

THE STAGES IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH

[Dr. Alexander F. Skutch, known to our readers for his thoughtful articles of idealistic bent, here affirms his faith, grounded in analogy, in the purposiveness of the cosmos and in continued growth. The great Enlightened Ones, the Buddhas and the Christs of the race, stand as the proof of the perfectibility of the individual, living examples of what all may become through many lives of effort. But can a stream rise higher than its source? Must there not have been the prior involution of Spirit to account for the urge to evolution, to the fulfilment of a purpose which Dr. Skutch recognizes as immanent in the cosmos?—ED.]

IN the spiritual development of an individual we may recognize four stages, each with its characteristic attitude. Since childhood is weak and dependent, our predominant attitude then is necessarily *trust*. If fortunate, as children we trust in the goodness and wisdom of our parents and teachers, in the stability of our home, in the strength and righteousness of our country, in the beneficence of the Supreme Power. How pitiful is the plight of those millions of children who in our generation are growing up in a war-torn world, their parents dead or powerless to shield them from abuse, their homes destroyed, their countries humiliated and dishonoured—nothing in which they can trust!

Then follows youth, when *confidence* is our predominant state of mind. We have come to recognize that our elders are not so good, so wise, or so disinterested as a few short years ago we believed them to be; we know that our home, which seemed to be firmly set upon a foundation of unshakable rock, is only a frail barque voyaging precariously over a stormy, reef-studded economic sea; our country is neither so great nor so honourable as we had been taught to view it. Yet we are not greatly perturbed by so much disillusion; for we feel within us that which can surmount all difficulties, right all old wrongs, make the world better than we found it. Indeed, without the conviction that things are not all that they should or might be, that there is a challenge before us, dragons to be slain and lovely damsels to be rescued from beleaguered towers, youth would lose much of its drive and zest. Youth has confidence in itself, in its lucky star, in its ability to make its dreams come true and to fulfil its highest aspirations.

At its highest, youth's confidence is constitutional rather than critical, springing from its own overflowing vitality rather than from a just appraisal of its powers in relation to the obstacles it confronts. Youth often pays dearly for the disparity between its audacious hopes and its experi-

ence, which prevents a smooth and comfortable transition to maturity. For many young people, especially those with some capacity for independent thinking, there is an intermediate period that may be called after-youth; for some, this stage might without exaggeration be termed the slough of despair. We suddenly wake up to the fact that we are not as strong and capable as we believed we were; that the world is solidly set in its ancient evil ways and sullenly resists our attempts to jog it out of them; that honesty, hard work, intelligence, loftiness of purpose are not always attended by the success, the happiness or the recognition that they seem to deserve. As in a mountainous terrain the highest ridges are separated by the deepest valleys; so, as our hopes soared high in youth, our despair in this subsequent stage is likely to be the more profound.

The biographies of a number of eminent thinkers contain moving accounts of this unhappy period, but no writer has described it more poignantly than Thomas Carlyle in the seventh chapter of the second book of *Sartor Resartus*, entitled "The Everlasting No":—

Having no hope, neither had I any definite fear, were it of Man or of Devil: nay, I often felt as if it might be solacing, could the Arch-Devil himself, though in Tartarean terrors, but rise to me, that I might tell him a little of my mind. And yet, strangely enough, I lived in a continual, indefinite, pining fear; tremulous, pusillanimous, apprehensive of I knew not what: it seemed as if all things in the Heavens above and the Earth beneath would hurt me; as if the Heavens and the Earth were but boundless jaws of a devouring monster, wherein I, palpitating, waited to be devoured.

Slowly this troublous period that follows exuberant youth gives way to maturity, which is the acceptance in a calm and philosophic spirit of the unalterable conditions of one's existence. This would be at best but a melancholy state of mind if *faith* did not come to relieve the drabness of our days—faith in some unseen spiritual force of restitution in the Universe, some righteousness and justice that operates over a longer period than is covered by our individual experience, perhaps in ways that transcend our understanding. In childhood, our trust in things present and tangible made faith in the unseen superfluous. In youth, our confidence in ourself gave us all the courage that we needed for facing life. In after-youth, our despair may have been too deep to be alleviated by anything short of unquestionable certainties. Faith is left to be the support of our years of maturity, and without it we readily become bitter cynics or self-indulgent worldlings.

The nature of faith is frequently misunderstood, and too often it is

taken to be blind, unquestioning acceptance of the pronouncements of some supposedly infallible authority. Such a state of mind is repugnant to the intellectually honest person, and its spiritual value seems negligible. Faith, of the sort that enhances life, might be defined as belief sufficient to determine one's attitude and conduct. Its province is not propositions which we take to be absolutely certain, like some of those of logic or mathematics, but those that are only probable, in which class we must include all statements about existence, and especially future existence. It is obvious that without faith of this sort no one would begin any large undertaking, such as making a journey, building a house, planting crops, starting a business, or rearing a family; for nobody can ever be sure that he can bring any one of these things to a successful conclusion and enjoy the fruit of his effort. At best, he can count on a greater or less probability of success.

This kind of faith may be vital or organic rather than the outgrowth of thought and experience. It is co-extensive with life itself, and without it life would cease. For no seed ever germinates with the assurance that it will grow into a mature flowering plant, no bird builds its nest with the certitude that its eggs will hatch and its young will be fledged, no animal ever migrates with a guarantee that it will safely reach its destination. The probability—nay, the bare possibility—of a successful termination is all that such organic faith requires.

It follows that faith is not incompatible with a large measure of scepticism. From ancient times the consistent sceptic, despairing of attaining certainty about anything, has been content to estimate probabilities and to regulate his conduct by those beliefs that seemed most likely to be true. To act on a probability requires greater spiritual hardihood than to act on a certainty, and this applies not only to small practical affairs but also to those great matters with which religion deals. Religious faith, as I understand it, is belief in the probable truth of certain propositions which are capable of influencing the whole tenor of one's life. To have faith of this sort, one must be capable of sacrifice, of risking his best effort, his whole being, for a result which he holds to be probable or at least possible, but of which he has no assurance. The spiritual value which a number of religions attribute to faith seems to be present in this readiness to stake everything for some supremely desirable end which may or may not be attainable by us, but to be lacking from that blind acceptance of unprovable dogmas which these religions too often demand of their adherents.

Some of the historical religions have required, as indispensable to their

system of salvation, faith in a variety of marvellous things: in the *avatar* in human form of the supreme deity; in corporeal ascension from the grave; in the magical efficacy of certain rites and formulas; in the reality of a number of miraculous events. All of these supposed happenings transcend experience; and in the measure that we become critical and develop confidence in the uniformity of nature, we have difficulty in regarding them as even probable. My own religious faith is confined to things of whose reality I have no doubt, because I have had much experience of them; but it consists in extending them beyond the limits of experience, into regions where probability replaces certainty.

First, I have faith in the purposiveness of the cosmos. That purpose exists at certain points in the Universe I cannot doubt, for I experience it directly within myself, and there is every indication that others like me are similarly endued with purpose. Many of our purposes are trivial and transient, followed for a day or an hour, and for these we can claim no high ancestry. But it is otherwise with those comprehensive, constant purposes which determine the course of our lives or large segments thereof, such aims as the attainment of ever greater harmony within ourselves and with the beings about us, growth in knowledge and insight, the promotion of concord among living things.

These enduring purposes seem to be not created so much as discovered by us; they are the natural development, at the human level, of that great stream of purposiveness that we call life, which is above all a constant striving toward organization, the giving of unity and form to materials that were relatively disunited and formless. But life itself could not arise until the creative process had performed an immense preliminary task, arranging the primal stuff of the cosmos, however we conceive it, into galaxies, suns and planets, into atoms, molecules and crystals: suns which might serve as continuing sources of the energy which living things need, and planets at lower temperatures that permitted atoms to be built up into the complex molecules of which living bodies are composed. All of this constructive activity necessarily preceded the birth of purposes in the human mind. Our highest aspirations aim in the same direction, the lifting of the crude stuff of the cosmos to higher levels of organization, along with awareness thereof, so that they appear to be direct descendants of a primary cosmic purpose.

This purpose need not exist in a cosmic mind. Mind, as we know it, is one of the latest developments of a long creative process, and to place it at the source of all things is surely a bold assumption. What in the vastitude of the Universe corresponds to the human mind, finite and conceivable

only in its finitude, I do not pretend to know. The purpose which infuses the cosmos appears to be implicit in it rather than explicit in a cosmic mind. Were it the purpose of some intelligent and powerful Creator, able to direct the course of universal evolution as an architect directs the construction of a house, I believe that creation would have proceeded toward its goal with far less strife and pain, far fewer miscarriages and reversals, than we actually witness.

I conceive the universal purpose as a constant striving in a definite direction, comparable to the incessant onward flow of a river toward its mouth. And, just as, in spite of sandbars, dams, cross-currents and backwaters, the river pushes relentlessly seaward, so the cosmos moves steadily toward the fulfilment of its immanent purpose, despite all the difficulties, complications and frustrations that appear to be inseparable from the creative process. And the end toward which the Universe tirelessly strives is the arrangement of its contents into ever more coherent and harmonious patterns, with appreciation of the ever higher values springing from this superior level of organization—an effort which we can fully approve, and support within the limits of our powers.

Secondly, I have faith in the continuance of growth, by which I understand increase in the richness and coherence of content of any entity no less than increase in size. I am certain that growth occurs, for I have had much experience of it. Crystals grow; plants and animals grow; men grow in body and mind. But all the modes of growth that I know somewhat intimately appear to have definite limits; development slows down, ceases and is sooner or later followed by decay. This is true not only of animal and vegetable bodies but of civilizations and even of minds, so far as we are able to observe them. The things whose growth we are most eager to promote seem always to falter and collapse before they reach the level to which we aspire to lift them. Few men, if any, have attained the spiritual or intellectual heights toward which they strove. Growth seems in the long run to be balanced by decay, evolution by devolution, so that no permanent advance is possible. Hence the need for faith that growth, of whose occurrence we can have no doubt, somehow continues beyond the point where it appears to languish and halt, that some of the products of growth are more enduring than we can demonstrate them to be.

These two articles of faith are complementary. If the cosmos is infused with something corresponding to a steady purpose, then it should persist in this purpose until creation attains the high level toward which it appears to be directed. And this, it seems, can be accomplished only through the continued growth of at least some of the things that it con-

tains. Since all available evidence points to the conclusion that in the evolutionary sequence matter and material conformations precede spirit and prepare the way for it, it is reasonable to look for the ultimate realization of the cosmic purpose in spiritual beings. Perhaps the creative process will reach its goal through the continued growth of certain spiritual beings already existing, or even of all of them; but it is also possible that beings of a higher grade must arise, probably in conjunction with more perfect bodies, in order to become capable of development that will lead to some enduring perfection. Either of these possibilities should satisfy our demand for continued growth.

This faith, that two things of whose existence we are certain are more wide-spread and permanent than can be scientifically demonstrated, appears to be the minimum requirement for a religious attitude towards the Universe. If there is no cosmic purpose of which our own highest aspirations are merely the more pointed expressions, then humanity and its most cherished hopes must be regarded as evolutionary accidents, products of a fortuitous trend of events in a limited region of space that tomorrow may be reversed, since it does not represent a constant universal endeavour. It would hardly be possible to feel a sense of solidarity with a universe that contains nothing corresponding to a purpose; it would stand for nothing to which we could be loyal. And if the creative process cannot be carried to higher levels than we have hitherto experienced, or maintain its culminating points for longer periods than have yet been demonstrated, then we must sadly recognize that the cosmic purpose, however much we may approve its goal, is weak and ineffectual, incapable of the full realization of that towards which it strains.

If we had infallible scientific proof that a beneficent purpose pervades the cosmos, and that it will realize its aim through the continued growth of at least some of its creations, faith would be superfluous, and we should be denied the ennobling experience of striving toward a lofty goal of whose attainability we lack assurance. But these two propositions appear to me sufficiently probable to determine one's loyalties and the course of one's life, and this is all that can reasonably be asked of religious faith.

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