ON BEING A REAL PERSON

[HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK, until his retirement, was pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City and internationally known as a preacher, as a professor at Union Theological Seminary and as the famous author of The Meaning of Faith, As I See Religion, Living Under Tension and 15 other books. He has received a dozen degrees from universities here and abroad, and his many books have been translated into numerous foreign languages.

During his many years at Riverside Church more and more people came to Dr. Fosdick for help and advice about their personal difficulties. To more effectively deal with unusual problems, he studied the techniques of psychiatrists and psychologists, and in many cases asked for their professional assistance. Thus, he was enabled to provide counsel concerning both mental and spiritual attitudes. “Nothing in my ministry,” he wrote in the introduction to this book, “gives me more satisfaction now than the memory of some of the results.”

The central business of every human being is to be a real person.

We possess by nature the factors out of which personality can be made, and to organize them into effective personal life is every man’s primary responsibility.

Without exaggeration it can be said that frustrated, unhappy people, who cannot match themselves with life, constitute the greatest single tragedy in the world. In mansion and hovel, among the uneducated and in university faculties, under every kind of circumstance, people entrusted with building their own personalities are making a real mess of it, thereby plunging into an earthly hell.

Three elements enter into the building of personality: Heredity, environment and personal response. We are not responsible for our heredity; much of our environment we cannot control; but the power to face life with an individual rejoinder—-that we are responsible for.

When acceptance of this responsibility involves self-condemnation, however, an alibi invariably rushes to the rescue. All of us resemble the lawyer in the New Testament story, concerning whom we read: “But he, desiring to justify himself, said ...”

On the lowest level this desire to escape blame expresses itself in emphasis upon luck. Fortunate people “get the breaks,” men say; personal failure is due not so much to mistake as to mischance. That luck represents a real factor in human experience is evident, but nothing finer has appeared on earth than unlucky people who are real persons. The determining element in their experience is not so much what happens to them as the way they take it.

Mile-runner Glenn Cunningham was crippled in boyhood in a school-house fire. The doctors said that only a miracle could enable him to ever walk again—we was out of luck. However, he began walking by following a plow across the fields, leaning on the handles for support; and then went on to tireless experimentation to see what he could do with his legs as they were, until he broke existing records for the mile run.

But luck is a poor alibi, if only because good luck by itself never yet guaranteed real personality.

Many escape a sense of personal responsibility by lapsing into a mood of emotional fatalism. This is, curiously, one of the most comfortable moods in which a man can lived. If he is an automaton, he is not responsible for anything.
On its highest level man’s desire to escape responsibility expresses itself in ascribing all personal qualities to heredity and environment. This is a popular theory today. For intelligence quotients within to crippling environments without, it offers defenses to every kind of deficiency. But, handling difficulty, making the nest of bed messes is one of life’s major businesses. Often, the reason victory is not won lies inside the individual. The recognition of this fact, however, by the person concerned is most difficult. At times, we all resemble the farmer laboriously driving his horses on a dusty road. “How much longer does this hill last?” he asked a man by the roadside. “Hill!” was the answer. “Hill nothing! Your hind wheels are off!”

The world is a coarse-grained place, and other people are often unfair, selfish, cruel. Yet, after all, we know the difference between a man who always has an alibi and the man who in just as distressing a situation habitually looks inward to his own attitudes and resources—no excuses, no passing of the buck.

In any circumstance he regards himself as his major problem, certain that if he handles himself well that is bound to make some difference. Anyone can recognize the forthright healthy-mindedness of the youth who write home to his father after an unsuccessful football game, “Our opponents found a big hole in our line, and that hole was me.” When we succeed, when by dint of decision and effort we achieve a desired goal, we are sure we had a share in that. We cannot slough off responsibility when we fail.

The beginning of worthwhile living is thus to confront ourselves----unique beings, each of us entrusted with the makings of personality. Yet, multitudes of people wrestle with every conceivable factor before they face their primary problem----themselves. Our commonest human tragedy is correctly represented in a recent cartoon: A physician faces his patient with anxious solemnity, saying, “This is a very serious case; I’m afraid you’re allergic to yourself.”

Our Many Selves

The common phrase, “building a personality,” is a misnomer.

Personality is not so much like a structure as like a river----it continuously flows, and to be a real person is to be engaged in a perpetual process of becoming.

The tests of successful personal living, therefore, are not merely identical when applied to two persons in different situations or to the same person at different ages. Concerning one criterion, however, there is common agreement. A real person achieves a high degree of unity within himself. Each of us deals continually with the underlying problem of a disorganized life. The ruffled man badly flurried because he has mislaid a pair of glasses, the frightened person fallen into a panic, the chronic individual surprised by a burst of temper into loss of control----such examples remind us how insecure in our personal integration.

No virtue is more universally accepted as a test of good character, than trustworthiness. Obviously, however, dependability is possible only in so far as the whole personality achieves a staunch unity that can be counted on. Many of us frequently act “out of character.” The general pattern of our lives may involve honesty, truthfulness and similar qualities----but not always. This is evident even with regard to a virtue like courtesy. How common is the person whose courtesy is unreliable! We all know him----polite today, uncivil tomorrow; obliging and well-bred in business, crabbed and sultry at home.

In a real person with character, the responses to life are well established and well organized; one can count on them, always. His various emotions, desires and ideas are no mere disparate will-o’-the wisps. He has become a whole person, with a unifying pattern of thought and feeling that gives coherence to everything he does.

From: Harry Emerson Fosdick, "On Being a Real Person"
A “well-integrated” life does not mean a placid life, with all conflicts resolved. Many great souls have been inwardly tortured. Florence Nightingale had a real desperate time finding herself, and wrote in her diary, “In my 31st year I see nothing desirable but death.” Dwight L. Moody said, “I have more trouble with D. L. Moody than any other man I know.”

In all strong characters, when one listens behind the scenes, one hears echoes of strife and contention. Nevertheless, far from being at loose ends with themselves, such persons have organized their lives around some supreme values and achieved purpose and drive. The process by which real personality is thus attained is inward and spiritual. Even so fortunate an environment as a loyal and loving family cannot dispense a man from confronting himself.

As for material prosperity, that often disorganizes life rather than unifying it. Indeed, nervous prostration is a speciality of the prosperous. Wealth, by increasing the number of possible choices, is far more disrupting than satisfying. A modern novelist describing one of his characters says, “He was not as much a human being as a civil war.” Every human being sometimes faces a situation where on the one side is his actual self, with his abilities and circumstances, and on the other are ideal pictures of himself and his achievements; and between the two is a gulf too wide to be bridged.

To hold high ideals and ambitions is a man’s glory, and nowhere more so than in the development of personality. This faculty, however, can function so abnormally that it tears life to pieces. No well-integrated life is possible, therefore, without an initial act of self-acceptance, as though to say: I, John Smith, hereby accept myself, with my inherited endowments and handicaps and with the elements in my environment that I cannot control, and, so accepting myself as my stint, I will now see what I can do with this John Smith.

Tension between our existent and our desired selves often arises from high moral ideals, and nowhere is it more likely to be mishandled. Unselfishness and loyalty, for instance, are major virtues, but a daughter under the thralldom of a possessive mother can so picture herself as in duty bound to be unselfish and loyal that, without doing her mother any real good, her life is blighted and her personality wrecked. When self-acceptance is not achieved and the strain between the actual and the dreamed-of self becomes great, the result is unhappy and sometimes crushing sense of inferiority. One study of 275 college men and women revealed that over 90 percent suffered from gnawing, frustrated feelings of deficiency. They gave all sorts of reasons—physical incompetence, unpleasant appearance, lack of social charm, low-grade intellectual ability, moral failure and guilt.

The importance of the problem is made evident by the unhealthy ways in which it is commonly handled. Some deal with it by the smoke screen method. Feeling miserably inferior, and not wanting others to know it, the shy become aggressive, the embarrassed effusive, and the timid bluster and brag. One man, hitherto gentle and considerate in his family, suffered a humiliating failure. At once he began to grow harsh and domineering. Paradoxical though it is, when he felt superior he behaved humbly, as though he felt inferior; when he felt inferior he began to swagger.

Others, like the fox in Aesop’s fable, call all sour grapes they can not reach. The frail youth discounts athletics; the debauchee scoffs at the self-controlled as prudes; the failures at school scorns intellectuals as “highbrows.” A major amount of cynicism springs from the source. Watch what people are cynical about and one can often discover what they lack, and subconsciously deeply wish they had.

Still others find excuses based on an exaggerated acknowledgment of their inferiority. One student struggling with failure said, “I have thought it over very carefully and
I have come to the conclusion that I am feeble-minded!" Far from being said with despair, this was announced with relief; it was a perfect excuse; it let him out of all responsibility. Yet, factually it was absurd, and emotionally it was abnormal.

Among the constructive elements that make self-acceptance basic in becoming a real person is the principle of compensation. Deficiency can be a positive stimulus. The homely girl may develop the more wit and charm because she is homely; the shy, embarrassed youth, with the temperament of a recluse, may be all the more useful in scientific research because of that. Involved in such successful handling of recognized inferiority is the ability to pass from the defensive to the offensive attitude toward our limitations. John Smith accepts John Smith with his realistically seen limitations and difficulties, and positively starts out to discover what can be done with him.

Capt. John Callender of the Massachusetts militia was guilty of cowardice at the Battle of Bunker Hill. George Washington had to order his court-martial. Callender re-enlisted in the army as a private, and at the Battle of Long Island exhibited such conspicuous courage that Washington publicly revoked the sentence and restored to him his captaincy. Behind such an experience lies a basic act of self-acceptance, along with a shift from a defensive to an offensive attitude.

In achieving self-acceptance a man may well begin by reducing to a minimum the things that mortify him. To have “a caricature of a face,” to lack desired ability, to be economically restricted----such things are limitations, but if they become humiliations it is because inwardly we make them so.

Life is a landscaping job. We are handed a site, ample or small, rugged or flat, whose general outlines and contours are largely determined for us. Both limitations and opportunities are involved in every site, and the most unforeseeable results ensue from the handling---some grand opportunities are muffed, and some utterly unpromising saturations become notable. The basic elements in any personal site are bound to appear in the end no matter what is done with them, as a landscape still reveals its size and its major shapes and contours, whatever the landscape architect may do. These basic elements, however, are to be accepted, never as humiliations, commonly as limitations, but most of all as opportunities and even as incentives.

One of the ablest women in this country, now the wife of a university president, was brought up in poverty. She recalls an occasion when, as a girl, she complained of her hardships to her mother. “See here.” said the mother. “I have given you life; that is about all I will ever be able to give you. Now you stop your complaining and go do something with it.” That is the place to start. Such self-acceptance is realistic, humble, self-respectful.

**Getting Ourselves off Our Hands**

A certain “charm school.” promising to bestow “personality” on its clients, prescribes in the first lesson that one stands before a large mirror and repeat one’s own name in a voice “soft, gentle and low” in order to impress oneself with oneself.

But, obsession with oneself can be one of life’s most disruptive forces. An integrated personality is impossible save as the individual finds outside himself valuable interests, in devotion to which he forgets himself. To be whole real persons we must get our selves off our hands.

Self-centeredness is natural in early childhood.

Many, however, never outgrow it.

At 50 years of age they still are living on a childish pattern.

Such egocentricity is ruinous to real personality.

*From: Harry Emerson Fosdick, "On Being a Real Person*
A person completely wrapped up in himself makes a small package.

Practical suggestions as to ways and means of getting out of ourselves must start close at home with the body. Many miserable self-centered folk need not so much a psychiatrist as common sense in handling the physical basis of a healthy life. Our bodies were made to use in hard physical labor. Any man who has found his appropriate recreational or exercise where he can let himself go in the lusty use of his major muscles knows what a transformation of emotional tone and mental outlook such bodily expenditure can bring.

One of the most durable satisfactions in life is to lose oneself in one’s work.

This is why more people become neurotic from aimless leisure than from overwork.

The personal counselor constantly runs upon self-focused lives, miserably striving to find happiness through “self-expression.”

Popularly, self-expression has meant: Let yourself go; knock the bungs from your emotional barrels and let them gurgle! The wise counselor wants self-expression to be practiced in accord with realistic psychological facts. Merely exploding emotions for the sake of the momentary self-centered thrill gets one nowhere, and in the end the constant repetition of such emotional self-relief disperses life and leaves it more aimless than before.

Even in the sexual realm this is true. Says an eminent psychiatrist, “From the point of view of cure, the advice to go and ‘express your instincts’ is very foolish. In actual experience I have never known a true neurosis cured by sexual libertinism.”

Adequate self-expression is a much deeper matter than self-explosion. Its true exponent is not the libertine but the artist, the scientist, the fortunate mother absorbed in her family, the public-spirited businessman creatively doing something for his community.

At least two practical consequences follow from such successful expansion of the self. For one thing, it gives a person a saving sense of humor. If anyone afflicted with abnormal self-concern, a deficient sense of humor is an inevitable penalty. Only people who live objectively in other persons and in wide-flung interests, and who therefore can see themselves impartially possibly have the prayer answered.

O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us To see ourselves as ither see us The egocentric’s petition is habitually otherwise: O wad some Pow’r to others gie To see myself as I see me.

Nast, the cartoonist, one evening in a social group drew caricatures of each one of the company. The result was reveling—each one easily recognized the caricatures of the others but some could not recognize their own. This inability to see ourselves as other see us is one of the surest signs of egocentric immaturity.

Aristophanes in his drama The Clouds, caricatured Socrates, and when the play was produced all Athens roared with laughter. Socrates, so runs the story, went to see the play, and when the caricature came on he stood up so that the audience might the better enjoy the comic mask that was intended to burlesque him. He was mature. He had got himself off his hands.

An extended self also results in power to bear trouble. In those who rise to the occasion and marshal their forces to deal with it, one factor commonly is present— they are thinking about someone else besides themselves.

A person who has genuinely identified himself with other persons has done something of first-rate importance for himself without intending it. Hitherto he has lived, let us say, in a mind like a room surrounded by mirrors. Every way he turned he saw himself. Now, however, some of the mirrors change into

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windows. He can now see through them to new interests.

**Using All There Is In Us**

One way or another we must do something with all the emotional drives native to our constitution. Such emotional urges as curiosity, pugnacity, fearfulness, self-regard, sexual desire are an essential part of us; we can either be ignoble enslaved by them or master them for the enrichment of our personality.

Curiosity is an emotional urge in all normal people, and its manifestations are protean. Peeping Toms, prying gossips, inquisitive bores, open-minded truth-seekers, daring explorers, research scientists are all illustrations of curiosity. Some uses of it produce the most despicable persons, while others produce the most admirable, but there is no escaping it.

From this fact, which holds true of all our native drives, a double lesson comes-----first, no basic emotional factor in human nature is to be despised; and second------each of them can be ennobled by its use.

Pugnacity is one of the most deeply rooted emotional drives in human nature, and combativeness is necessary to the continuance and advancement of human life. The fighting spirit expresses itself in hard work, in bravely facing personal handicaps, in the whole range of attacks on entrenched social evils. If, however, we give this indispensable emotional drive gangway, the results are shattering. A chronic hatred or even a cherished grudge tears to pieces the one who harbors it. A strong feeling of resentment is just as likely to cause disease, as is a germ. If one is so unfortunate as to have an enemy, the worst thing that one can do, not to the enemy but to oneself is to let resentment dig in and hatred become chronic.

When Edward Everatt Hale in his later years said, "I once had an enemy, a determined enemy, and I have been trying all day to remember his name.' he gave evidence not only of right-mindedness but of healthy-mindedness.

Fear is another indispensable element in the human make-up.

Even in its simpler forms we cannot dispense with it; on the streets of a modern city a fearless man, if the phrase be taken literally, would probably be dead before nightfall. And fear can be a powerful creative motive. In a profound sense schools spring from fear of ignorance, industry from fear of penury, medical science from fear of disease. But fears abnormalities----hysteria, phobia, obsessive anxiety----tear personality to pieces.

Human life is full of secret fears, thrust into the attics and dark corners of personality. Fear of the dark, thunder and lightening, of cats, high places, of closed places, of open places; fear of responsibility, poverty, of having children, flying, of old age, and death; guilty fears, often concerned with sins long passed; religious fears, associated with ideas of a spying and vindictive God and an eternal hell; and sometimes a vague fearfulness, filling life with anxious apprehension----such wretchedness curses innumerable lives daily.

The disruptive effect of such secret, chronic fearfulness is physically based. The adrenal glands, furnish us in every frightening situation with “a swig of our own internal fight-tonic.” A little of it is stimulating; too much of it is poison. Habitual anxiety and dread constitute a continuous false alarm, turning the invaluable adrenal secretion from an emergence stimulant into a chronic poison.

To get our fear out into the open and frankly face it is of primary importance. As infants we started with fear of TWO things only------falling and a loud noise.--

All other fears have been accumulated.

*From: Harry Emerson Fosdick, "On Being a Real Person"*
To find out where and how we picked them up, to trace their development until we can objectively survey them as though they were another’s and not our own, is half the battle. Often, they can then be laughed off the scene.

Sometimes, however, the fear we find ourselves confronting is justified. In that case, we are commonly defeated by the fallacy that dangerous situations are necessarily undesirable, whereas, the fact is that there is stimulus in hazardous occasions. Love of danger is one of the strongest motives in man. When life does not by itself present men with enough hazard, they go out looking for it—-in sports, in risky researches and explorations, in missionary adventures, in championing unpopular causes. To stand up to a hazardous situation, to let it call out in us not our fearfulness but our love of battle, is a healthy, inspiring experience.

One of the sovereign cures for unhealthy fears is action. Dr. Henry C. Link give this homely illustration from a mother. “As a young wife I was troubled with many fears, one was the fear of insanity. After the birth of our first child, these fears still persisted. However, we soon had another child, and another child—we ended up with six. We never had much money and I had to do all my own work. Whenever I started to worry about myself, a baby would cry and I would have to run and look after him. Or, the children would quarrel and I would have to straighten them out.

Or, I would suddenly remember that it was time to start dinner, or that I must run out and take in the wash before it rained, or that the ironing had to be done. My morbid fear was continually interrupted by tasks into which I had to put my back.

Gradually, my fears disappeared, and now I look back on them with amusement.”

The dual nature of fear, as both good and evil, is nowhere better illustrated than in a man who dreads so much falling short of his duty that he dreads much less the cost of doing it. If one has anything positively to live for, from a child, or a worth-while day’s work, to a world delivered from the scourge of war, that is what matters!

Self-regard likewise is not to be despised or suppressed but educated and used. When Charles Lamb said, “The greatest pleasure I know is to do a good action by stealth, and to have it found out by accident,” he revealed how omnipresent is the wish for notice and attention that enhances self-esteem.

The cynic says that at the fountainhead of every so-called “unselfish” life are self-regarding motives. The cynic is right——but in his cynicism about it, he is wrong. We all start as children, with self-regarding instincts. The test of us, however, lies in the objective aims and purposes, which ultimately capture these forces in us and use them as driving power. A wise personal counselor, therefore, never tells anyone that he ought not to wish to feel important, but rather endeavors to direct that powerful wish into constructive channels. We neither can nor should stop caring for ourselves. Our initial business in life is to care for ourselves so much that I tackles ME, determined to make out of him something worth while.

Probably, it is the realm of sexual desire that “sublimation”-----redirection to a higher ethical level-----is talked about most and understood least. Not all demands of the human organism can be sublimated. In satisfying physical hunger there is no substitute for food. When sex is thought of in its narrowest sense, it belongs to this class. The youth troubled by this elemental biological need, many sensible things can be said: that chastity is not debilitating and that sexual indulgence is not necessary to good health; that the general unrest accompanying unsatisfied sexual tension can often be relieved by vigorous exercise or action, fatiguing the whole body; that sexual desire is natural and right, to be accepted with gratitude and good humor as part of our constitutional equipment, and not sullied with morbid feelings of guilt; that nature, when left

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to itself, has its own ways of relieving the specific sex-tension.

Sex, however, is far more deep-seated and pervasive in personality than at first appears. All the relationships of the family—maternal, paternal and filial—are grounded in this larger meaning of sex, all fine affection and friendship between brothers and sisters, and other men and women, and all extensions of family attitudes to society at large, as in the love and care of children.

When one's life is thus thought of as a whole, sublimation of sex becomes meaningful. It is possible for one to choose a way of living that will channel one's devotions and creative energies into satisfying courses so that the personality as a whole finds contentment, even though specific sexual desires are left unfulfilled. So, an unmarried woman, denied motherhood, can discover in nursing, teaching or social service an outlet for her maternal instincts that brings to her personality an integrating satisfaction.

That there must be some restraint on all our native drives is obvious.

Picture a life in which all the native drives and urges explode themselves together.

-----self-regard, pugnacity, sexual drive, fears; obviously pandemonium would reign.

The popular idea, therefore, that the restraint of basic emotional drives is in itself unhealthy is nonsense. The choice before us is not whether our native impulses should be restrained and controlled but how that shall be done in the service of an integrated life.

The multiple possibilities of use and misuse in handling our native drives root back in the essential quality of all emotional life: sensitiveness. One of the most important subjects of self-examination concerns the way we handle this primary quality. Let a man discover what he is characteristically touchy about, and he will gain valuable insight into his personal problems.

Many people are extremely touchy about criticism. Sensitiveness to the opinions of others, without which social life could not go on at all, has in them been perverted into a disease. Such abnormal persons take appreciation for granted and regard criticism as an impertinence. The normal person comes nearer taking criticism for granted and regarding appreciation as velvet. Emerson once made a speech that a minister sitting on the platform deeply disliked. The minister, in delivering the closing prayer, prayed, "We beseech Thee, O Lord, to deliver us from ever hearing any more such nonsense as we have just listened to." When Emerson was asked afterward what he thought about it, he remarked, "The minister seems a very conscientious, plain-spoken gentleman." Such healthy-mindedness is a necessary factor in a well-integrated personality.

**Mastering Depression**

One of the commonest causes of personal disorganization is despondency.

Some despondency is physically caused, but the moody dejections most people suffer are not altogether beyond their control.

A first suggestion for dealing with this problem is:

**Take depression for granted.** One who expects completely to escape low moods is asking the impossible. To take low moods too seriously, instead of saying, "This also will pass," is to give them an obsessive power they need not have.

A second suggestion is of daily importance:

**We can identify ourselves not with our worse, but with our better, moods.**

Deep within us all is that capacity. The ego, the central "I," can choose this and not that mood as representing the real self; it can identify itself with hopefulness rather than disheartenment, with good will rather than rancor.

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From: Harry Emerson Fosdick, "On Being a Real Person"
All slaves of depression have this in common:

They have acquired the habit of identifying their real selves with their low moods.

Not only do they have cellars in their emotional houses, as everybody does, but they choose to live there. While each of us has depressed hours, none of us needs to be a depressed person.

This leads to a third suggestion.

When depression comes, tackle yourself and do not merely blame circumstances.

Circumstances are often so tragic and crushing as to make dejection inevitable. Nevertheless, to deduce from the presence of misfortune the right to be a despondent person is a fatal error.

Life is an assimilative process in which we transmute into our own quality whatever comes into us. Walter de la Mare’s lines have a wider application than at first appears:

It’s a very odd thing----
As odd as can be----
That whatever Miss T. Eats
Turns into Miss T.

The fourth suggestion goes beyond self-tackling and says;

Remember others. I repeat myself. Remember others!

Emotions are contagious. I repeat myself. Emotions are contagious!

One depressed person can infect a whole household, and become a pest even to strangers If, therefore, Ian Maclaren’s admonition is justified, “Let us be kind to one another for most of us are fighting a hard battle.” good cheer and courage are among the most important kindnesses that we can show.

The fifth suggestion call for deep resources of character:

Remember, some tasks are so important that they must be gone through with whether we are depressed or not!

Strong personalities commonly solve the problem of their despondency not by eliminating but by sidetracking it. They have work to do, a purpose to fulfill, and to that, whether or not they feel dejected, the main trunk line of their lives belongs.

The Ultimate Strength

To pull a personality together takes inner reserves of power----of power assimilated from beyond oneself. As truly as a tree exists by means of chemical assimilation through roots and leaves, our own physical organisms sustain themselves by appropriated power. The entire cosmos furnishes the indispensable by which we live at all. We are pensioners on universal energy, and our power is not fabricated in us, but released through us.

This principle of released power does not stop at any supposed line separating man’s physical from his spiritual experience. That our spirits are continuous with a larger spiritual life, and that in this realm also, our power is not self-produced but assimilated, is the affirmation of all profound religious experience.

No more pathetic cases present themselves to the personal counselor than those whose only technique in handling their problems is to trust in the strength of their own volition (will). Sooner or later, they face problems to which such a technique is utterly inapplicable. Bereavement, for instance, bringing with it profound sorrow, calls for the hospitable receptivity of faith.

Many people ask, “how does one get faith? “ One cannot will to have it.

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But, faith is not something we get; it is something we have.

Moreover, we have a surplus of it, associated with more curious objects than tongue can tell—faith in dictatorship or astrology or rabbit’s feet, in one economic nostrum or another. That we have more faith than we know what to do with, is shown by the way we give it to every odd and end that comes our way.

Our trick of words ----“belief” vs. “unbelief” ---- obscures this.

No man can really become a non-believer: he is psychologically bound to the necessity of believing----in God, for example, or else no God. When positive faiths die out, their place is always taken by negative faiths----in impossibilities rather than possibilities, in ideas that make us victims rather masters of life; in philosophies that plunge us into Rabelais’s dying mood: “Draw the curtains; the farce is done.”

A friend once wrote to Turgenev: “It seems to me that to put oneself in the second place is the whole significance of life.” Turgenev replied, “It seems to me that to discover what to put before oneself, in the first place, is the whole problem of life.”

Whatever one does put thus before oneself is always the object of one’s faith; one believes in it and belongs to it; and whether it be a chosen vocation or a personal friend, when such committal of faith is heartily made, it pulls the trigger of human energy.

Confident that it is worth while constructively to tackle oneself, and the determination so to do, depends on faith of some sort. Distraught and dejected people almost inevitably ask: “Why should we bother to try to create an integrated and useful personality? Of what importance are we anyway?” These miserable folk perceive nothing worth living for, and the only cure for their utilitarian attitude is a positive faith.

Even though one goes no further than Robert Lewis Stevenson in saying, “I believe in an ultimate decency of things,” such faith has inestimable value. If one can go beyond Steverson’s affirmation, religion presents the most stimulating faith in human experience. It has said to every individual, "Whatever you may fail at, you need not fail at being a real person; the makings of great personal life include handicaps, deficiencies, troubles and even moral failures; the universe is not a haphazard affair of aimless atoms but is organized around spiritual purposes; and personality, far from being chance inadvertence, is the fullest and completest way of being alive and the most adequate symbol we have of the nature of God."

Thus religion is a basis for hopeful adventure and a source of available power in trying to make the most of our natural endowments and become what we ought to be. And he who undertakes the task is on the main highroad of creation’s meaning and is accepting the central trust of life.

A condensation from the book by

Harry Emerson Fosdick
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