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THE VENTURES OF FAITH¹

Isaiah XL, 3—"Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

SOME one asked me not long ago which one of the so-called Christian virtues I was disposed to rank the highest. You remember how St. Paul rounded up a fine catalogue of the virtues:—diligence, patience, gentleness, compassion, brotherly kindness. "If these things are yours," he says, "and abound, they make you to be not idle nor unfruitful." But all through the Bible books there is another note which finds clearer echo in my temperament; something that underlies and fortifies all these other things. It's foremost in the word of the prophets, it rings through the teaching of Jesus, it is incarnate in the work of the apostles. It's a characteristic emphasis which no one can accurately define but of which every one of us is conscious—a certain gallant way of looking at life and taking life's chances and changes, a confidence in the possibilities of this human nature of ours and of its divine destiny so strong as to inspire one to defy the hard facts of existence. What shall we call it? Why, it's—"looking up and lifting up"—it's courage and confidence, it's the cheerful tenacity with which one follows the things that seem best worth while—it's a loyalty that cannot be broken, an ardor which will not admit defeat; it's "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen".

¹ Baccalaureate sermon of the thirteenth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, preached by the Reverend Samuel Atkins Eliot, D.D., Pastor of the Arlington Street Church, Boston, in the academic court, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 3, 1928.

Whatever we may call it, never, I am sure, is the Christian life set forth in terms more remote from its original import than when it is interpreted as a safe and easy experience. "There is no promise that I can find in the Christian teaching," said the most invigorating of our contemporary philosophers, "of a time when religion will be accommodated to the general demand for smooth-flowing enjoyment . . . Religion in the Bible is presented . . . as a challenge addressed to the valiant Soul, and which none but he can successfully meet."

Oh! of course a timid soul may seek religion as a kind of refuge, or a tired life may cry out for rest, but when we think of the characteristic spirit of modern American youth—well, perhaps, we see why some of them are not much interested in religion. It is not that religion puts up to them condition and requirements that are too hard—it is that it too often makes things too easy. Life is no soft experience, but a hazardous occupation. The real reason why Christianity fails in these days to win a deeper loyalty is, I repeat, that it makes too slight an appeal to heroism. It is too often a soft and invertebrate sentimentalism. The young Americans I know do not want immunity from danger; they do not want to lie at anchor in the quiet harbor, they want the risk and conflict of the open sea.

Success, you may be sure, does not come to the drifter or the dawdler, but to the worker, the creator, the winner over odds. The life that knows no outward resistance soon develops an inward inertia. Character is always something in the making—it is life in motion. It is not immunity from trouble, but experience of it, that promotes self-control. It is not the mind that has never doubted that is most secure in its conviction, but the mind that has thought things through and faced perplexities and problems, and found the solu-

tions. It is not the people who do not know what pain is who are brave and strong, but those who have wrestled with the dark angel and subdued him.

Why, even among the animal creation we acknowledge a kind of aristocracy of courage. Do we rank the lion and the jackal together? And among men—why, we salute courage, do we not, even in our enemies? A manly foe is worthier of our respect than a timid and spiritless friend. It is the gallant spirit that I rank so high among the virtues, that levels youth with age, equalizes all so-called classes, disregards all outward distinctions. It is the protector and defender of all the other virtues. “A man is great,” I read the other day, “not because he has adventures, but because he is the *cause* of adventures—to meet him, is, itself, an adventure, and makes a change in those who experience it.”

The people who possess that valiant spirit are the kind of folk by whom God gets things done in this world. They are the people who are expectant of good, audacious in their joyful anticipations. They are the people who have the happy feeling that it is very likely that, at any corner or turning of the common dusty road on which they plod, they may come face to face with God, that in *his* world anything may happen—and that the best is the likeliest to happen.

Oh, there are not many of those bright souls! Most of us are comparatively listless and apathetic, and our hopes are small and thin. We take things as they are and rather assume that so they must be to the end. We are disposed to jog along in rather a tame and unheroic way; content so long as things are reasonably smooth and comfortable. The idea that we have a right to an easy time, that life ought not to be difficult, and that, so far as it is difficult we have something of a grievance against the Creator,—that is dreadfully prevalent nowadays.

I confess to you that it sometimes seems to me that there is really only one great and essential difference in people—just their possession or their lack of the initiative, the persistence, the chivalric spirit, that I feel like extolling to-day. Most people are not creators, but absorbers. They just run in the grooves of custom, or drift with the currents of accepted opinions or fashions. Here, on the other hand, are the men and women who are original, real, genuine, who have character behind their words and actions—who have power by mere presence or practice to touch, to move, to satisfy. They have definite thoughts, motives, purposes. They count as living spirits in a living world. They “prepare the way of the Lord”. They *make straight in the desert a highway for our God*.

I like the symbolism of the figure, it appeals to the imagination. Highways echo the call of the far horizons. The sea has its highways like the land and now adventurous spirits are plotting highways in the air. And what a record of road building is behind us! The whole history of mankind is the story of difficulties conquered, obstacles removed, impassable rivers crossed, insurmountable heights scaled. More and more I come to feel that human life is not so much a creation as a migration. Every step in advance that man has made has taxed his resources to the uttermost. To detach himself from his brute ancestry, to invent his earliest tools, to learn the primitive arts, to lay the rough foundation of the highway of civilization and then to carry on that road—why, these are titanic achievements which only a race of heroic fibre could have accomplished.

And that spirit is not overpast. I encounter it again and again. Thank God, I know many people who cannot content themselves with easy acquiescence with things as they are, or with idle looking on! They are filled with eager discon-

tent and with the expectation that allures to pursuit. They are the trailmakers and roadbuilders. They are in revolt against monotony and neutrality.

Monotony—well, you young people may not have sensed it yet, but the rest of us have. Upstairs and downstairs—out and back—that is the law of the threshold. The same situations continually repeat themselves—recurring routines seem to imprison us—the ways we walk are worn deep by by our own feet. Why, even this flying and spinning world comes round again on the same old orbit. One of my colleagues told me of going to see a dying man, a man who had spent practically all his life in one sedentary and confining employment—a humdrum drudgery faithfully performed, but out of which he had never risen. “You need not talk to me of death,” he said with a grim smile, “Why, sir, I have been dead for thirty years. I don’t know what is coming to me now, but at least it will be something new.” Oh, how common that is in a modern world, where everything is more and more reduced to mechanical terms! Our mass production, our factory methods—how they tend to make machines of us all—just parts of a great system in which men become things rather than persons, hands rather than living souls. For the most favored of us how much there is of repetition—in the household, the classroom, the shop, the office! It is the same worn path, the same furrow to follow, the same dishes to wash, the same burdens to bear.

But to the man of the gallant spirit—the builder of the highway in the desert, life never gets monotonous—no, it is an inexhaustible inheritance, a limitless allurements. A thousand voices call to the jocund march. There are so many things one wants to see—let’s go and see them! There are so many things one wants to do—let’s go and do them!

There are heights to climb, valleys to cross, plains to traverse—discovering the best routes, staking out the course, marking the grades, bringing up the material for roadbed and bridges, preparing the way—making straight the highway. The promise of difficulty is just the stimulus to new endeavor; it is a challenge rather than a discouragement. Why, how tame life would be without a hill to breast, without the canyon to span, without the flood to circumvent. Those are the tingling anticipations that rouse and stay the gallant trailmakers. No torpid stagnation for such folks, no stunted and wasted life. One goes out to meet the cynic years with elation.

And then I observe an incentive for those who would prepare the way of the Lord in the revolt from *neutrality*. Neutrality is usually a hopelessly futile attitude. No more spice in it than in the white of an egg! In small matters, indeed, we sometimes just cannot take the time to get interested, but in big issues every one has to be counted and the lukewarm people just have to be added to the opposition. The man who would like to be counted on both sides is always counted on the wrong side. There are lots of well-intentioned or well-disposed people in the world, but you do not get much real help from a man who says of some good cause you are trying to promote, "I wish you well with it". He is not going to oppose you, but he is not going to lend a hand—probably he is not going to think anything more about it. It is one thing to vote "Aye" in favor of a resolution, and another thing to go to work to make that resolution effective in practical affairs. Well-wishing takes nothing out of you, requires no effort, and may be a rather cheap way of getting credit. Why, we might clear out the whole tribe of well-wishers and what cause would be the loser? I can't help feeling that the "live-and-let-live" policy,

that is agreeable to everybody, smiles on everything, condemns nothing, insists on nothing, lets the devil alone to do what he wants—that is one of the serious perils of our time.

Or even more irritating are the patronizing neutrals—“My dear sir,” they say, “no doubt yours is a good cause, that road would be worth building, it’s a beautiful dream—but you must remember that it is a dream, and that by and by you will wake up and find that desert just as lonely and barren and those defiles as impassable as they really are.” Yes, and they speak rather loftily as if experience had brought them wisdom and disillusionment—as if our ideals were just pretty tales for the nursery; and to pursue them—well, it is a bit immature and rather silly. There is an annoying way of wagging one’s head and saying rather superciliously—“Yes, in my time I came through all that,” as if generous enthusiasm were a kind of childish ailment that grown-up people no longer suffer from. Against all that kind of thing the eager soul revolts. Who wants to linger in the gray and dusty ashes of a burnt out life, or in the smoke of a merely smoldering fire? No, let us have the glowing flame. Who wants a climate that is always neither hot nor cold? No, I value the zeal that has color and motion, even if it does sometimes seem to lack sense. The spirit that is neither hot nor cold, the life that is looking for the broad and easy way—well, all I can say is that the New Testament seems to condemn that sort of thing in a very downright fashion.

No, fasten to some *big* idea, some *great* truth, some *noble* cause, and it will send you forward with energy, and steadfastness and confidence. Make life an opportunity not only for enjoying something, but for becoming something. That is what Emerson meant when he said “Hitch your wagon to a star.” Let’s get into that inspiring company. Then

though we fall, yet onward moves the highway—and our souls go marching with it, for we are part of it, we have built ourselves into it. We do not ask for completeness of achievement. We know that this narrow span of life is quite inadequate for any great accomplishment; but each brave and self-effacing service of the present world prepares, through the wilderness of to-day, the way for the marching armies of the Kingdom of God and makes straighter the path of Justice and Liberty and Truth.

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