

Take Time to Live

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

1906

"Midway upon the road of life I found myself within a dark wood, for the right way had been missed."<sup>1</sup> In these words Dante opens the "Divine Comedy" and I fancy that in these words he does what Walt Whitman always tried to do, he strikes a note which causes sympathetic vibrations to be felt in almost every person's life. To become entangled in the underbrush of life, to forget to look up for the light which shines through the enveloping forest, to wander about in a circle, to become confused, to lose self-control, and permit confusion to be transformed into a panic, and the panic to terminate in gloomy despair, this is the tragic ending of many a well-intended, and devoted life. It is also but a dramatic picture, a magnified presentation of that which is to be observed in every life that we come in contact with.

This same tendency to miss the right way, to forget to look up now and then as we work our way along the ground, and pay for our thoughtlessness by finding ourselves at length flat against a stone wall, with no alternative but to about-face and go back, this comes not only to individuals, but to communities, nations, ages, and races. The wages of error as well as of sin is death. When people find themselves in such a state of confusion, and panic, or when an age finds itself in such a blind alley into which it has been lured by following some firefly of fancy, instead of directing its course by the guiding star of its ideals, a remedy is sought on the one hand, and thousands are suggested on the other, by the all too willing blind guides of the blind. Some man like Carlyle looks with one eye shut and the other blurred back over the road that has

---

<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), *Inferno*, Canto I

been travelled, composes the *Past and Present*<sup>2</sup> much to the discredit of the present, and sends out the gloomy announcement that our only hope is to turn our back upon the visions of a future land flowing with milk and honey, and retrace our steps on the once travelled road of the past, to encamp again upon the arid spot from whose soil the fertility has long since been exhausted. Another, out of his lack of experience, dreams a dream, or sees a vision of serene utopian land or utopian life, which is just over the crest of the hill which shuts from our view the joys of a perfect world. If we could by some superhuman effort or by some magic device leap over the space which separates us from that world of "labor-less joy," and uninterrupted bliss, how delightful it would be to dwell therein, how all the shadows would vanish! How refreshing and transcendently habitable would be that land bathed always in the sunshine of pure happiness!

But methinks that neither the one nor the other of these alluring programs would be completely satisfactory in relieving an individual from the pressure of present confusion, or the age or the nation from evils and limitations of its imperfect present. It is doubtless true that there is something of good in the past. Of course there is, and more of it even than Carlyle ever dreamed of, but in spite of the goodness of the past, we live in the present. As a thing which can live again, the past cannot exist for us. Were there a line of Carlyle's reaching from here to [the] Garden of Eden, as there is, and each one pointing to the past as a place of safety, still we would not, and could not, heed their warning, or stop to listen to their dismal cry. The past has been glorious, but the past was made glorious by men who, while they lived, lived in the spirit of their own times and faced their future. However perilous, and distressing may be our situation, no relief is to come by attempting [to] rekindle the fires upon an old camping ground.

But hardly have we disposed of our *Past and Present* signposts, when we come face-to-face with some Edward

---

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) published *Past and Present* in 1843. It combines medieval history with criticism of 19<sup>th</sup> century British society.

Bellamy<sup>3</sup> who is making ready to leap from the footstool of the present far into the distant future, and slow down to enjoy things in placid sort of contentment such as the cow reveals to us as she is ruminating in some cool nook when man and heart are called from labor to refreshment. But however inviting, however alluring might the life of the future bliss into which the dreamer of modern apocalyptic literature would have us leap, and however long he may stand there on the threshold, measuring his distance, getting his balance, making trial springs, yet the fact remains that he remains. Even if it be only a hair's breadth that distinguishes the present from the future, yet the hair's breadth is sufficient to prove an insurmountable obstacle to any discontented one who has lost the right way within the dark wood. Neither in the past, nor in the future do we, or can we, live, but in the present, and the present in which we are living has presented all the good that has been garnered from the fields towards which Carlyle would direct us. The present in which we are living contains all the richness and the splendor of the land over yonder hill crest. There is no past or future, but only the eternal present, and in that eternal present we live.

Now the fact is that our communities as a whole, and many individuals in particular, not to say you and I, find ourselves in this midday of our national and individual prosperity, lost in a dark wood, for we have missed our way. Turbulent, confusing, almost panic-stricken, seems our lives, as we fling about amid the underbrush and dismal forest into which we have been allured by some will-of-the-wisp, some gadfly of a disorganized imagination.

Since the revelation of the truth of the worth of man and the nobleness of life, and its eternal divine beauty, found its way into the hearts of men, the people of this new world have been giving a new interpretation to life, and its functions. The gloomy pessimistic cry of other-worldliness has ceased. We no longer sing those godless songs, or prey those godless prayers, or believe those godless ideas in which this world, this life, this

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), American author and journalist, most famous for his utopian novel *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, published in 1888.

threescore years and ten upon the earth are looked upon as gloomy days of sorrow, pain, sin, which by the grace of God we hope to escape from as soon as possible relying upon the divine possibility of a unending bliss of another world. The humanistic movement which has been coming to its fruition, and is establishing itself among us with tremendous rapidity, has no place for this irreligious, godless, materialistic interpretation of this world, and this life, as a sort of prison from which the spirit would flee to the unalloyed bliss of the other world.

The tendency has been therefore to place greater emphasis upon this life in all its aspects. Instead of whining about the seat of prayer pleading for deliverance from a world of pain and sin, we have gone to work clearing up some of the cesspools in which sin and pain have had their growth. Instead of praying to God to forgive, and save the outcast, and the downtrodden whom the selfishness of man had cast into the outer darkness of this world, there has been a marked tendency, which is even now developing a terrible momentum, for future activity to extend the hand of fellowship to those who have in their degradation asked alms.

Instead of singing "my father is rich in houses and land," the men of this humanistic movement have said to themselves that we should improve the plain material conditions of life, better, houses, more ease, more comfort right here and now. Transportation, industrial development, inventions of every description have within the last 40 years made a better, cleaner, a safer world to live in.

Starting with the premise that this world is good, and may become better, that man is not totally depraved, but only uncompleted, that this life is not a necessary evil, but is essentially good, we have been rebuilding our whole fabric of society, and the ideas upon which it rests. That we might come nearer to the ideals towards which we were finding our pathway, we have built an educational system, which is one of the greatest achievements of history. That we might clear way some of the cesspools of our social life, and remove from the back yard of our palatial residence some of the foul and disease-giving debris, we have reformed, or tried to reform, educate, uplift what are

commonly called the less fortunate. That we might have more time to devote to culture, refinement and a higher social intercourse, we have built up an industrial system such as the world has never seen. Efficient, productive, strong and powerful, it has become at once the admiration and the terror of our nation.

Our school system which was developed to give children such aid, such insight into life as to enable them to live broad deep noble manly and womanly lives, has become a great threshing machine, into whose feeder are turned thousands upon thousands of children at five years of age. Then begins the process of making the thousand individuals, whose individuality is the most precious germ, pass through an average hole in which there is no opportunity for individuality. Some are crushed, some are bruised, some are ruined for life; some are left by the wayside, some are broken in health, some are broken in spirit, and finally out of the driving confusion of the medley there appear a few mediums who have been squeezed through the holes that separate one department of the machine from the other. The fact is that this which we have constructed to assist in developing life, and helping our young people to live, has become an absolute master, and upon the altar of its machinelike perfection we are sacrificing yearly the individuality, the very life and health even, of many of our best youths.

This great industrial plant into which men have put noble works, noble thought, noble sacrifice, that, too, has become a double-headed monster who is devouring men by the thousand, not alone workmen, but as well the most influential and masterful minds. The institution which dwarfs, destroys the joy of labor, ruins the individuality of man, makes him a mere cog in a wheel of a great machine, that institution has ceased to be servant, and become master.

In the same way men seek, as they must seek, relaxation from work in pleasure. Social intercourse, lighthearted, carefree enjoyment of festivity is an essential to man's life, as work, or meditation, or prayer. But when our relaxations for pleasure have become a part of a complete system of social formality, so that the life of pure

pleasure become a tiring exhausting burden from which one would free himself as from the wrath to come, men are again imprisoned in the trap of our own construction.

I delight in education. I am not blind to the benefits of our existing system. I never cease to wonder at the great products of our industrial system. I enjoy with the joy of a child the pleasures of social festivity, and good fellowship. But of infinitely more worth than a perfect school system, is a strong healthy group of young men, and young women in whom individuality has not been warped by the merciless lovers of conformity, in whom the desire and thirst after knowledge has not been impaired, or the power of digestion destroyed by intellectual one-feeding, and stuffing.

But of infinitely more worth than the great industrial plant with its man-destroying conformity, is the free-workman who can take some joy in the freedom of his work, and the expression of his individuality.

Pleasure as a relaxation from the plain level, from the common duties of life, is an essential factor of life, but when pleasure becomes master, and we are caught in the clutches of its harpy-like claws, then it is goodbye to pleasure, and all wholesome life as well.

The fact is that these very institutions which we have developed that we might have the greater freedom to live, and to do the work, and become the men and the women that we should become, have become our overlords. In their lifeless impersonal, monster-like power they have become not our working tools, and valuable assistants in living the noble life, but they have become our false gods, whom we worship upon whose alters we sacrifice all that is worthwhile in life. Midday upon the road of life we find ourselves in a dark wood, for the right way has been missed.

The lion's whelp which we have cared for and nourished and watched over, now lies by our side gently licking the hand by which we caress it. The first taste of blood is changing the docile and affectionate whelp into [a]

maddened and ferocious lion, with whom we must contend for life and death.

These are but illustrations of the way in which we imprison ourselves in the house which we built for shelter. We chose some line of work wherein to do our share in the world's work, to express our inner thoughts upon the work that we do, and in return to receive sufficient return for support. However noble that work may be, when it so claims us as to develop our very being, and drag us in the filth of corruption, and dishonor behind its war chariot, as for example a minister being dragged behind the war chariot of sectarianism, we have forfeited our freedom and become embedded in some dead tree trunk from which in our distress we complain, and whine about the influence of our environment.

What right has man to say that he is a slave to his labor, to his pleasure, to his passion. He may be in the forest of trees, but he is not entombed in any one of these trees. We are not here to be dragged along the ground by the war chariot of anything or any person, be that thing business, state, church, school or nation or priest, but we are here to walk upon the ground with our heads erect, doing the work of life with the majesty of a King, taking rest, relaxation and pleasure with the innocence and purity of childhood. Talking with each other as we journey, assisting each as we talk and work. The world was not created by a Divine fiat, man was not evolved in a hurry. Nothing in God's universe is hurried or rushed through. Everything moves with the same stately majestic swing. Everything takes time to live, even the meanest of creatures upon whom we step without thought.

Why should not we then take our time to live our life? Why should the child be hurried and rushed and crammed through school, without ever having the thought that he should take time to live, to absorb and to radiate the very atmosphere of nobility of life?

Why should the businessman wear out his body and mind, deprive himself of the social festivity, and family life, just for the sake of being a slave to business? How cruel it is that we compel a workman to spend his life plodding

wearily along for the sake of getting enough to keep life in his body, and keep the door closed upon the wolf of hunger.

How disgusting and humiliating it is to be compelled to meet with and be decent to people who never do any kind of productive work, who never take the time to live, but crawl along on hands and knees to get one sip of wine from the trough out of which the slaves of pleasure seek to satisfy their thirsty and famished souls.

Take the time to live. Do not be dragged through life by the controlling power of any system. Do not become worn and exhausted plunging about after some firefly of the forest. If you are lost in the confusion and discouragement of work, if you are being crushed and trampled underfoot by the crowd, if you are the prisoner of any institution that claims your work, honor, your integrity, the only thing to do is to leave the crowd, is to cut free from the institution, is to throw the world from your shoulders, lie down upon the grass, look up at the heavens, collect yourself together, and find again the star, or the sun by which you were directing your course before you became engulfed in the wild stampede after some gadfly.

Dare to be a non-conformist, and defy the absoluteness of every institution or person who would claim your slavish submission. Dare to be a non-conformist, and walk with your head erect and your feet firm upon the earth.

Dare to take time to live the noblest and grandest life of which you are capable. Dare in short to be a man, doing your work as it should be done, meditating as your need, praying as your soul's eye turns up, and taking your pleasure and relaxation in the purity of Man's natural holy life.

END OF SERMON

On the back of page 21 were a few sentences, not connected, I don't believe, with this sermon. The references here are to Shakespeare's Tempest:

We are Ariels, too fine in spirit to obey the commands of our commonplace earthly Sycorax, and yet this same sorceress of superstition whom we thrust from us with a strong arm, we permit to imprison in the fine trees of our construction and there we await the coming of some Prospero to free us from our bondage.