

YOUTH'S ASPIRATIONS

[Dr. Alexander F. Skutch is an old and valued friend of THE ARYAN PATH. He contributes once again an article full of direct, lucid thinking on the moral life of man. For, properly speaking, it is a profoundly moral idea that from loss of dreams and seeming frustration man may receive spiritual treasures and in plain, everyday life find scope for every heroic power of the soul.—Ed.]

APPLY AS WE WILL the naturalistic doctrines of Rousseau, we can hardly educate children without sacrificing many of childhood's spontaneous impulses upon the altar of the invisible god of the future. Happiness in years to come is constantly held before the child as an incentive to diligence in disagreeable tasks; grim spectres of future misery and destitution are conjured up before the young mind as a deterrent to wayward impulses. Only with the most gifted teachers, only with those fortunate boys and girls in whom love of knowledge is of early birth and rapid growth, does study become its own reward. Few children value knowledge for its own sake; the majority work for it only as a coin that may in the coming years be exchanged for more tangible benefits.

All too soon the young person confronts the perplexing task of choosing his future vocation. To be forced to select his life's work at a time when his character and interests are rapidly changing, when he scarcely knows himself and has only vague notions of the baffling world of adults, is a harsh assignment. Ideally, we should elect our careers after we mature and have become familiar with a number of occupations, so that we may make informed judgments of our adequacy for our intended work and the rewards it will bring us. Unfortunately, long before we are mature we must choose our studies with a view to our future vocation; indeed, preparing oneself to occupy a niche in the world of affairs is part of the process of maturing. To be obliged to commit the whole future course of one's life before one knows much about life is so unfair that a philosopher might refuse to reach a decision and refrain from participation in this irrational world. But the youth's animal buoyancy and organic optimism carry him through this cruel predicament, usually without a trace of the resentment that it might engender in a more reflective mind.

He meets the crisis and passes it calmly, even cheerfully and hopefully, because he lives so largely in an ideal, visionary realm, which contrasts strongly with the hard, cruel, grasping world on whose threshold he stands. He colours all coming years and activities with his own

warm fancies. From childhood he has been nourished on tales of noble deeds; he has breathed an atmosphere of great expectations; the future has from early years been held before him, like a handful of corn before a recalcitrant horse, as the magnificent recompense for present sacrifices. Now all the hope, all the earnestness, all the spontaneous generosity, all the romantic abnegation, all the desire to serve, of ardent youth are thrown into this choice of a career, these plans for future endeavour. If worth his salt, the lad fixes his gaze on no peak short of the highest; no mediocre achievement will satisfy his broad-winged aspiration. All that men in past generations have accomplished is only the background for his own attainment; the greatest of the honoured dead are but his harbingers and precursors: his will be "some figured flame which blends, transcends them all."

A youth can find no more inspiring example and pattern for his own life than that of a forest tree. It starts as a tender sprout pushing through the litter of the woodland floor, in the deep shade cast by its elders towering far overhead. From the day it spreads its earliest leaf to the dim light of the underwood, the single objective of its infancy, childhood and youth is to push upward, ever upward, until it reaches the roof of the forest, wins for itself a place in the sunlight, and can spread its ample boughs among the noblest of its kind. For it there is no alternative course, no compromise with circumstance which will not lead to death. It must win a place in the forest canopy or perish from lack of the vital sunlight. Its whole activity is regulated by this single aim; until it has attained full stature, it cannot afford to squander its substance by sending forth mighty boughs; it must deny itself the luxury of efflorescence; it resolutely casts off the lower branches which no longer further its purpose.

The odds against the seedling's ultimate success are great, and it may succumb in the severe struggle to win a place in the woodland canopy; but, if this occurs, its clean and slender stem, free of all useless excrescences, attests that so long as sap flowed in its young trunk it was faithful to its dominant purpose and made no compromise with fortune—its death was such as any man might envy. Only if at last it achieves the aim of all its youthful striving and finds its lofty crown on a level with those of the best of its race, does it begin to expand, to flower and become the host of murmurous insects and songful birds. It would be well for us if, instead of the multitude of diverse and often incompatible objectives which we conceive for ourselves and those whom we guide, our choice were limited to one so natural and simple, so lofty and

sincere.

Youth is intensive in its aims; human life, diffusive in its demands. Youth, with eyes fastened upon its distant goal, overlooks all the inequalities of the intervening terrain. It will hurry directly toward its objective, following the straightest and shortest course, regardless of what hills and valleys, cliffs and chasms may obstruct the way. Life cries: "No, thou canst not travel so; no man can scale that precipice, only a bird can pass that canyon from side to side." Eager to advance quickly, Youth would travel girt-high and without a pack. Life admonishes: "Thou must eat, drink, and shelter thyself on the road, else I cannot sustain thee and thou wilt perish long before thou attainest thy destination." Because he who walks alone goes fastest, Youth often prefers to journey in solitude. Again Life warns: "If without the cheering presence of a mate thou becomest lonely and disconsolate, I shall not solace thee."

Life's stern admonitions, reiterated at every attempt to forsake the most trodden path in favour of the most direct, soon chill and discourage all but the stoutest heart and the purest, most devoted purpose. Once

Youth seemed all too costly to be staked
On the soiled cards wherewith men played their game,
Letting Time pocket up the larger life,
Lost with base gain of raiment, food, and roof.

Now, with advancing years and cooling blood, these base gains absorb the major share of our efforts; while the goal of our precious youth, if not wholly lost from view, is pursued only in hours left free by economic demands and the whims of society. As in the drab middle span of life we tread the humdrum daily round of conventional activities, we have little time and less desire to recall the shining aspirations of our youth; we can scarcely remember them without a pang, for in neglecting them we seem to have permitted our spirit's brightest flame to languish and die. The roseate clouds of childhood's dawning consciousness, the brilliant rays of youth's rising sun, have been succeeded by a harsh midday glare, which mercilessly dissolves the mists of enchantment and drives back the long, cool shadows of illusion. Doubtless we are fortunate that daily cares now leave little time for accusing memories.

But in due course the sun passes its fierce zenith and, falling westward, permits the shadows to steal forth from our feet, from the foundations of the houses and under the crowns of the trees. Presently they

grow as long as in the early morning and lie as caressingly upon the lawns and meadows, although in the opposite direction. The feverish activity of life's noontide relaxes, and we enjoy leisure to look back along the path we have trodden, viewing it in perspective softened by illusion. We perceive that life's journey, earnestly undertaken and strenuously pursued, has somehow rewarded us, although perhaps not with those supernal endowments on which our heart was fixed as we so hopefully set forth. No laurel wreath encircles our thin and dusty gray locks, yet in head and heart we have gathered treasures overlooked by our eager youthful calculations. If life has stubbornly withheld the greater part of that particular achievement which once seemed supreme and alone worthy of our effort, it has in compensation endowed us with other treasures which we lacked the wisdom to seek.

Perhaps the goal of our youth was universal knowledge. The years have humbled our once proud intellect with the demonstration that every fact we learn raises four new questions which remain unanswered. But delays have taught patience; perplexity has trained us in tolerance; love has schooled us in kindness; suffering has instilled compassion; beauty, which once seemed to distract us from the quest of truth, has amplified truth's meaning. Lessons have come from unexpected quarters; and, if we have amassed less knowledge than we desired, we have perforce acquired more wisdom than we sought.

Or power was our supreme objective. We have not conquered the world, or even succeeded in controlling our dependants as closely as we wished. Yet in life's long struggle we learned to moderate our desires, to govern our passions, to remain cheerful in adversity and to recognize that nothing is more important to us than this regulation of our own inner state. Is not the man who can rule himself more powerful than the world-conqueror who remains enthralled to his own violent passions? And has not life, in teaching us self-control, endowed us with more power than filled the dream of insolent youth?

Our wealth was the dominant desire of our young heart. Riches came and riches went, as in a fantastic dream; and we may be satisfied now if a few coins tinkle in our pocket after all bills and taxes have been paid. Yet in gaining and losing money we were shown, with the convincing force of a laboratory demonstration in physics, that the only true wealth resides in the mind, where alone we can guard it intact through all the vicissitudes of war and of rising and falling prices. Are we not then far richer than we had ever hoped to become?

The experience of an individual may repeat in miniature the history

of the whole realm of living things. Organisms, like men, tend to sink into ruts, to become narrow and specialized, unless from time to time they encounter difficulties which force them to spread out and diversify to avoid extinction. Life often treats us more kindly than in the most self-indulgent moments of youth we had planned to treat ourselves; frequently she presses on us gifts far more precious than those coveted prizes that she persisted in holding above our reach. Our long mortal journey, even when made by the most travelled roads and in the most conventional conveyances, is often attended by adventures more strange and varied than in the wildly romantic dreams of youth we had envisioned for ourselves in Eldorado or Ultima Thule. In some of the ordinary contingencies of human existence, we require more courage than we had hoped to display at the most perilous junctures of our travels through the dragon-haunted realms of fancy. Successfully to discharge our commonplace duties as a winner of bread, guardian of property, parent of growing children and member of the community, we may need a wider range of accomplishments, more varied knowledge and more diverse skills, than as lads big with our own importance we had planned to acquire for that long-anticipated voyage through the uncharted archipelago of phantasy. Lead us where she will, Life provides us with abundant opportunities to grow broad and mellow in spirit, if only we are wise enough to seize them.

Aspiring youth fastens its gaze upon some snowy peak that towers high above the green and comfortable world of everyday experience. It would devote all its energy to the upward climb, and plant its banner upon the lofty summit that would henceforth be its monument. But the exigencies of life cause the dispersion of the forces that we would concentrate upon some single dominant effort. We must eat, clothe and shelter ourselves; we have duties to our family and the community; all of which cause the dissipation of our energy. At our best and noblest, we wander over a high plateau of experience and accomplishment, rather than scale a single outstanding summit. The Andean plateau of Junín is not so lofty and spectacular as the snowy cone of Cotopaxi, but it contains a great deal more solid rock.

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH
