

THE EDUCATION OF THE SPIRIT.

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THE old mystics were fond of saying that "Man is a made trinity, like to the unmade Blessed Trinity." That particular form of words comes, as many of you will remember, from Julian of Norwich; but it expresses a thought which we often meet in the spiritual writers of the Middle Ages. Further, these writers were disposed to find in man's nature a reflection of the three special characters which theology attributes to the Christian Godhead. They thought that the power of the Father had its image in the physical nature of man: the wisdom of the Son in his reason: the creative vigour of the Holy Spirit in his soul. The sceptic of course would put this differently, and see in it but one more illustration of the fact that man always makes God in his own image. But without scepticism I think we may put it thus: that those who have pondered most deeply on the Divine Nature have most easily found in its richness, and best understood, just those attributes which are most clearly marked in human nature. Man has been for them a key to God.

All this does not sound much like the beginning of an address on education. But it really has to do with the ideas which I wish to put before you this evening: because I am concerned now not with the religious speculation, but with the human analogy—the fact, that man's deepest exploration of his own nature gives this three-fold result: that he feels that his real selfhood and real possibilities are not wholly exhausted by the terms "body" and "mind." He knows in his best moments another vivid aspect of his being, as strong as these, though often kept below the threshold of his consciousness: the spirit, which informs, yet is distinct from both his body and his mind.

Now, what I want you to consider is this. To what extent
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does that three-fold analysis influence our educational schemes? The object of education is to bring out the best and highest powers of the thing educated. Do we in our education even attempt to bring out the best and highest powers of the spirit?

The child as he comes to us is a bundle of physical, mental, and spiritual possibilities. He is related to three distinct yet interpenetrating worlds; all accessible to him, since he is human; all offering endless opportunities of adventure to him.

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy,
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
About the growing boy."

Why should they close? Whose fault is it that they do? Does not the fault lie with the poor grovelling outlook of those to whom this sensitive, plastic thing is confided? Who so badly select and manipulate the bundle of possibilities offered to them, that they often contrive to manufacture a creature ruled by its own physical needs and appetites, its mental and emotional limitations, instead of a free, immortal being, master of its own body and mind. Here's this child: the germ of the future. To a great extent, we can control the way that germ developes; the special characters of the past which it shall transmit. We can have a hand in the shaping of

the history that is to be when we have gone: for who can doubt that the controlling factor of history is the physical, mental, or spiritual character of those races that dominate the world? It is in the interplay, tension, and strife of these three universes that history in the last resort consists.

Now, on the eve of a great period of reconstruction, is it not worth while to remind ourselves of this terrific fact? To see whether our plans are so laid as to bring out all the balanced possibilities of the coming man, all his latent powers? We recognize the fact that body and mind must be trained whilst still in a plastic state. We are awake to the results of allowing them to atrophy. Where we get individuals with special powers in one of these directions, we aim at their perfect development; at the production of the athlete, scholar, man of action. Are we equally on the look-out for special qualities of spirit? Do we, when found, train them with the same skill and care? If we don't, can we expect to get the very best out of the race? To explore all its potentialities; some, perhaps, still unguessed?

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The mischief is that whatever our theoretic beliefs, we do not in practice really regard spirit as the chief element of our being; the chief object of our educational care. Our notions about it are shadowy, and have very little influence on our educational schemes. For ten parents who study the Montessori system of sense training, how many think of consulting those old specialists who taught how the powers of the spirit may be developed and disciplined, and given their true place in human life? How many educationalists realize that prayer, as taught to children, may and should be an exercise which gently develops a whole side of human consciousness that might otherwise be dormant; places it in communication with a real and valid universe awaiting the apprehension of man? How many give the subject the same close, skilled attention that they give, say, to Latin grammar on one hand or physical culture on the other? Those subjects, and many more, have emerged from vagueness into clarity because attention, the cutting point of the human will, has been concentrated upon them. Gradually in these departments an ordered world has been made, and the child or young person put in correspondence with that world. Can we say that the same has been done for the world of spirit? and, if it isn't done, must not the human trinity be deformed by this suppression of one of its powers?

We are just beginning to pay such ordered attention to that fringe-world in which sense, intellect, and spirit all have a part: I mean the world of aesthetic apprehension. What has been the result? Has it not been, for many of the young people now growing up, an immense enlargement and enrichment of life? Look at one of the most striking phenomena of the moment: I mean the rapid growth of the taste and need for poetry, the amount of it that is written, the way in which it seems to supply a necessary outlet for young Englishmen in the present hour. Look at the mass of verse composed, under conditions of utmost horror, at the front—poetry the most pathetic in the world, in which we see the passionate effort of spirit to find adjustment, its assertion of unconquerable power, even in the teeth of this overwhelming manifestation of brute force. *There* is the power of the future. There is that quickening spring, bubbling up afresh in every generation; and ready, if we will help it to find expression, to transfigure our human life.

There is a common idea that the spiritual life means something pious and mawkish: not very desirable in girls, and most

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objectionable in boys. It is strange that this notion, which both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures so emphatically contradict, should ever have grown up amongst us. The spirit, says St. Paul, is not a spirit of fearfulness; it is “a spirit of Power and Love and Discipline”—qualities that make for vigour and manliness of the best type. It is the very source of our energies, both natural and supernatural. The mystics sometimes called it our “life-giving life.” People say, “Come, Holy Spirit”; as if it were something foreign to us: yet it comes perpetually in every baby born into the world, for each new human life entering the temporal order implies a new influx of spirit. But, when spirit is thus wedded to mind and body to form human nature, it is submitted to the law governing human nature—the law of freedom. It is ours, to develop or stunt as we please. Its mighty powers are not pressed on an unwilling race, but given us in germ to deal with as we will. Parents are responsible for giving it every opportunity of growth—in fact, for its education: a terrific honour, and a terrific responsibility.

Wherein does such education consist? First, I think in a definite moral training; which is like the tilling and preparation of the earth in which the spiritual plant is to grow. What, then, should be the special objects of this training? I will give the definition of a great spiritual writer, a definition remarkable for its sanity and moderation: “If we would discover and know that Kingdom of God which is hidden in us, we must lead a life that is virtuous within, well ordered without, and fulfilled with true charity.” What does that imply? It implies the cultivation of *self-control: order: disinterestedness*. *Order* is a quality which all spiritual writers hold in great esteem; for they are far from being the ecstatic, unbalanced creatures of popular fancy. Now the untrained child has all the disorderly ways, the uncontrolled and self-interested instincts of the primitive man. The history of human society, the gradual exchange of license for law, self-interest for group-interest, spasmodic activity for orderly diligence must be repeated in him if he is to take his place in that human society. But if we would also prepare in him the way of spirit, the aim of this training must be something higher than that convenient social morality, that spirit of fair play, truth, justice, mutual tolerance, which public school discipline seeks to develop. That morality is relative and utilitarian. The morality in which alone the life of the spirit can flourish is absolute and ideal. It is sought, not because it makes life

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secure, or promotes the greatest happiness of the greatest number: but for its own sake. Yet in spite of this, the social order, in the form in which the child comes in contact with it, may be made one of the best instruments for producing those characters demanded by the spiritual life. For what, after all, is the exchanging of self-interest for group-interests but the beginning of love? And what is at the root of the spirit of give and take but humility? See how the approaches to the spiritual kingdom are found in the midst of the common life: what easy opportunity we have of initiating our children into these central virtues of the soul. The spiritual writers tell us that from love and humility all other virtues come: that on the moral side nothing else is required of us. And we, if we train wisely, may lead the young into them so gently and yet so deeply that their instinctive attitude to existence will be that of humbleness and love; and they will be spared the conflict and difficult reformation of those who wake to spiritual realities in later life.

Now humbleness and love, as understood by spiritual persons, are not passive virtues: they are energetic, and show themselves in mind, will, and heart. In the mind, by a constant

desirous tendency to, and seeking after, that which is best; in the will by keenness, or as the mystics would say, by diligence and zeal; in the heart, by an easy suppleness of relation with our fellow men—patience, good temper, sympathy, generosity. Plainly the moral character which makes for spirituality is a moral character which also makes for happiness.

Suppose, then, that our moral training has been directed towards this eager, supple state of humbleness and love: what special results may we expect as the personality develops? Spiritual writers tell us to expect certain qualities, which are traditionally called the “seven gifts of the spirit”; and if we study the special character of these gifts, we see that they are the names of linked characters, or powers, which together work an enhancement and clarification of the whole personality—a tuning-up of human nature to fresh levels. The first pair of qualities which are to mark our spiritual humanity are called *Godliness* and *Fear*. By these are meant that solemn sense of direct relationship with an eternal order, that gravity and awe, which we ought to feel in the presence of the mysteries of the universe; the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. From these grow the gifts called *Knowledge*, that is, the power of discerning true from false values, of choosing a good path through

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the tangled world, and *Strength*, the steady central control of the diverse forces of the self: perhaps the gift most needed by our distracted generation. “Through the gift of spiritual strength,” says Ruysbroeck, “a man transcends all creaturely things and possesses himself, powerful and free.” Is not this a power which we should desire for the children of the future, and get for them if we can?

We see that the first four gifts of the spirit will govern the adjustment of man to his earthly life: that they will immensely increase the value of his personality in the social order, will clarify his mind and judgment, confer nobility on his aims. The last three gifts—those called Counsel, Understanding and Wisdom—will govern his intercourse with the spiritual order. By *Counsel*, the spiritual writers mean that inward voice which, as the soul matures, urges us to leave the transitory and seek the eternal: and this not as an act of duty, but as an act of love. When that voice is obeyed, the result is a new spiritual *Understanding*; which, says Ruysbroeck again, may be “likened to the sunshine, which fills the air with a simple brightness, and lights all forms and shows the distinctions of all colours.” Even so does this spiritual gift irradiate the whole world with a new splendour, and shews us secrets that we never guessed before. Poets know flashes of it, and from it their power proceeds; for it enables its possessor to behold life truly—that is, from the angle of God, not from the angle of man.

“Such an one,” says Ruysbroeck, “walks in heaven, and beholds and apprehends the height, the length, the depth, and the breadth, the wisdom and truth, the bounty and unspeakable generosity, which are in God our Lover without number and without limit; for all this is Himself. Then that enlightened man looks down, and beholds himself and all other men and all creatures; and this gift, through the knowledge of truth which is given us in its light, establishes in us a wide stretching love towards all in common.”

“A wide stretching love towards all in common”—think of that as the governing character of our future world.

It seems hard to conceive anything beyond this. But there is something. To behold things as they are is not the end: beyond this is that *Wisdom* which comes not with observation, but is the fruit of intimate communion with Reality. Understanding is perception

raised to its highest expression: Wisdom is intuition raised to its highest expression. It is, so [p 759]

far as we know here, the crown and goal of human development; the perfect fruition of love.

Now we have considered very shortly the chief possibilities of the human spirit, as they are described by those who have looked most deeply into its secrets. These seers tell us further that this spirit has its definite course to run, its definite consummation: that it emerges within the physical order, grows, spreads, and at last enters into perfect union or communion with the real and spiritual world. How much attention do we pay to this statement, which, if true, is the transcendent fact of human history, the key to the nature of man? How much real influence does it have on our hopes and plans for our children? The so-called phenomena of conversion—the fact that so far nearly all the highest and best examples of the spiritual life have been twice-born types, that they have had to pass through a terrible crisis, in which their natural lives were thrown into confusion in order that their spiritual lives might emerge—all this is really a confession of failure on the part of human nature. If our growth were rightly directed, would not the spirit emerge and flower in all its strength and loveliness, as the physical and mental powers of normal children emerge and flower? What is wrong with education that it fails to achieve this? Partly, I think, that the values at which it aims are too often relative and self-interested, not absolute and disinterested. Its intelligent gaze is fixed too steadily on earthly society, earthly happiness. It forgets that its duties ought to include the awakening of that clear consciousness of eternity which should be normal in every human being, and without which it is impossible for any man to grasp the true values and true proportion of life.

From the very beginning, then, we ought to raise the eyes of the young from the contemplation of the earth under their feet to that of the heavens above their heads: to give them absolute values, not utilitarian values, to aim at. There is nothing morbid or sickly in this: it is rather those who do not possess the broader consciousness who are the morbid, the sickly, and the maimed. The hope of the future is wide. We must train our children to a wide stretch of faith, of aim, of imagination, if they are to grasp it. Never was the value of the wide view so sharply brought home to us as now. The merely earthly view wrecks those who are bounded by it. The strong, the stay of the nation, are those whose training, temperament, [p 760]

or self-discipline makes them able to look through and beyond the suffering at the glory that shall be revealed.

How then should we begin this most delicate of all tasks; this education of the most sacred and subtle aspect of human nature? We must be careful; for difficulties crowd the path, cranks lie in wait at every corner.

I have spoken of the moral preparation. That is always safe and sure. But there are, I think, two other safe ways of approach; the devotional and aesthetic. These two ways are not alternative, but complementary. The love and realization of beauty, without reverence and devotion, soon degenerates into mere pleasure. Devotion, unless informed with the spirit of beauty, becomes thin, hard and sterile. But where these two exist together, we find on one hand that the developed apprehension which discovers deep messages in nature, in music, in all the noble rhythms of art, makes the senses themselves into channels of God: and this is an apprehension which we can foster and control. And on the other hand the devotional life,

rightly understood as a vivid, joyful thing—with that disciplining [sic] of the attention and will which is such an important part of it—is the most direct way to an attainment of that simple and natural consciousness of our intangible spiritual environment which all ought to possess and which the old mystics called by the beautiful name of the practice of the Presence of God. Hence these two ways of approach, merged as they should be into one, can bring the self into that simple kind of contemplation which is a normal birthright of every soul, but of which our defective education deprives so many men and women; who cannot in later life quicken those faculties which have been left undeveloped in youth.

As logic is a supreme exercise of the mind, so contemplation is a supreme exercise of the spirit. Before the inevitable smile appears on the faces of the audience, I will say at once that I am not suggesting that we should teach young children contemplation; though I am sure that many brought up on a favouring atmosphere naturally practise it long before they know the meaning of the word. But I do suggest that we should bring them up in such a way that their developed spirits might in the end acquire this art, without any more sense of break with the normal than that which is felt by the developed mind when it acquires the art of logic.

What *is* contemplation? It is attention to the things of
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the spirit. Ought that to be an outlandish and alarming practice, foreign to the general drift of human life? Surely, were we true to our own beliefs, it should be our central and supremely natural activity; the way in which we turn to the spiritual world, and pick up the messages it sends to us. That world is always sending us messages of liberation, of hope, and of peace. Are we going to deprive our children of this unmeasured heritage, this extension of life, or leave their enjoyment of it to some happy chance? Can we read the wonderful records of the spiritually awakened without a sense of the duty that is laid on us, to develop if we can this spiritual consciousness in the generation that is to be?

All great spiritual literature is full of invitations to a newness of life, a great change of direction. It urges us perpetually, as a practical counsel, as something which is within human power, to “put on the new man,” to “bring to birth the Son of God in the soul.” The race as a whole has never responded to that invitation; and therefore its greatest possibilities are still latent. Cannot we, the guardians of the future, at perhaps the most critical point in the history of the world, make some real effort to bring those possibilities into manifestation?