength of the current lessened. This proved an apparently insurmountable barrier to shipping until finally a man of power conceived of a plan for relieving the conditions. His plan was simply this. He constructed huge mattresses of brush firmly woven together. Then these mattresses were heavily weighted with stones, and sunk on either side of the river leaving a channel between of sufficient width for shipping. The mattresses piled one on top of the other became effectual in turning the great bulk of the water into the channel between them, and the very force of the water which had spread itself out over so vast an area, and caused so much trouble, was now turned to the work of keeping clean a channel for shipping. The sand and dirt which the river had formerly deposited in such a way as to hinder shipping is now carried by the river itself out into the Gulf, out of the way. The principle of it is this. The very force which had brought with it the sand and refuse was made use of by directing it into proper channels, in putting that sand out of the way where it would no longer interfere with shipping. That same irrepressible impulse to growth, which carries such a burden of passion, appetite and desire of the flesh through which it must flow and deposits them in the way of progress will, if directed into proper channels, carry these same passions, appetites and desires safely out of the way where they can, by no possibility, impinge or retard the progress of man's growth into highest and noblest capacities of life. As we look back over the history of man, and see the great souls who grow to the heights of [sic] called witness of the truth, as we study the truth which they have disclosed to us, and estimated the direction in which it leads us, it seems as if this great free people, with its free government, with its

freedom of thought and freedom of press, with its freedom of religious life; it seems as if this great democracy with its system of education and its high religious ideals is the great engineer who is to direct the flood of growing humanity into its proper channels and vouchsafe to man his safe passage through the years of passion and appetite and selfishness into the open sea of mature manhood where great thoughts and high conceptions of duty and manhood may have full free play.

We cannot over-estimate the tremendous obstacles to be overcome. Sometimes they seem so great as to overwhelm us by their very greatness. The great inroads that are being made up growth, by the terrible diseases which make havoc in our midst, must be reduced to a minimum. Great intellectual errors which cast a shadow over us like a plague must be removed. Great moral misconceptions which are eating at the very vitals of the family, state, and the church, must be set aright. The task calls for noble men and women, inspired by the highest religious and moral aims of which the human soul is capable, men and women who have a righteous hatred of all sin, all error, but who have a deep sincere love for the sinner, and the erring. The task calls for men and women who in their homes, in their churches, in the towns in which they live, may, by the very simplicity and consecration of their lives, become a powerful force in doing this great work of man, of growing up into the truth of God. We must remember always the fact that it [is] a growth. It cannot come to us as Divine Fiat. We cannot give it to others as remedy which will cure in a moment. The truth of Christianity transplanted into the lives of the German people could not produce a Luther for hundreds of years. It took five hundred years for the seeds of the English Reformation to take root, and grow and bear fruit in the religious freedom of modern thought. It takes time for a people to absorb a truth, and have it become a vital part of daily life and duty. If we get discouraged let us look back over the centuries of history, and see the things we have escaped; if we get discouraged let us look to the ideals of life and man which have been revealed to us by witnesses of the truth. If we get discouraged let us remember that the irrepressible impulse to the pursuit of truth is [the] very foundation of our nature, and that Pure Truth is with Good. All the sin, all the ignorance, all the selfishness of man cannot stem for one moment the working of that impulse to grow into the truth. You and I are consecrated to this life of growth. It so happens that it

leads us into paths of noble thoughts, and great hopes. But let us not forget those whom this irrepressible impulse leads into ways of sin and pain and shame. With the heart every human being believeth unto righteousness, but the road he travels may depend upon you and me.