

The Richness of the Religious Life¹

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No Date

Scripture:

Text: Psalms 121:1 "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."

Ever since man first began to look with wonder and fear, amazement and reverence, upon evidences of a power in things, a power which he could not account for, there has been a steady and ever richening development of the religious instinct in his nature.

If we could trace our way back over the dramatic years, centuries, and ages of history, and find ourselves face-to-face with the earliest and most simple of religious feelings, I fancy that we should find man overawed, shrinking with fear and trembling before what would seem to us most commonplace, and most easily explained conditions. In the early stories of the Old Testament there are evidences of a time when men stood with fear before a spring of water bubbling out of the earth. Unable to explain by his knowledge the cause of such a marvelous phenomenon, he attributed to the presence of a superior power, which worked in ways that he could not understand. He felt the presence of a power superior to himself, and

¹ This manuscript is unusual in that its first page is written on the back side of the last page, page 7, of another (incomplete) sermon, "Irrepressible Impulse to Growth."

² While there is no date or place provided in the manuscript of this sermon, the paper and the fact that it is hand-written place this before 1907 when Earl Davis began to type his sermons. The similar subject matter, and treatment of the subject matter with the sermon "Obedience to the Will of God," and the fact that this manuscript was among several others at least one of which, "Obedience," can be reasonably certainly placed at Pittsfield, suggests that this is an early sermon from Earl Davis' time as minister of the Unity Church in Pittsfield, MA.

converted the place into sacred ground and it became a place of worship for him. Whenever anything strange or unexplainable happened, there the superior power was working, and there man's religious instinct asserted itself, and said, "take off the shoes from off thy feet, for the place where on thou standeth is holy ground."

Sometimes, when I have been free from the thoughts of history, and philosophy, in moments when my mind was off its educated guard and had slipped back into the simple habits of its primitive nature, I have fancied that I have felt the same feelings of reverence and awe come over me, as came to the mind of early man, whose education was that of daily life. I remember one night I had been canoeing for hours on a quiet silently flowing river. It was one of those soft peaceful evenings in June when one seems bound to slip silently away from the life of man, and lose himself in the simple harmonies of reverie and unthinking meditation, such as only the unlettered child of nature could feel. Following without thinking, without being roused from the waking slumber by the force of habit, the usual custom, I pushed the canoe upon the sandy shore, and leaving it there, let myself be led by an invisible spirit up the narrow winding pathway through the trees to a little spring which trickled out from the rocky soil. It was such a quiet secluded spot, hidden from the outside world by a wall of trees, and sharply distinguished from them by the flood of light from a full moon which poured in through an opening in the trees behind me. Involuntarily I stopped in reverence of the beauty, the mystery, the evidence of the presence of an unseen power. For one moment I stood there claimed by the Divine presence. In that moment I think that I must have felt as the primitive man, uninfluenced by science or philosophy, felt as he stood in the presence of some superior power manifesting itself in simple things of nature, and responding to his religious instinct, {??} there an altar for religious worship.

At times, when we get away from the activities of life, our mind seems to throw off the training of ages, and slip back into its primitive simplicity, and reveal to us the very simplest of all religious feelings, that reverence for the presence of a power superior to ourselves. In truth, the water trickling from the rocky soil, the great tree growing from the earth, the tremendous mountains rising from the plains, the fierce wind, the thunder and lightning, all the works of nature, are they not still

evidences of a power, unseen, but whose presence we cannot doubt, a power so superior to our power, that the means of comparison fails us, and should we not bow down with fear and trembling before that power, and prostrate ourselves in its presence fearing lest it annihilate us completely?

But the fear of the Lord is but the beginning of wisdom. To feel the presence of a power superior to ourselves is but the beginning of religion. There is a great truth hidden in that story which is told of Robert Burns.³ He was taken at one time to see a bit of bold rugged mountain scenery famous for its beauty and grandeur. His eyes wondered over the scene spread out before him in reverence and awe, taking in all the marvels of the inspiring wildness, until they finally rested with tenderness and love upon a group of little cottages in the valley where human nature was giving expression to its powers of love and goodness. For Burns that bit of human nature transformed the whole landscape, and gave it life and coloring which only human life can give. When we see a landscape painting, which gives no suggestion of human life, how cold and mechanical it seems. Something is not there which ought to be there. Just the merest suggestion of man would give the picture new life for us.

Man could not rest content in seeing the superior power only, but as he grew in experience and wisdom he discovered that he himself could do things which were related in some way to the unseen power. He could plant seeds and, responding to the soil, they would grow up in the very place where he had planted them. The unseen power could make a tree, but he could convert the tree into a boat or a house. The unseen power could make a mountain, but he could make a great pyramid and a sphinx. So, year-by-year he learned that in many ways he could do things in much the same way that the unseen power did. As he thought of this strange coincidence, of the strange similarity between some of his own works and the works of the unseen power, he came to the conclusion that he must be like the power, it must be that God had made man in his own image.

That we [are] akin to God is the second great truth of religion. When men first discovered that truth they saw in it only most crude meaning. God made man in his own image, physically, hands, feet, face, body. But as the centuries

³ Robert Burns (1759-1796), important Scottish poet.

passed by, it became a truth capable of greater significance than that of mere physical kinship. Man began to trace a moral and intellectual kinship, and finally in Jesus, we have the consummation of the truth, the spiritual relationship of God to man, as father to son. "I and my father are one," said Jesus.⁴

In the form in which Jesus put the truth, and in the meaning which it had for him, we find its highest expression, but we have been tardy in apprehending the full meaning of it. Do we often stop to think that we are able to think because the Father thinks, that we know because the Father knows, that we love because the Father first loved us, that whatsoever we may do it is not we that do it, but the Father who worketh in us? Not that we are kin in our bodies, as was so early thought, but that we are kin in our minds, in our moral purposes, in our spiritual natures, in all that we are or hope to be. Sons of one great father in whom we live and move and have our being.

Through the power of this truth our fear in the presence of the great overshadowing Being is transformed into trust, confidence and love. Are not the very hours of our lives numbered? Can one of us by the utmost endeavor ever escape from the care and control of the great Being to whom we are akin? Confidence, peace, safety, trust come to us to drive away fear and doubt.

Even as the truth of this spiritual relationship is dawning upon our minds, there follows closely behind it another truth, not less important. The boy who has become old enough to appreciate the intimacy of the relationship which he bears to his father, so becomes inspired with the desire to work with his father, to assist. In his small way in doing the work which the father does. The working out of this desire is seen most naturally on the farm. What former boy does not at an early age take some share in doing the farm work, helping to tend the cattle, assist in the planting, and harvesting. It is the most natural, and the most perfect part of the boy's education. How unfortunate for the boy who lives in the city that he is deprived of this natural right. No less naturally do we, as we become old enough in years, and a humanity become old enough I civilization, turn ourselves to the work of the Father, and feel the dignity, and the sacredness of doing a work which

⁴ John 10:30.

helps to realize the purpose of the great world process. How simple, yet how profoundly true are those words of Jesus, "Verily, verily, I say unto you. The son can do nothing of himself but what he seeth the father do."⁵ Gradually, as we grow in spiritual power we are coming to discover the third great truth of religion. Not only do we feel ourselves in the presence of an infinite being, but we feel that the Infinite Being is akin to us. Not only is the Being akin to us, but we are seeking a common cause with Being. If we search after the truth, we have as a helper, him who is truth. If we seek to give expression to truth by goodness, we have as a co-worker, him who is the source of all goodness. If we seek to help another into the ways of truth, we are supported by Him, who watcheth with infinite care over the most wayward and downtrodden of his children. If we seek to lead another into the paths of duty and purity, we can depend upon the cooperation of him who rejoiceth over the finding of one lost sheep, more than over the safety of the ninety and nine who go not astray.⁶ Whatever force or power within us that inspires us to work for the good of man, for the enrichment of life, for the growth of human souls, we can be spurred on to greater action, to more {??} labor, to more glorious hope, by the knowledge that the great infinite God in whom we live and move and have our being is working for the same ends that we are, that the very existence of the ideals in our minds is due to the fact that they also exist in the infinite mind.

The deepest, the most powerful religious experience is to be filled with the greatness of this truth, that you and I, who go about day-by-day, individuals outwardly distinguished by individual names, are in the very presence of the Infinite God of the Universe in whom we live and move and have our being, to whom we are akin, and with whom we seek a common cause.

How commonplace, meaningless seems that life which ignores this truth, and spends itself in vain search after happiness by excitement, by indulgence of all passing desires, by following the most trivial will of the wisp aims of selfishness, greed, and notoriety. How grand and noble seems that life, which follows this truth and regulating the desires and passions of his mind and body to

⁵ John 14:12.

⁶ See Matthew 18:12.

the realization of the truth and goodness of the Infinite purpose of living, calmly seeks its way through the manifold duties of the day, obediently following the wishes of God as they are revealed to him day-by-day.

The religious life, is not a life of sacrifice, not a thin, narrow exclusive life, emptied of all that makes life rich and grand. On the contrary, it is a full complete, ever broadening life, which regulates the pleasures of today to the needs of eternal happiness, which makes the desires of today the working tools in realizing an eternal hope, which seeks to make the supreme act of life not an act of sacrifice, but an act of devotion, devotion to what is true and eternal, devotion to what is soul-satisfying and worthwhile. The religious life in its fullness is the life that give sacredness and holiness to all the duties, and the acts of a human being, and fills the soul with a happiness that is unknown to the irreligious, a happiness that can come only to him who feels the presence of a superior being, to whom he is akin, and with whom he sees a common cause, and with trust, confidence and assurance, says, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help."