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How to Face Life, 1948.

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HOW TO FACE LIFE

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The eminent American philosopher, Thoreau, once wrote: "Our life is frittered away by detail. The nation is ruined by want of calculation and a worthy aim. It lives too fast." And commenting on this observation of Thoreau, Henry Seidel Canby, noted American author and critic, writes the following:

Millions of American women fritter away their lives by a thousand details of which nine hundred get them nowhere - certainly not toward happiness. And so do their husbands. They live fast, but neither hard nor deep. They live too fast because they don't know where they are going, and so have to hurry to get there. They can't simplify their lives because they have never simplified their thinking. These millions have never stopped long enough to calculate what is an aim worth having. They don't really know what they want.

Henry Thoreau, our greatest natural philosopher, had his own solution to the problem. He wanted to write a book, and so for two years he lived a hermit-like life in the woods, cultivating beans and corn to keep up his rations. He succeeded in escaping from the fritter and the fluster of living in Concord village while he thought out his book and wrote it; then he came home. In short, he found out his worth-while aim, and then got rid of the particular kinds of detail that frittered away his time and energy.

This doesn't necessarily mean that we must all follow Thoreau's exact example - above all, that is no solution for anyone who hates beans and gardening. But nearly everyone can apply his general principle. We live in the midst of details that keep us running round in circles and never getting anywhere but tired, or that bring on nervous breakdowns and coronary thrombosis. The answer is not to take to the woods, but to find out what we really want to do and then cut out the details that fritter away what is most valuable in life. Live deep instead of fast. I think this is what Thoreau meant.

Now there is much wisdom in all this. It is clear that the first thing that a man must do as he prepares seriously for the journey of life is to set his goal. What is it that we really want to do with our lives? It does not make much difference what our profession or occupation or calling is, or is likely to be. The important thing is to have a philosophy about it. Will the doing of that which we are setting out to do really satisfy us, will it express us, really fulfill us? Everyone must earn a living, but the important question

to ask is, will the thing which we are setting out to do also give us life.

Now, in setting a goal, it is wise to set a distant goal. It is wise to make sure that our reach will exceed our grasp. On a long journey it is good to have a mountain peak to guide us. We may never attain to that peak, but it will be a sure and dependable guide in all our ways. Or to use another metaphor, very few do reach the promised land which we set for ourselves, but the very fact that we have set before us a promised land, all our wanderings in the world will come to take on a glow with meaning. A man's work in the world, whatever it is, has dignity only if it tends somewhere, if it leads to something beyond the immediate gain and profit, if it is linked up with some unfolding and widening purpose in society. Now, our work does not need to be of a heroic or dramatic character. A civilization is fashioned not merely of the extraordinary achievements of a few men of genius; a great civilization is built by the numberless men and women in all walks of life who carry on day to day work with a touch of genius, with a lift of some high standard and some firm discipline. And if you feel that your work, whatever it is, in some way yields an influence, regardless how wide the circle wherein that influence tells, then you can face life invincibly.

It is important to have an aim in life - call it a philosophy of life, and it must not be a mean or narrow aim. It should be the kind of aim which would come to impress more and more, both in point of time and balance and society. There is a beautiful verse in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah which reads something like this: Enlarge the site of your tent and stretch without limit the curtains of your home. Lengthen your cords.

Enlarge the site of your tent progressively. Increase your world. Widen your horizons, raise your sites. Widen the circumference around the center of your being and your interest. Let your life and your interests come to include more and more of the world and of the goodly fellowship of men. Link up what

our rabbis used to call the life of the hour with the life of eternity because if you do something that exercises an influence, you are immortalizing that which you are doing.

One cannot face life successfully without a philosophy, and the best philosophy is the one which our religion, Judaism, has given to mankind, and to sum it up, it is the philosophy which tells man to seek perfection, knowing full well that perfection is unattainable in a world of sharp limitations where everything, including human knowledge, is uncertain, inexact and partial. Nevertheless, the philosophy recommended by our faith to all is to seek perfection in this kind of a world, knowing that in the quest for perfection man will find the deep satisfactions that life can afford.

Now why is this a good philosophy for everyone? In the first place, this philosophy implies that a man is free, that a man is morally free to affect his destiny. Now all life rests, of course, on material bases; all human life is determined, to a large measure, by heredity and environment, and many unknown and unconscious forces influence man's conduct. Nevertheless, there is much else besides heredity, environment and the outside stimuli which finally decide what kind of man or woman he or she is to be. There is also man's own volition, man's own inner aspirations, the hammer of man's own moral exertions which mold and determine him. Man have and can overcome the handicaps of birth. Everyone knows that in many instances men are goaded on and made stronger by handicaps of life. It is not so much the opportunities which we have, but the use we make of the opportunities we have, and it is we who determine what use we shall make of them.

There is a legend among our people that at the time of birth an angel, especially assigned for that function, pronounces this man about to be born shall be strong and this man shall be weak; this man shall be rich or this man shall

be poor. But at no time does the angel pronounce that this man shall be good or this man shall be evil. This philosophy of the quest of perfection is basic to all religions is a very liberating philosophy. It tells a man to go to life and acquire as much knowledge as he can, as much wisdom and as many good deeds as he can, and in so doing, he will find the largest measure of contentment which it is possible to find in this imperfect world. It means - this philosophy of seeking perfection that a man will expect much out of life, but much more out of himself. And that all through life, whatever stage of life a man happens to be in, all through life until the day of his death, man will continue to seek to improve himself on the very terrains of existence.

The rabbis say that King Solomon wrote three books during his lifetime. One is a book about love and youth, and the other is about wisdom and counsel and serious thought and how man should carry on the business of life, and the third is a book of contemplation. And the rabbis say that when Solomon was young he wrote the Song of Songs; when he was middle-aged he wrote the Book of Proverbs, and in his later years, he wrote the third book. When we are young, that is the period for love; in middle age is the time of the business of living; and old age is the period of contemplation. But in each stage man can grow and develop.

Why do I say that to seek perfection is a good philosophy? Why not happiness? Because to seek happiness is no philosophy of life at all. You cannot go out hunting for happiness. You can guide your conduct in life by reference to happiness. Happiness is not a thing to find here or there. It is a by-product. Happiness is an attendant circumstance of seeking perfection and in the quest of perfection lies the secret of whatever measure of happiness man can find. Why again do I say that is a sound philosophy? Because according to our faith man was born imperfect deliberately so by the will of God. Man was not created perfect. There are no perfect men, no angels; angels are figments of human imagination. Man is reality. Man was born imperfect, but perfectable and his very

destiny consists in his quest of perfection. And what is this pattern of perfection towards which man should strive? It is the perfection which he ascribes to God. When we think of God, we think of Him as the kind father, a friend, we think of Him as just, loving, forgiving - well, those are the qualities towards which we strive. This is what the Bible meant.

Of course, we know that with our limitations we can never attain to the omnipotence of God in his infinitude, but being made in His image, we can approximate in some small measure those qualities of perfection. Now why should it be worth-while altogether to strive for perfection? Some religions deprecated life, feel it is a period of tears, one should try to finish it as quickly as possible. There were many periods of pessimism throughout history, the kind which denies any nobility and significance to life. Here again our great religion teaches us that life is beautiful and life is holy. Judaism never speaks of the tragic futility of all life, and when such a philosophy is expressed, that philosophy is quickly refuted and corrected. What is vain in life is not life itself, but the strivings of man.

It is true that life is short - "Our days pass away as a shadow" - and they are not free from pain and sorrow and loss, but within these harsh frames of circumstance, life can still be glorious and exalted and noble, and it can yield us a large measure of happiness. Life is holy. The holiest day is the Sabbath. David said you are not allowed to violate a single law of the Sabbath. We read time and again: Choose life. It is not the dead who can praise God. Therefore everything that contributes to life, to real life, everything that contributes in a proper proportion and measure to life is holy. The relationship between the sexes is a holy relationship - it is sanctified. It is only when that into the cesspool of perversion that it becomes indecent. Food, drink, home, dress, care of the body - all these are virtues regarded by the sages of our people as extolled. There was never any asceticism in Judaism to speak of.

Everyone who sits fasting most of his life in order to purge himself of sin is called a sinner. He is called a pious fool. God gave the world to man to enjoy the world and to increase his life by enjoying the world which God gave to him.

Life is not a from which death is the only release. We ought to enjoy life but make sure the enjoyment does not destroy life. The body is the instrument of the human soul, and therefore, it should not be disfigured. And one should also remember that the highest enjoyment of life cannot be attained without labor and struggle and sometimes disappointments and very often sacrifice. It is sometimes of these very things that we exact the most exquisite satisfactions of life. The holy spirit does not rest upon men. In sadness or idleness and in self-indulgence - that is not when man reachest the highest point of living. The spirit rests upon men out of the happiness that comes from doing a Mitzvah. As part of this philosophy of seeking perfection, it is never one-sided - it is a highway; extremes are away from that balance and harmony which is perfection of all things. Take poverty and wealth; neither noble nor ignoble. It is what we do with it. The real poverty which is to be feared is the poverty of the heart and the real wealth to be sought is the wealth of ideals.

What I am trying to say is that the quest for perfection is not a lugubrious enterprise in life - it is a very sad role. It is a high adventure. This quest for perfection is something not intended for saints. This is human, daily food for all men, each according to his endowments - each according to his tastes and aptitudes.

So when one asks how should one face life, the clear answer is first, to get us a philosophy of life. Set us an aim, not for your profession or occupation, because man is more than his profession. Man is more than what he does by

seeking a livelihood. Set yourself an aim not merely for your chosen calling, but for your destiny as a human being. What do you want to do with your years; how do you want to use them to the best advantage? Because life finds its meaning only as you give meaning to it. Remember that. If you think of life as noble, life will be noble. If you think of it as cheap, life will be cheap. The aim is self-perfection to make the most of yourself - to give the most of yourself - to take the most out of life and to put the most into life, and to do it without fear.

Just about this time we are reading the stories of our patriarchs, the early fathers of our faith. There are two instances of the life of Father Jacob. Father Jacob had to run away from home and go into exile. He had to face life, an unknown world in the midst of danger. And on his way to the unknown world he fell asleep and had a dream, and the vision of the Lord appeared and said to him, "Jacob, be not afraid. I will be with thee." And Jacob went forth to his destiny and spent many years a stranger in a strange land. He prospered because he was unafraid, and he finally determined to return to his home with his family. On his way home he was overtaken by fear. What will confront him? Will the dangers from which he fled still be there? And again we are told that in the stillness of the night Jacob wrestled with an angel of darkness, and vanquished that angel, and the Angel said: "Henceforth your name will be Yisroel because you have wrestled with angels and conquered them." That is how to face life - fearlessly and courageously. And that, too, is the great message of our God inspired.