

YOUTH AND LIFE

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Table of Contents

I YOUTH

II THE TWO GENERATIONS

III THE VIRTUES AND THE SEASONS OF LIFE

IV THE LIFE OF IRONY

V THE EXCITEMENT OF FRIENDSHIP

VI THE ADVENTURE OF LIFE

VII SOME THOUGHTS ON RELIGION

VIII THE MYSTIC TURNED RADICAL

IX SEEING, WE SEE NOT

X THE EXPERIMENTAL LIFE

XI THE DODGING OF PRESSURES

XII FOR RADICALS

XIII THE COLLEGE: AN INNER VIEW

XIV A PHILOSOPHY OF HANDICAP

FOOTNOTES:

I YOUTH

How shall I describe Youth, the time of contradictions and anomalies? The fiercest radicalisms, the most dogged conservatisms, irrepressible gayety, bitter melancholy,—all these moods are equally part of that showery springtime of life. One thing, at least, it clearly is: a great, rich rush and flood of energy. It is as if the store of life had been accumulating through the slow, placid years of childhood, and suddenly the dam had broken and the waters rushed out, furious and uncontrolled, before settling down into the quieter channels of middle life. The youth is suddenly seized with a poignant consciousness of being alive, which is quite wanting to the naïve unquestioning existence of the child. He finds himself overpoweringly urged toward self-expression. Just as the baby, born into a “great, blooming, buzzing confusion,” and attracted by every movement, every color, every sound, kicks madly in response in all directions, and only gradually gets his movements coördinated into the orderly and precise movements of his elders,—so the youth suddenly born into a confusion of ideas and appeals and traditions responds in the most chaotic way to this new spiritual world, and only gradually learns to find his way about in it, and get his thoughts and feelings into some kind of order.

Fortunate the young man who does not make his entrance into too wide a world. And upon the width and depth of that new

world will depend very much whether his temperament is to be radical or conservative, adventurous or conventional. For it is one of the surprising things about youth that it can so easily be the most conservative of all ages. Why do we suppose that youth is always radical? At no age are social proprieties more strictly observed, and Church, State, law, and order, more rigorously defended. But I like to think that youth is conservative only when its spiritual force has been spent too early, or when the new world it enters into is found, for some reason, to be rather narrow and shallow. It is so often the urgent world of pleasure that first catches the eye of youth; its flood of life is drawn off in that direction; the boy may fritter away his precious birthright in pure lightness of heart and animal spirits. And it is only too true that this type of youth is transitory. Pleasure contrives to burn itself out very quickly, and youth finds itself left prematurely with the ashes of middle age. But if, in some way, the flood of life is checked in the direction of pleasure, then it bursts forth in another,—in the direction of ideals; then we say that the boy is radical. Youth is always turbulent, but the momentous difference is whether it shall be turbulent in passion or in enthusiasm. Nothing is so pathetic as the young man who spends his spiritual force too early, so that when the world of ideals is presented to him, his force being spent, he can only grasp at second-hand ideals and mouldy formulas.

This is the great divergence which sets youth not only against old age, but against youth itself: the undying spirit of youth that seems to be fed by an unquenchable fire, that does not burn itself out but seems to grow steadier and steadier as life goes on, against the fragile, quickly tarnished type that passes

relentlessly into middle life. At twenty-five I find myself full of the wildest radicalisms, and look with dismay at my childhood friends who are already settled down, have achieved babies and responsibilities, and have somehow got ten years beyond me in a day. And this divergence shows itself in a thousand different ways. It may be a temptation to a world of pleasure, it may be a sheltering from the stimulus of ideas, or even a sluggish temperament, that separates traditional and adventurous youth, but fundamentally it is a question of how youth takes the world. And here I find that I can no longer drag the traditional youth along with me in this paper. There are many of him, I know, but I do not like him, and I know nothing about him. Let us rather look at the way radical youth grows into and meets the world.

From the state of “the little child, to whom the sky is a roof of blue, the world a screen of opaque and disconnected facts, the home a thing eternal, and ‘being good’ just simple obedience to unquestioned authority,” one steps suddenly into that “vast world of adult perception, pierced deep by flaring search-lights of partial understanding.”

The child has an utter sense of security; childhood is unconscious even that it is alive. It has neither fears nor anxieties, because it is incorrigibly poetical. It idealizes everything that it touches. It is unfair, perhaps, to blame parents and teachers, as we sometimes do in youth, for consciously biasing our child-minds in a falsely idealistic direction; for the child will infallibly idealize even his poorest of experiences. His broken glimpses and anticipations of his own future show him everything that is orderly, happy, and

beautifully fit. He sees his grown-up life as old age, itself a sort of reversed childhood, sees its youth. The passing of childhood into youth is, therefore, like suddenly being turned from the cosy comfort of a warm fireside to shift for one's self in the world. Life becomes in a moment a process of seeking and searching. It appears as a series of blind alleys, all equally and magnificently alluring, all equally real and possible. Youth's thirst for experience is simply that it wants to be everything, do everything and have everything that is presented to its imagination. Youth has suddenly become conscious of life. It has eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As the world breaks in on a boy with its crashing thunder, he has a feeling of expansion, of sudden wisdom and sudden care. The atoms of things seem to be disintegrating around him. Then come the tearings and the grindings and the wrenchings, and in that conflict the radical or the poet is made. If the youth takes the struggle easily, or if his guardian angels have arranged things so that there is no struggle, then he becomes of that conservative stripe that we have renounced above. But if he takes it hard,—if his struggles are not only with outward material conditions, but also with inner spiritual ones,—then he is likely to achieve that gift of the gods, perpetual youth. The great paradox is that it is the sleek and easy who are prematurely and permanently old. Struggle brings youth rather than old age.

In this struggle, thus beset with problems and crises, all calling for immediate solution, youth battles its way into a sort of rationalization. Out of its inchoateness emerges a sort of order; the disturbing currents of impulse are gradually resolved into a

character. But it is essential that that resolution be a natural and not a forced one. I always have a suspicion of boys who talk of "planning their lives." I feel that they have won a precocious maturity in some illegitimate way. For to most of us youth is so imperious that those who can escape the hurly-burly and make a sudden leap into the prudent, quiet waters of life seem to have missed youth altogether. And I do not mean here the hurly-burly of passion so much as of ideals. It seems so much better, as well as more natural, to expose one's self to the full fury of the spiritual elements, keeping only one purpose in view,—to be strong and sincere,—than to pick one's way cautiously along.

The old saying is the truest philosophy of youth: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you." How impossible for a youth who is really young to plan his life consciously! This process that one sometimes sees of cautiously becoming acquainted with various ideas and systems, and then choosing deliberately those that will be best adapted to a concerted plan, is almost uncanny. This confidence in one's immunity to ideas that would tend to disarrange the harmony of the scheme is mystifying and irritating. Youth talks of "getting" or "accepting" ideas! But youth does not get ideas,—ideas get him! He may try to keep himself in a state of spiritual health, but that is the only immunity he can rely upon. He cannot really tell what idea or appeal is going to seize upon him next and make off with him.

We speak as if falling in love were a unique phase in the life of youth. It is rather the pattern and symbol of a youth's whole life. This sudden, irresistible seizure of enthusiasm that he

cannot explain, that he does not want to explain, what is it but the aspect of all his experience? The youth sees a pretty face, reads a noble book, hears a stirring appeal for a cause, meets a charming friend, gets fired with the concept of science, or of social progress, becomes attracted to a profession,—the emotion that fixes his enthusiasm and lets out a flood of emotion in that direction, and lifts him into another world, is the same in every case. Youth glories in the sudden servitude, is content to let the new master lead wherever he will; and is as surprised as any one at the momentous and startling results. Youth is vulnerable at every point. Prudence is really a hateful thing in youth. A prudent youth is prematurely old. It is infinitely better, I repeat, for a boy to start ahead in life in a spirit of moral adventure, trusting for sustenance to what he may find by the wayside, than to lay in laboriously, before starting, a stock of principles for life, and burden himself so heavily for the journey that he dare not, and indeed cannot, leave his pack unguarded by the roadside to survey the fair prospects on either hand. Youth at its best is this constant susceptibility to the new, this constant eagerness to try experiments.

It is here that youth's quarrel with the elder generation comes in. There is no scorn so fierce as that of youth for the inertia of older men. The lack of adjustment to the ideas of youth's elders and betters, one of the permanent tragedies of life, is certainly the most sensational aspect of youth. That the inertia of the older people is wisdom, and not impotence, is a theory that you will never induce youth to believe for an instant. The stupidity and cruelties of their management of the world fill youth with

an intolerant rage. In every contact with its elders, youth finds them saying, in the words of Kipling:—

“We shall not acknowledge that old stars fade and
alien planets arise,
That the sere bush buds or the desert blooms or the
ancient well-head dries,
Or any new compass wherewith new men
adventure 'neath new skies.”

Youth sees with almost a passionate despair its plans and dreams and enthusiasms, that it knows so well to be right and true and noble, brushed calmly aside, not because of any sincere searching into their practicability, but because of the timidity and laziness of the old, who sit in the saddle and ride mankind. And nothing torments youth so much as to have this inertia justified on the ground of experience. For youth thinks that it sees through this sophism of “experience.” It sees in it an all-inclusive attempt to give the world a character, and excuse the older generation for the mistakes and failures which it has made. What is this experience, youth asks, but a slow accretion of inhibitions, a learning, at its best, not to do again something which ought not to have been done in the first place?

Old men cherish a fond delusion that there is something mystically valuable in mere quantity of experience. Now the fact is, of course, that it is the young people who have all the really valuable experience. It is they who have constantly to face new situations, to react constantly to new aspects of life, who are getting the whole beauty and terror and cruelty of the world in its fresh and undiluted purity. It is only the interpretation of this first collision with life that is worth

anything. For the weakness of experience is that it so soon gets stereotyped; without new situations and crises it becomes so conventional as to be practically unconscious. Very few people get any really new experience after they are twenty-five, unless there is a real change of environment. Most older men live only in the experience of their youthful years.

If we get few ideas after we are twenty-five, we get few ideals after we are twenty. A man's spiritual fabric is woven by that time, and his "experience," if he keeps true to himself, consists simply in broadening and enriching it, but not in adding to it in arithmetical proportion as the years roll on, in the way that the wise teachers of youth would have us believe.

But few men remain quite true to themselves. As their youthful ideals come into contact with the harshnesses of life, the brightest succumb and go to the wall. And the hardy ones that survive contain all that is vital in the future experience of the man,—so that the ideas of older men seem often the curious parodies or even burlesques of what must have been the cleaner and more potent ideas of their youth. Older people seem often to be resting on their oars, drifting on the spiritual current that youth has set going in life, or "coasting" on the momentum that the strong push of youth has given them.

There is no great gulf between youth and middle age, as there is between childhood and youth. Adults are little more than grown-up children. This is what makes their arrogance so insulting,—the assumption that they have acquired any impartiality or objectivity of outlook, and have any better standards for judging life. Their ideas are wrong, and grow progressively more wrong as they become older. Youth,

therefore, has no right to be humble. The ideals it forms will be the highest it will ever have, the insight the clearest, the ideas the most stimulating. The best that it can hope to do is to conserve those resources, and keep its flame of imagination and daring bright.

Therefore, it is perhaps unfair to say that the older generation rules the world. Youth rules the world, but only when it is no longer young. It is a tarnished, travestied youth that is in the saddle in the person of middle age. Old age lives in the delusion that it has improved and rationalized its youthful ideas by experience and stored-up wisdom, when all it has done is to damage them more or less—usually more. And the tragedy of life is that the world is run by these damaged ideals. That is why our ideas are always a generation behind our actual social conditions. Press, pulpit, and bar teem with the radicalisms of thirty years ago. The dead hand of opinions formed in their college days clutches our leaders and directs their activities in this new and strangely altered physical and spiritual environment. Hence grievous friction, maladjustment, social war. And the faster society moves, the more terrific is the divergence between what is actually going on and what public opinion thinks is actually going on. It is only the young who are actually contemporaneous; they interpret what they see freshly and without prejudice; their vision is always the truest, and their interpretation always the justest.

Youth does not simply repeat the errors and delusions of the past, as the elder generation with a tolerant cynicism likes to think; it is ever laying the foundations for the future. What it thinks so wildly now will be orthodox gospel thirty years hence.

The ideas of the young are the living, the potential ideas; those of the old, the dying, or the already dead. This is why it behooves youth to be not less radical, but even more radical, than it would naturally be. It must be not simply contemporaneous, but a generation ahead of the times, so that when it comes into control of the world, it will be precisely right and coincident with the conditions of the world as it finds them. If the youth of to-day could really achieve this miracle, they would have found the secret of "perpetual youth."

In this conflict between youth and its elders, youth is the incarnation of reason pitted against the rigidity of tradition. Youth puts the remorseless questions to everything that is old and established,—Why? What is this thing good for? And when it gets the mumbled, evasive answers of the defenders, it applies its own fresh, clean spirit of reason to institutions, customs, and ideas, and, finding them stupid, inane, or poisonous, turns instinctively to overthrow them and build in their place the things with which its visions teem.

"This constant return to purely logical activity with each generation keeps the world supplied with visionaries and reformers, that is to say, with saviors and leaders. New movements are born in young minds, and lack of experience enables youth eternally to recall civilization to sound bases. The passing generation smiles and cracks its weather-worn jokes about youthful effusions: but this new, ever-hopeful, ever-daring, ever-doing, youthful enthusiasm, ever returning to the logical bases of religion, ethics, politics, business, art, and social life,—this is the salvation of the world."¹⁴

This was the youthful radicalism of Jesus, and his words sound across the ages "calling civilization ever back to sound bases." With him, youth eternally reproaches the ruling generation,— "O ye of little faith!" There is so much to be done in the world; so much could be done if you would only dare! You seem to be doing so little to cure the waste and the muddle and the lethargy all around you. Don't you really care, or are you only faint-hearted? If you do not care, it must be because you do not know; let us point out to you the shockingness of exploitation, and the crass waste of human personality all around you in this modern world. And if you are faint-hearted, we will supply the needed daring and courage, and lead you straight to the attack.

These are the questions and challenges that the youth puts to his elders, and it is their shifty evasions and quibblings that confound and dishearten him. He becomes intolerant, and can see all classes in no other light than that of accomplices in a great crime. If they only knew! Swept along himself in an irrationality of energy, he does not see the small part that reason plays in the intricate social life, and only gradually does he come to view life as a "various and splendid disorder of forces," and exonerate weak human nature from some of its heavy responsibility. But this insight brings him to appreciate and almost to reverence the forces of science and conscious social progress that are grappling with that disorder, and seeking to tame it.

Youth is the leaven that keeps all these questioning, testing attitudes fermenting in the world. If it were not for this troublesome activity of youth, with its hatred of sophisms and glosses, its insistence on things as they are, society would die

from sheer decay. It is the policy of the older generation as it gets adjusted to the world to hide away the unpleasant things where it can, or preserve a conspiracy of silence and an elaborate pretense that they do not exist. But meanwhile the sores go on festering just the same. Youth is the drastic antiseptic. It will not let its elders cry peace, where there is no peace. Its fierce sarcasms keep issues alive in the world until they are settled right. It drags skeletons from closets and insists that they be explained. No wonder the older generation fears and distrusts the younger. Youth is the avenging Nemesis on its trail. "It is young men who provide the logic, decision, and enthusiasm necessary to relieve society of the crushing burden that each generation seeks to roll upon the shoulders of the next."

Our elders are always optimistic in their views of the present, pessimistic in their views of the future; youth is pessimistic toward the present and gloriously hopeful for the future. And it is this hope which is the lever of progress,—one might say, the only lever of progress. The lack of confidence which the ruling generation feels in the future leads to that distrust of the machinery of social reform and social organization, or the use of means for ends, which is so characteristic of it to-day. Youth is disgusted with such sentimentality. It can never understand that curious paralysis which seizes upon its elders in the face of urgent social innovations; that refusal to make use of a perfectly definite programme or administrative scheme which has worked elsewhere. Youth concludes that its elders discountenance the machinery, the means, because they do not really believe in the end, and adds another count to the indictment.

Youth's attitude is really the scientific attitude. Do not be afraid to make experiments, it says. You cannot tell how anything will work until you have tried it. Suppose science confined its interests to those things that have been tried and tested in the world, how far should we get? It is possible indeed that your experiments may produce by accident a social explosion, but we do not give up chemistry because occasionally a wrong mixture of chemicals blows up a scientist in a laboratory, or medical research because an investigator contracts the disease he is fighting. The whole philosophy of youth is summed up in the word, Dare! Take chances and you will attain! The world has nothing to lose but its chains—and its own soul to gain!

I have dwelt too long on the conflicts of youth. For it has also its still places, where it becomes introspective and thinks about its destiny and the meaning of its life. In our artificial civilization many young people at twenty-five are still on the threshold of activity. As one looks back, then, over eight or nine years, one sees a panorama of seemingly formidable length. So many crises, so many startling surprises, so many vivid joys and harrowing humiliations and disappointments, that one feels startlingly old; one wonders if one will ever feel so old again. And in a sense, youth at twenty-five is older than it will ever be again. For if time is simply a succession of incidents in our memory, we seem to have an eternity behind us. Middle-aged people feel no such appalling stretch of time behind them. The years fade out one by one; often the pressure of life leaves nothing of reality or value but the present moment. Some of youth's elders seem to enjoy almost a new babyhood, while youth has constantly with it in all its vividness and multifariousness that specious wealth of abrupt changes,

climaxes and disillusiones that have crowded the short space of its life.

We often envy the sunny noon of the thirties and forties. These elders of ours change so little that they seem to enjoy an endless summer of immortality. They are so placid, so robust, so solidly placed in life, seemingly so much further from dissolution than we. Youth seems curiously fragile. Perhaps it is because all beauty has something of the precarious and fleeting about it. A beautiful girl seems too delicate and fine to weather a long life; she must be burning away too fast. This wistfulness and haunting pathos of life is very real to youth. It feels the rush of time past it. Only youth can sing of the passing glory of life, and then only in its full tide. The older people's lament for the vanished days of youth may be orthodox, but it rings hollow. For our greatest fears are those of presentiment, and youth is haunted not only by the feeling of past change, but by the presentiment of future change.

Middle age has passed the waters; it has become static and placid. Its wistfulness for youth is unreal, and a forced sentimentality. In the same breath that it cries for its youth it mocks at youth's preoccupation with the thought of death. The lugubrious harmonies of young poets are a favorite joke. But the feeling of the precariousness of life gives the young man an intimate sense of its preciousness; nothing shocks him quite so much as that it should be ruthlessly and instantly snatched away. Middle age has acclimated itself to the earth, has settled down familiarly in it, and is easily be fooled into thinking that it will live here forever, just as, when we are settled comfortably in a house, we cannot conceive ourselves as ever being

dislodged. But youth takes a long time to get acclimated. It has seen so many mysteries and dangers about it, that the presence of the Greatest Mystery and the Greatest Danger must be the most portentous of things to it.

It is this sense of the preciousness of his life, perhaps, that makes a youth so impatient of discipline. Youth can never think of itself as anything but master of things. Its visions are a curious blend of devotion and egotism. Its enthusiasm for a noble cause is apt to be all mixed up with a picture of itself leading the cohorts to victory. The youth never sees himself as a soldier in the ranks, but as the leader, bringing in some long-awaited change by a brilliant *coup d'état*, or writing and speaking words of fire that win a million hearts at a stroke. And he fights shy of discipline in smaller matters. He does not submit willingly to a course of work that is not immediately appealing, even for the sake of the glorious final achievement. Fortunate it is for the young man, perhaps, that there are so many organs of coercion all ready in the world for him,—economic need, tradition, and subtle influence of family ambition,—to seize him and nail him fast to some profession or trade or activity, before he is aware, or has time to protest or draw back!

It is another paradox of youth that, with all its fine enthusiasm, it should accomplish so little. But this seeming aimlessness of purpose is the natural result of that deadly fear of having one's wings clipped by discipline. Infinitely finer, it seems to youth, is it to soar freely in the air, than to run on a track along the ground! And perhaps youth is right. In his intellectual life, the young man's scorn for the pedantic and conventional amounts

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