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How to Face Life's Handicaps, 1948.

HOW TO FACE LIFE'S HANDICAPS

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The famous philosopher, Descartes, based his entire philosophy on the principle, "I think; therefore, I am." "Cogitum ergo sum - I think; therefore, I am." And Helen Keller, who was born deaf, dumb and blind and who became an inspiring author and lecturer, had this comment to make on this principle of Descartes:

Mine has been the limited experience of one who lives in a world without color and without sound. But ever since my student days I have had a joyous certainty that my physical handicaps were not an essential part of my being, since they were not in any way a part of my mind. This faith was confirmed when I came to Descartes' maxim, "I think, therefore I am."

Those five emphatic words waked something in me that has never slept since. I knew then that my mind could be a positive instrument of happiness, bridging over the dark, silent void with concepts of a vibrant, light-flooded happiness. I learned that it is possible for us to create light and sound and order within us, no matter what calamity may befall us in the outer world.

"My physical handicaps were not an essential part of my being," writes Helen Keller. She does not say they were not any part of her being because that would be untrue. Any handicap, especially a serious one, is a part of our being because we are one, and there is continuous interaction between body and mind. What affects the one, affects also the other. But she refuses to allow her handicaps to become an essential part of her real body. She might have done so, as many people have done and are doing, and by so doing, destroy themselves, but her spirit resolved that the victory should not go to her handicaps, but to her real self - to the real essential part of a true being - to her mind - her mind, which could be a positive instrument of happiness even in the midst of her dark and silent private world.

I came across the other day exactly the same thought expressed by a man who suffered handicaps almost as severe. When Michael Dowling was 14 years old, "a blizzard robbed him of both his legs, his left hand, and the thumb and several fingers of his right hand. So he talked ~~to~~ some of his townspeople into sending him to Carleton Academy. He listened to the man within and believed in himself

as much as that. He could not actually have foreseen at that time that he would become the pride of everyone who had helped him - that he would progress from the academy to school teaching, to the editorship of the Minnesota House of Representatives, and finally to the presidency of a bank. He did not foresee the long automobile trips he would eventually take with his wife and children (himself at the wheel), or the trip abroad on which he was to meet the King of England. He began by using the one thing he seemed to have left - his mind with all its various capacities - and went step by step just as any normal man must go. Asked how he was able to go so far, he used to say: 'The main thing about a man is the power plant in his coconut. If this plan generates properly it doesn't matter about a few wires being down.'

"He used the wires he had, hitching them together into a workable system and letting the 'power plant in his coconut' do the rest. He traveled the road of the most blighting kind of handicap for the benefit of every man who will ever have one. And, putting on his collar and tie by means of an invention all his own, he could look any man in the eye and say, 'There's only one thing a fellow need be afraid of and that's a wooden head.'"

You have been reading the last few days in your own newspapers about a veteran in Elyria - a man who was wounded in the war and paralyzed, and he was advised by his doctors to become a watch-maker. He was interested in carpentry. He wanted to build a house and a garage and to work in the garage and make a living that way. He was discouraged by everyone, but he persisted, and now this Robert Riley has built his house and garage and is working in it, moving about in his wheelchair, slipping under the car to do his work, working entirely like a normal human being and enjoying his work.

Now, every human being has his handicaps. Not all of them are as grave and as serious as others. 70% of the young men who were called up for service were

rejected because of some physical or mental defect. Of course, there are other handicaps besides physical and mental. We are not perfect instruments. We all have defects and deficiencies, and in some they are more apparent than in others. No man is physically perfect, mentally perfect or morally perfect. Some men are born handicapped, endowed from the very beginning with some physical blemish or some mental or psychic defect. Some are born into handicaps - into a poor social environment, lack of educational opportunities, poverty, vice - and some are seriously handicapped later on in life by some misfortune or mishap.

Observing the universality of such handicaps, which cause suffering and unhappiness in the world, there have been those who concluded that the evils in the world are much more numerous than the good, and therefore, life is an evil thing. There have been various schools of philosophy - pessimism, from Buddhism to Schopenhauer - which based their sad conclusions not only on the abounding incidents of evil in the world, but on the general observation that man and his environment are not well-fitted to one another, and therefore, there is no real chance for happiness for man on earth.

This existence of handicaps, especially the suffering of the righteous and the innocent, has posed a serious problem for the religious philosopher of all times. From Job down to the latest theologian they have all wrestled with this problem of human suffering, and while they have shed much light upon the subject, they have not given final answer because rationally the problem is unsolvable and inexplicable, as are all the primary problems of life. Creation, life, time, substance, form, mind - these prevent explanation and definition. The religious man in a sense has an advantage in wrestling with this problem. This problem is inexplicable, whether you take a religious or a non-religious point of view. But the religious man comes to the conclusion that if the ex-

istence of a suffering being is the true and only answer to the riddle of the universe, then it must follow that His ways, even if we do not understand them, must be the ways of wisdom and of justice, and that therefore, man's destiny, whatever it is and however inexplicable it is, is bound up with God's wise and just scheme of creation. Like Job who suffered so terribly, deprived of all things and finally afflicted with leprosy - in spite of all that he suffers, Job knows that his redeemer lives and that though he is wasting away, he is compensated for his lot of dust and ashes. Job is not a stoic. Pain is very real to him. His physical suffering does disturb him. On the other hand, he will not justify the ways of God by acknowledging, as his friends would have him acknowledge, that his suffering is merited because of his sins. Job is not conscious of any sins which he commits so heinous as to justify these afflictions upon him. He insists upon his spiritual integrity and he demands vindication at the hands of God, and in this great drama of the Bible, God vindicates Job, but Job, in his suffering and in his pain, humbly resigns himself to the will of God in his mystic faith that in this universe of God, "moral goodness is achieved not merely in spite but actually by means of the suffering that is found in all human life".

This is the great assempion of all faith. It derives like all great spiritual truth, not from logic but from the mystic insights of man, and therefore, the fact of evil, of suffering, of handicaps, even of death, have never undermined the true faith of the devout believer who always would say in the face of ~~evil~~ misfortune: "All that the Lord doeth is for the best."

There is a beautiful story told by Solomon ibn Verga which describes the tragic events which overtook the exile from Spain to hundreds of thousands of them who, because of their loyalty to their faith, were expelled from Spain.

A shipload set forth from Spain, and a plague broke out among them, and they were not permitted to land anywhere, and finally the Captain dropped all these helpless exiles upon some barren shore of North Africa, and they set out in quest of some human habitation. Many of them perished. There was one man, his wife and their two children who moved out to find some human abode. And after some days, the wife died, and the man carried the two children as long as possible, and in the morning when he awoke, he found his two children had died, and so says Solomon ibn Verga in telling the story of this man: He rose and stood up and said, "Great God, you have done much unto me to make me give up my faith, but regardless of all you have done and all you may do unto me, I am a faithful Jew and I shall remain a faithful Jew, and nothing you can do unto me will change my faith." And he covered his two children with earth and moved on into the wilderness to find some habitation. This is the supreme motivation of a faith which challenged even divinity to maintain the integrity of its faith in divinity. Our holy faith has taught us how to face life's handicaps.

First of all, we are not admonished to face them rebelliously or resentfully, for they only tend to poison the wellsprings of our life. When our spirits are sorrowful, it is good to pour out our souls as did Hannah, mother of Samuel, who poured out her soul to God - not against God, not against society, not against those close to us, not against ourselves. Prayer for strength and guidance is far more salutary and upbuilding than unavailing outcries against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

And in the second place, we are told that in the case of handicaps, self-pity is the worst kind of medicine, and anyone who has worked in the field of rehabilitation will tell you that this is so. Self-pity spells defeat, and the consignment of the individual to permanent and hopeless invalidism. Self-pity

means the triumph of the handicap over us. On the other hand, cases abound in the records of our Veterans Hospitals and other hospitals where men, mutilated and disfigured, refuse to yield themselves up to self-pity, men, who through a mature grown-up attitude faced their grave new problems without evasion, and who thus replenished and increased their mental and spiritual powers, to compensate them for the physical powers which life had trained from them, and who came through the struggle redeemed to life and usefulness, inspiring symbols of the spirit of man over chaos and disintegration. In the profound intuitions of our faith, suffering - especially the kind of suffering which becomes a means to help - suffering was looked upon as possessing redemptive qualities. "Suffering purges a man of his sins." We rise upon the rungs of pain to higher levels, and those eyes which have been washed by tears frequently see most clearly, and it is hearts which have been torn taut by bereavement and defeat that often-times yield the most exquisite music of humanity.

The servant of God whom Isaiah describes in the 53rd Chapter: "He had no form of comeliness and no beauty that we should delight in. He was deprived and forsaken of men. A man of pains and with disease. And as one from whom men hide their face. But with his stripes we were healed."

This type of the ~~physic~~ perfect man is not a man physically perfect, but a man beaten and broken by life and a man frequently shunned by society, but a man so magnificent that through his suffering all mankind is benefited, and the Messiah was always spoken of as the suffering Messiah.

It is yet to be determined what class of people have made the greatest contributions to civilization - the so-called normal people or those who have suffered handicaps in life. No statistics are available and statistics would not be of particular help in an evaluation of this situation. But it is a very serious question - which group of people have given most to society - those who

have have been normal, healthy, physically sound, who have led normal, peaceful lives - or those who were torn and mutilated by life.

It is remarkable how many of the great benefactors of society were acquainted with . It seems as if they compensated by some extraordinary exertion of mind and spirit for the physical defects. It was a case of building up great pluses to make up for the great minuses of their lives - superior achievements to make up for the inferior physical equipment. Moses, the man of God, the man whose words have reverberated throughout the ages and have given inspiration to mankind, Moses, according to the Bible, was a man handicapped in speech. Paul, who organized the Christian church and was responsible for the establishment of Christianity as a religion - Paul was affected with epilepsy which he called the thorn in his flesh. And that is also true of Mohammed, the found of Islam. Homer, the greatest poet of all times, was blind, as was Milton when he dictated his immortal poem, "Paradise Lost". Socrates, whose philosophy has influenced the thought of mankind to this day, besides being afflicted with a shrew who made his life miserable - Socrates was physically ugly and a grotesque man in appearance.

We are told that the greatest orator of all times, Demosthenes, was a stammerer who trained himself to overcome his handicap. All the greatest military leaders - I do not know how much they benefited mankind - Caesar, Napoleon, and Alexander - each one of them seems to have had some major physical defect. Nearly all the dictators of our day are little people - Stalin and Franco and Hitler, who tried to stretch themselves - to compensate for what they regard as physical deficiency.

Beethoven poured out his soul in the most exquisite of music. Beethoven, at 28, had some difficulty in hearing and at 49 was completely deaf, and his greatest symphonies were written when Beethoven could not hear the sound of a phrase or the sound of an instrument, and in addition was afflicted with rheumatism and dropsy. His father was a drunkard and he was brought up in poverty.

Shortly before he died, he said: "I shall hear in Heaven." He heard even on earth and he bequeathed what he heard through his deafness as a priceless legacy to mankind.

Chopin was consumptive; Massenet wrote his last operas on the floor with a pillow under his chest. Byron was lame; Shelley was tubercular, as was Keats. Joyce Kilmer said, "They only sing who are struck dumb by God." Charles Lamb, author of "Tales from Shakespeare", and Essays of Elia", whose writing is so smooth and even and charming, was frequently during his life, mentally unhinged. His poor sister killed their invalid mother in a fit of insanity.

Robert Louis Stevenson - and who of us as children and young people have not read his "Treasure Island", "Kidnapped" and his lovely poems - Robert Louis Stevenson seldom complained but in one letter he wrote to his friend, he said:

For 14 years I have not had a day's real health; I have wakened sick and gone to bed weary; and I have done my day unflinchingly. I have written in bed and written out of it; written in haemorrhages, written in sickness; written torn by coughing, written when my head swam from weakness and for so long it seems to me I have won my wager. The battle ~~goes~~ goes on, ill or well is a trifle, so as it goes. I was made for a contest and the powers have so willed that my battlefield should be this dingy, inflorious one of the bed and the physic bottle.

That was his life. But he asked that there be inscribed upon his tombstone the following words, the words of a spirit who would not be downed:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live, and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
"Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

Now there is rich beauty in such a spirit that rides high over all of life's handicaps and grows in strength with the buffeting of fate.

On our own American history how many are the superb examples of men who know how to face life's handicaps. Abraham Lincoln suffered all his life from melancholia and frequently contemplated suicide, but he never yielded to the breaking point. You know the story of the two Roosevelt presidents of the United States. Theodore Roosevelt suffered from ill health from childhood, almost blind - yet never permitted his physical defects to interfere with his physical development and his mental development. He fought against time as a valiant soldier.

And Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in the prime of his manhood, was struck down with infantile paralysis. Other men would have retired to a world of isolation and defeat and bitterness. He resolved to outface his handicaps - he struggled against them and for four successive terms became President of the United States and molded the destiny of our world in spite of the pain to which he was frequently subject and the difficulties of an almost complete cripple.

Thomas Edison, who explored the field of sound, while he himself was stone deaf, being made deaf as a child by someone boxing his ears after the miniature little laboratory he had set up was blown upon a railroad car where he had set it up.

We all know the story of Charles Steinitz, a cripple from birth who became one of the foremost electrical engineers of our age, and of George Washington Carver, a Negro born of slave parents in abject poverty who had to fight his way against prejudice and handicaps which life forced upon him, and yet he became one of the foremost scientists of our age.

Hundreds and thousands of such instances can be recounted who substituted proficiency for deficiency - superiority for inferiority - plus for minus. That is not true merely of famous men, but of myraids of men and women in humble walks of life who do not permit handicaps to unfit them for life, whether the

handicaps be of poverty, lack of education, or ill health. When they are blind, they teach the nerves of their hands to read for them, and develop skills which they never knew they possessed because the will is there, because they will not surrender and make of themselves invalids of life.

Our religion teaches us how to face life's handicaps, not with self-pity, but first with the philosophy that mind is greater than matter, that you are more than your body, that your power of energy inside you, your will, purpose, resolve, is mightier than anything your body can throw around you as a handicap. That you are made in the image of God and possess something of the omnipotence of divinity to overcome the body. That is the philosophy, and once having it, you know how to meet misfortune and handicaps, and that is by work. Someone said, work is the best narcotic, and that is true. Work - in the very doing of things you acquire proficiency, skills, increased power which sooner or later gives you a sense of satisfaction, of contentment because you have mastered your handicaps and you are able to live normally.

And finally, it is well to remember that a man who suffers a handicap can be greatly helped to make the necessary adjustment to live. Many of these whose names I have mentioned here were helped over their valley of the shadow of death by the guiding hand of some loving mother or father or brother or sister or friend, by another human being. We all need one another because we are all handicapped and the greater our handicaps, the more we stand in need of the normal, of the intelligent help and strengthening of those about us. And when we ask ourselves how to face life's handicaps, the answer is given by our holy religion: Face it without without self-pity; face it in the confidence that when there is a destiny which need not be extinguished by any physical mishap. Face it by physical work, never yield until the day of your death and face it with the help and the cooperation of those nearest and dearest to you and of other men.