



Author of this Page

To the Young Men of Western Canada

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Sufficient Unto The Day

Really all that I need worry over to-day is to-day. Of course, to-day for me may be what it is, in

difficulty and danger, because of my past. But that does not affect the truth of the statement that my obligation to-day is limited to to-day. So many of us saddle ourselves with too big a load—a load which almost perforce makes us stagger and stumble. Everybody knows the adages about "borrowing trouble" and about "jumping ditches" and "crossing bridges." The contrary attitude is enshrined in the wise word: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Let us limit the burden of our responsibility to the present. Make to-day right. To-morrow will be a new to-day, when, once again, you can apply the same principle. A series of right to-day's solves the problem of life.

Avoid Exceptions

Of course it does so, only in so far as the series is uninterrupted. The great trouble lies in the breaks and the lapses. A man forms a certain scheme of life. This virtually amounts to his conception of an ideal life. Well, he loses prestige in his own eyes every time he proves recreant to that conception. And he may prove recreant to it so often as finally wholly to undermine his self-confidence. There is a momentum in failure as well as in success. We say commonly: "Nothing succeeds like success." Similarly, "Nothing fails like failure." There is a habit of failure, as there may be a habit of success. We may set up in our life whichever of the two traditions we please.

The Marvel of Memory

What a marvellous thing memory is! Just as I write I see in my mind's eye a certain hill, valley, river, cliff. I see the exact spot where I was when for the first time they lay beneath my eye. That was thirty-five years ago if it's a day. Fourteen years ago the following incident happened to me: I was on the western coast of Brittany, that rocky shore-line, which, because it bears the full weight of the Atlantic, the peasants call "la cote sauvage"—the wild coast. Coming up over the brow of a hill I looked down into a narrow cove. The waves were breaking in foam on the beach. All alone there, was an old, old man. He was dragging seaweed out of the water and flinging it, with strange, unnatural quickness up on the strand. As a wave receded he would follow it until he was waist-deep in water. Then he launched his fork—its prongs at right angles to the handle—into the waves. Then, with an advancing wave he would rush up on the bank, dragging his catch with him. We did not exchange a word, but I watched his fervent movements for rather a long while. Then I turned away. But I suppose, until the day of my death, I shall be able to conjure up that scene in virtually all its details.

The Palimpsest of the Brain

De Quincey has a brilliant and haunting essay on the subject I have just been referring to. He calls it The Palimpsest of the Brain. First, he describes the palimpsest, a parchment or some other material used for writing purposes before the invention of paper. The material was, naturally, costly; and when the writing had ceased to have value, the desirability was felt of using the parchment again, if only the original writing could be effaced. The chemistry of the time met the demand. That is, men became able to obliterate the markings, sufficiently at any rate, to permit a new inscription. Apparently effaced, though, the writing was not wholly deleted. And De Quincey makes the point that modern chemistry has enabled them to call back into distinctiveness and legibility the various manuscripts entrusted to some of these parchments. A lewd song might upon occasion have been superimposed upon a bit of the Gospel. Well, to make a long story short, the opium-eater says to his reader, to you and me: "Such a palimpsest is your brain." Nothing imprinted upon it is ever really effaced. There it lies, waiting if even to the crack of doom, ready to spring into clearness when it is really needed or called for. So he accounts for the panoramas that unfold themselves with lightning swiftness before the eyes of the drowning man. Following the same train of thought, if this is true, our memory

our mind is itself capable of being our ultimate punishment or reward. Milton's Satan is made to say: "Where I am is Hell, and where Hell is there must I ever be."

Macbeth on Memory

Macbeth makes two poignant deliverances on the moral aspects of memory. Trusting my memory, which I know tricks me a little, so that the lines are not perfect, I think they run about as follows:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Rase out the hidden trouble of the brain
And with some sweet, oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of what weighs upon it
withal?

I know the last line is quite faulty. I have no doubt that if I worked it over and over again, I could get it correctly. This last summer I was in Nova Scotia. I found that the beautiful landscape of that province, and of New Brunswick, kept prompting recollection of all the poetry I ever knew. The point I wish to make is that again and again, a passage that I could not reproduce at first righted itself perfectly in my mind, as a result of thinking hard over it. All of which throws strange light, of course, on the nature and functions of memory. The other passage, from "Macbeth" runs thus:

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more
Macbeth doth further sleep. The innocent sleep!
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm to hurt minds, great Nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

Recollections from Childhood

All the poetry I know "by heart" I learned before I was sixteen. Strange the way those old things linger. Take Scott's description, in the "Lay of the Last Minstrel," of Melrose Abbey by moonlight:

If thou would'st view fair Melrose aright,
Go, visit it by the pale moonlight.
For the gay beams of lightsome day
Gild but to flout the ruins grey.
When the broken arches are black in night
And each shafted oriel glimmers white;
When buttress and buttress, alternately,
Seem framed of ebony and ivory,
And silver edges the imagery,
And the scrolls that teach thee to live and die;
When the distant Tweed is heard to rave,
And the owlet to hoot o'er the dead man's grave;
Then go, but go alone the while,
Then view St. David's ruined pile;
And home returning, soothly swear,
Was never scene so sad and fair.

With regard to this treasure of my childhood, I may make three remarks. The first is that I do not think I could memorize that to-day if my life were at stake. I can get phrases, bars of striking expression, individual sentences; but I certainly shouldn't like to address myself to a prolonged passage. The second is, that it looks to me now as if

children must learn the like of this as wholes, not by conscious acquisition of details. Thus there are points of syntax and meaning in that extract that I have never realized until to-day when, for the first time, I write it down. In fact, to tell the truth, I shouldn't wonder if the child learns this sort of thing largely as a matter of verbiage, rather than by any considerable appropriation of the meaning. I do not believe that, when I learned this passage, I realized even that it was a picture of the old abbey at night and by moonlight, as contrasted with the same thing by day; and yet that is the whole point as it stares out on me to-day. The last comment I wish to make is that I remember about twenty years ago hearing a student here in Winnipeg quote the last two lines as follows:

And home returning, smoothly swear,
Was never scene so sad and fair.

Great Literature in the Schools

The vein I have been following here prompts me to remark upon the importance of having our school readers packed with great literature. Go into the dining halls of the Oxford colleges. You find that the walls of those rooms are hung with the pictures of alumni of the college who have gone out to do great things. In other words, the students have daily before their eyes exemplars of notable achievement. This is an integral part of the justly famous "atmosphere" of Oxford. This summer at St. John, New Brunswick, I met Mr. Powell, a member of the International Waterways Commission. He has a library of 6,000 volumes in his house. For almost a whole evening he regaled me with great passages he had learnt by heart from the school readers of his boyhood. I myself have never forgotten certain passages in the speeches of Burke and Chatham that I learned to recite at school closings when I was six, seven and eight years old. "If I were an American as I am an Englishman, while a foreign enemy was embarked upon my shores, I never would lay down my arms, never, never, never!" A great phrase like Burke's "the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of the Protestant religion," lying in one's sub-consciousness throughout the years, may conceivably mean much for one's own powers of expression. Mere words often have a strange power. Tennyson relates that when a boy he often ran through the woods or over the moor crying aloud:

"I hear a voice that's thundering on the wind!"

This shows that his expressional sense was already feeling its infant way. Perhaps if he had not done that sort of thing as a boy the time would never have come when he could achieve a noble initiative passage like this from the beginning of the Morte d'Arthur:

So all day long the noise of battle rolled
Among the mountains by the winter sea.

Remember Wordsworth's words:

The child is father to the man,
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each in filial piety.



Members of the Manitoba Legislature on a visit to the R. B. S. Co. Ltd. Canal, Tuxedo Park, Winnipeg