

HERBERT JAMES HALL

THE UNTROUBLED MIND

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Содержание

PREFACE	5
I	6
II	8
III	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

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PREFACE

A very wise physician has said that “every illness has two parts—what it is, and what the patient thinks about it.” What the patient thinks about it is often more important and more troublesome than the real disease. What the patient thinks of life, what life means to him is also of great importance and may be the bar that shuts out all real health and happiness. The following pages are devoted to certain ideals of life which I would like to give to my patients, the long-time patients who have especially fallen to my lot.

They are not all here, the steps to health and happiness. The reader may even be annoyed and baffled by my indirectness and unwillingness to be specific. That I cannot help—it is a personal peculiarity; I cannot ask any one to live by rule, because I do not believe that rules are binding and final. There must be character behind the rule and then the rule is unnecessary.

All that I have written has doubtless been presented before, in better ways, by wiser men, but I believe that each writer may expect to find his small public, his own particular public who can understand and profit by his teachings, having partly or wholly failed with the others. For that reason I am encouraged to write upon a subject usually shunned by medical men, being assured of at least a small company of friendly readers.

I am grateful to a number of friends and patients who have read the manuscript of the following chapters. These reviewers have been frank and kind and very helpful. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Richard C. Cabot, who has given me much valuable assistance.

I

THE UNTROUBLED MIND

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?*

Macbeth.

When a man tells me he never worries, I am inclined to think that he is either deceiving himself or trying to deceive me. The great roots of worry are conscience, fear, and regret. Undoubtedly we ought to be conscientious and we ought to fear and regret evil. But if it is to be better than an impediment and a harm, our worry must be largely unconscious, and intuitive. The moment we become conscious of worry we are undone. Fortunately, or unfortunately, we cannot leave conscience to its own devices unless our lives are big enough and fine enough to warrant such a course. The remedy for the mental unrest, which is in itself an illness, lies not in an enlightened knowledge of the harmfulness and ineffectiveness of worry, not even in the acquirement of an unconscious conscience, but in the living of a life so full and good that worry cannot find place in it. That idea of worry and conscience, that definition of serenity, simplifies life immensely. To overcome worry by substituting development and growth need never be dull work. To know life in its farther reaches, life in its better applications, is the final remedy—the great undertaking—*it is life*. We must warn ourselves, not infrequently, that the larger life is to be pursued for its own glorious self and not for the sake of peace. Peace may come, a peace so sure that death itself cannot shake it, but we must not expect all our affairs to run smoothly. As a matter of fact they may run badly enough; we shall have our ups and downs, we shall sin and repent, and sin again, but if in the end we live according to our best intuitions, we shall be justified, and we need not worry about the outcome. To put it another way, if we would have the untroubled mind, we must transfer our conscientious efforts from the small details of life—from the worry and fret of common things—into another and a higher atmosphere. We must transfigure common life, dignify it and ennoble it; then, although the old causes of worry may continue, we shall have gained a stature that will make us unconscious masters of the little troubles and in a great degree equal to the larger requirements. Life will be easier, not because we make less effort, but because we are working from another and a better level.

If such a change, and it would be a change for most of us, could come about instantly, in a flash of revelation, that would be ideal, but it would not be life. We must return again and again to the old uninspired state wherein we struggle conscientiously with perverse details. I would not minimize the importance and value of this struggle; only the sooner it changes its level the better for every one concerned. Large serenity must, finally, be earned through the toughening of moral fibre that comes in dealing squarely with perplexing details. Some of this struggle must always be going on, but serener life will come when we begin to concern ourselves with larger factors.

How are we to live the larger life? Partly through uninspired struggle and through the brave meeting of adversity, but partly, also, in a way that may be described as “out of hand,” by intuition, by exercise of the quality of mind that sees visions and grasps truths beyond the realms of common thought.

I am more and more impressed with the necessity of inspiration in life if we are to be strong and serene, and so finally escape the pitfalls of worry and conscience. By inspirations I do not mean belief in any system or creed. It is not a stated belief that we need to begin with; that may come in time. We need first to find in life, or at least in nature, an essential beauty that makes its own true, inevitable response within us. We must learn to love life so deeply that we feel its tremendous significance, until we find in the sea and the sky the evidence of an overbrooding spirit too great to be understood, but not too great to satisfy the soul. This is a sort of mother religion—the matrix from which all sects and creeds are born. Its existence in us dignifies us and makes simple, purposeful, and receptive living almost inevitable. We may not know why we are living according to the dictates of our inspiration, but we shall live so and that is the important consideration.

If I urge the acquirement of a religious conception that we may cure the intolerable distress of worry, I do what I have already warned against. It is so easy to make this mistake that I have virtually made it on the same page with my warning. We have no right to seek so great a thing as religious experience that we may be relieved of suffering. Better go on with pain and distress than cheapen religion by making it a remedy. We must seek it for its own sake, or rather, we must not seek it at all, lest, like a dream, it elude us, or change into something else, less holy. Nevertheless, it is true that if we will but look with open, unprejudiced eyes, again and again, upon the sunrise or the stars above us, we shall become conscious of a presence greater and more beautiful than our minds can think. In the experience of that vision strength and peace will come to us unbidden. We shall find our lives raised, as by an unseen force, above the warfare of conscience and worry. We shall begin to know the meaning of serenity and of that priceless, if not wholly to be acquired, possession, the untroubled mind.

I am aware that I shall be misunderstood and perhaps ridiculed by my colleagues when I attempt to discuss religion in any way. Theology is a field in which I have had no training, but that is the very reason why I dare write of it. I do not even assume that there is a God in the traditional sense. The idea is too great to be made concrete and literal. No single fact of nature can be fully understood by our finite minds. But I do feel vaguely that the laws that compass us, and make our lives possible, point always on—"beyond the realms of time and space"—toward the existence of a mighty overruling spirit. If this is a cold and inadequate conception of God, it is at least one that can be held by any man without compromise.

The modern mind is apt to fail of religious understanding and support, because of the arbitrary interpretations of religion which are presented for our acceptance. It is what men say about religion, rather than religion itself, that repels us. Let us think it out for ourselves. If we are open to a simple, even primitive, conception of God, we may still repudiate the creeds and doctrines, but we are likely to become more tolerant of those who find them true and good. We shall be likely in time to find the religion of Christ understandable and acceptable—warm and quick with life. The man who ungrudgingly opens his heart to the God of nature will be religious in the simplest possible sense. He may worry because of the things he cannot altogether understand, and because he falls so far short of the implied ideal. But he will have enlarged his life so much that the common worries will find little room—he will be too full of the joy of living to spend much conscious thought in worry. Such a man will realize that he cannot afford to spend his time and strength in regretting his past mistakes. There is too much in the future. What he does in the future, not what he has failed to do in the past, will determine the quality of his life. He knows this, and the knowledge sends him into that future with courage and with strength. Finally, in some indefinable way, character will become more important to him than physical health even. Illness is half compensated when a man realizes that it is not what he accomplishes in the world, but what he *is* that really counts, which puts him in touch with the creative forces of God and raises him out of the aimless and ordinary into a life of inspiration and joy.

II

RELIGIO MEDICI

At all events, it is certain that if any medical man had come to Middlemarch with the reputation of having definite religious views, of being given to prayer and of otherwise showing an active piety, there would have been a general presumption against his medical skill.
George Eliot.

When a medically educated man talks and writes of religion and of God, he is rightly enough questioned by his brothers—who are too busy with the hard work of practice to be concerned with anything but material problems. To me the word “God” is symbolic of the power which created and which maintains the universe. The sunrise and the stars of heaven give me some idea of his majesty, the warmth and tenderness of human love give me some idea of his divine love. That is all I know, but it is enough to make life glow; it is enough to inspire the most intense devotion to any good cause; it is enough to make me bear suffering with some degree of patience; and it is enough, finally, to give me some confidence and courage even in the face of the great mystery of death. Why this or another conception of God should produce such a profound result upon any one, I do not know, except that in some obscure way it connects the individual with the divine plan, and does not leave him outside in despair and loneliness. However that may be, it will be conceded that a religious conception of some kind does much toward justifying life, toward making it strong and livable, and so has directly to do with certain important problems of illness and health. The most practical medical man will admit that any illness is made lighter and more likely to recover in the presence of hope and serenity in the mind of the patient.

Naturally the great bulk of medical practice calls for no handling other than that of the straight medical sort. A man comes in with a crushed finger, a girl with anæmia—the way is clear. It is only in deeper, more intricate departments of medicine that we altogether fail. The bacteriologist and the pathologist have no use for mental treatment, in their departments. But when we come to the case of the nervously broken-down school teacher, or the worn-out telegrapher, that is another matter. Years may elapse before work can be resumed—years of dependence and anxiety. Here, a new view of life is often more useful than drugs, a view that accepts the situation reasonably after a while, that does not grope blindly and impatiently for a cure, but finds in life an inspiration that makes it good in spite of necessary suffering and limitations. Often enough we cannot promise a cure, but we must be prepared to give something better.

A great deal of the fatigue and unhappiness of the world is due to the fact that we do not go deep enough in our justification for work or play, or for any experience, happy or sad. There is a good deal of a void after we have said, “Art for art’s sake,” or “Play for the joy of playing,” or even after we have said, “I am working for the sake of my family, or for some one who needs my help.” That is not enough; and whether we realize it or not, the lack of deeper justification is at the bottom of a restlessness and uncertainty which we might not be willing to acknowledge, but which nevertheless is very real.

I am not satisfied when some moralist says, “Be good and you will be happy.” The kind of happiness that comes from a perfunctory goodness is a thing which I cannot understand, and which I certainly do not want. If I work and play and serve and employ, making up the fabric of a busy life, if I attain a very real happiness, I am tormented by the desire to know why I am doing it, and I am not satisfied with the answer I usually get. The patient may not be cured when he is relieved of his anæmia, or when his emaciation has given place to the plumpness and suppleness and physical strength that we call health. The man whom we look upon as well, and who has never known physical

illness, is not well in the larger sense until he knows why he is working, why he is living, why he is filling his life with activity. In spite of the elasticity and spring of the world's interests, there must come often, and with a kind of fatal insistence, the deep demand for a cause, for a justification. If there is not an adequate significance behind it, life, with all its courage and accomplishment, seems but a sorry thing, so full of pathos, even in its brightest moments, so shadowed with a sense of loss and of finality that the bravest heart may well fail and the truest courage relax, supported only by the assurance that this way lies happiness or that right is right.

What is this knowledge that the world is seeking, but can never find? What is this final justification? If we seek it in its completeness, we are doomed always to be ill and unsatisfied. If we are willing to look only a little way into the great question, if we are willing to accept a little for the whole, content because it is manifestly part of the final knowledge, and because we know that final knowledge rests with God alone, we shall understand enough to save us from much sorrow and painful incompleteness.

There is, in the infinitely varied and beautiful world of nature, and in the hearts of men, so much of beauty and truth that it is a wonder we do not all realize that these things of common life may be in us and for us the daily and hourly expression of the infinite being we call God. We do not see God, but we do feel and know so much that we may fairly believe to be of God that we do not need to see Him face to face. It is something more than imagination to feel that it is the life of God in our lives, so often unrecognized or ignored, that prompts us to all the greatness and the inspiration and the accomplishment of the world. If we could know more clearly the joy of such a conception, we should dry up at its source much of the unhappiness which is, in a deep and subtle way, at the bottom of many a nervous illness and many a wretched existence.

The happiness which is found in the recognition of kinship with God, through the common things of life, in the experiences which are so significant that they could not spring from a lesser source, the happiness which is not sought, but which is the inevitable result of such recognition—this experience goes a long way toward making life worth living.

If we do have this conception of life, then some of the old, old questions that have vexed so many dwellers upon the earth will no longer be a source of unhappiness or of illness of mind or body. The question of immortality, for instance, which has made us afraid to die, will no longer be a question—we shall not need to answer it, in the presence of God, in our lives and in the world about us. We shall be content finally to accept whatever is in store for us—so it be the will of God. We may even look for something better than mere immortality, something more divine than our gross conception of eternal life.

This is a religion that I believe medical men may teach without hesitation whenever the need shall arise. I know well enough that many a blunt if kindly man cannot bring himself to say these words, even if he believes them, but I do think that in some measure they point the way to what may wisely be taught.

There is a practice of medicine—the common practice—that is concerned with the body only, and with its chemical and mechanical reactions. We can have nothing but respect and admiration for the men who go on year after year in the eager pursuit of this calling. We know that such a work is necessary, that it is just as important as the educational practice of which I write. We know that without the physical side medicine would fail of its usefulness and that disease and death would reap far richer harvests: I only wish the two naturally related aspects of our dealing with patients might not be so completely separated that they lose sight of each other. As a matter of fact, both elements are necessary to our human welfare. If medicine devotes itself altogether to the cure and prevention of physical disease, it will miss half of its possibilities. It is equally true that if we forget the physical necessities in our zeal for spiritual hygiene, we shall get and deserve complete and humiliating failure. Many men will say, “Why mix the two? Why not let the preachers and the philosophers preach and the doctors follow their own ways?” For the most part this may have to be the arrangement, but the

doctor who can see and treat the spiritual needs of his patient will always be more likely to cure in the best sense than the doctor who sees only half of the picture. On the other hand, the philosopher is likely to be a comparatively poor doctor, because he knows nothing of medicine, and so can see only the other half of the picture. There is much to be said for the religion of medicine if it can be kept free from cant, if it can be simple and rational enough to be available for the whole world.

III

THOUGHT AND WORK

I wish I had a trade!—It would animate my arms and tranquilize my brain.
Senancour.

“Doe ye nexte thynges.”—Old English Proverb.

Since our minds are so constantly filled with anxiety, there would seem to be at least one sure way to be rid of it—to stop thinking.

A great many people believe that the mind will become less effective, that life will become dull and purposeless, unless they are constantly thinking and planning and arranging their affairs. I believe that the mind may easily and wisely be free from conscious thought a good deal of the time, and that the greatest progress and development in mind often comes when the thinker is virtually at rest, when his mind is to all intents and purposes blank. The busy, unconscious mind does its best work in the serenity of an atmosphere which does not interfere and confuse.

It is true that the greatest conceptions do not come to the untrained and undisciplined mind. But do we want great conceptions all the time? There is a technical training for the mind which is, of course, necessary for special accomplishments, but this is quite another matter. Even this kind of thought must not obtrude too much, lest we become conscious of our mental processes and so end in confusion.

One of the greatest benefits of work with the hands, or of objective and constructive work with the mind, is that it saves us from unending hours of thinking. Work should, of course, find its fullest justification as an expression of faith. If we have ever so dim a vision of a greater significance in life, of its close relationship to infinite things, we become thereby conscious of the need of service, of the need of work. It is the easy, natural expression of our faith, the inevitable result of a spiritual contact with the great working forces of the world. It is work above all else that saves us from the disasters of conflicting thought.

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