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THE
PRACTICE OF IMMORTALITY

BY

WASHINGTON GLADDEN



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The Practice of Immortality

For I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day. — 2 Tim. 1 : 12.

“That day” is the great day of the future, the day of reckoning, when the secrets of hearts shall be revealed and the fruits of time shall be harvested. Toward some such summing up the great apostle is looking; and whatever may be the form under which we conceive of it, the fact that the Future holds the issues of the Present, and that we must confront them, by and by, is a solemn fact which we must not put aside. The apostle anticipates that reckoning with confidence. His interests are safe, because they are in the keeping of One who will guard them “against that day.” What this deposit is, the context makes plain, although the language seems to be ambiguous; whether we should read “that which I have committed

to him," or "that which he has committed to me," is not clear from the phraseology: it may be either; perhaps it is both. If Paul is speaking of life, in the large meaning of the word — of his self-hood, his personality, — that is a trust committed to him by his Maker, and a trust committed by him to his Father. Your life is a charge God has given you to keep; and, if you are in the right relation to him, it is a treasure which you have given back to him to keep for you. It is yours by the freedom with which he has endowed you, and it is his by the faith with which you have surrendered yourself to him.

"Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them thine."

There is nothing mysterious about this; the deepest experiences of human affection enable us to interpret these spiritual relations.

The great affirmation of the text is that this treasure, in Paul's case, is safe. Paul knows that his life, with all its possessions and possibilities, is in the hands of One who

will take care of it. There is no question about its continuance; there is no question about its welfare. That unknown future has no terrors for him and no shadows. It will be well with him in that eternal day.

For myself, I find some comfort in grasping the staff which this stalwart pilgrim passes down to me, that I may steady my own thought thereupon, as I look toward the future. For the mighty shadow of the great unknown has risen more than once of late athwart my path and laid its spell upon me, and I have been forced to think of the questions that it raises. One and another of those whose friendship has for many years been very precious to me — with whom I have taken sweet counsel; whose comradeship was full of inspiration and solace — have gone suddenly away into the darkness; without a sign or a warning they passed; I had not known that they were not standing in their lot and doing their work as of old; the first tidings that I receive is that they are not any longer in this world. The lines of Ald-

rich, about his friend, Edward Rowland Sill, come home to me, — albeit the circumstance is not the same :—

“ I held his letter in my hand,
And even while I read,
The lightning flashed across the land
The word that he was dead.

“ How strange it seemed ! His living voice
Was speaking from the page —
Those courteous phrases, tersely choice,
Light-hearted, witty, sage.

“ I wondered what it was that died !
The man himself was here,
His modesty, his scholar's pride,
His soul serene and clear.

“ These neither death nor time shall dim ;
Still this sad thing must be —
Henceforth I may not speak to him,
Though he can speak to me.”

That is the sad thing, the unutterably sad thing. These two friends of mine, — the one a man of letters, scholar, teacher, writer of books ; the other a man of affairs, grappling with the business of the world in close encounter — but both of them brave, true,

high-souled, strong-hearted, knightly men—both of them vital to the finger-tips with the life that is life indeed, both of them companions of my better self, and helpers of all my worthiest endeavors,—I cannot speak to them again. How can they go away into silence? Where are they now? It is not that I am lonely or forlorn, for all that is worth most is left me; it is only that one cannot see the portals of eternity closing behind those who have had a large part in his life without being forced to think of what lies beyond that barrier.

This is not a new theme to any of you, and there is nothing new to say about it; I am only fain to share with you my wonder, and my longing, and my hope. There is not one of you, I dare say, to whom it is not a question of deep and tender significance. So many of those whom we loved are beyond that veil; what reason have we for hoping that we shall see them again?

For demonstration, whether physical or logical, I do not look. For what people call

scientific evidence I do not ask. Such evidence could not convince me, no matter how much of it there might be. Proof that appeals to any of my senses would never satisfy me. All the noises, odors, or visions that can be produced by whatever kind of incantation could not prove anything. That the senses can be deceived and hoodwinked I am perfectly sure. For that reason no miracle would strengthen my faith. I must have better grounds for believing than any supernatural apparition could furnish me—something that appeals to my spiritual nature; something that satisfies my moral intuitions. It is not through the avenues of sense that we shall ever get sure report of spiritual verities. That is the absurdity of spiritism! Just as if anybody could find out whether Faith and Hope and Love are eternal realities by the tooting of tin horns and the thrumming of banjos!

Indeed, the only way, I think, to get any firm assurance of any of these great fundamental facts of life, is not to try to prove

them by what you call scientific evidence, but to assume them, and build your life on them.

Foundations are always assumed. There is not a building in this world which has not been obliged to accept its foundation. It rests on the earth. It depends for its stability on the stability of the earth. No builder can find or fashion any other foundation for his building than that which the earth gives him. After all his digging and blasting and boring he must finally trust the earth. If he cannot trust the earth he cannot build. If his building stands, the final reason will be that the earth sustains it.

Just as the foundations of our architecture are assumed, so are the foundations of our science. Science begins with an assumption, with something that cannot be proved, with what Mr. Huxley calls a "great act of faith." Science cannot stir a step without taking for granted what can never be proved, — the uniformity of natural law. That is the one great fact of science, the one underlying, overarching, all-encompassing, architectonic, scientific

truth,—but it is impossible to prove it: the scientist just believes it, takes it for granted; and goes ahead with his investigations as if he were perfectly sure of it. It is by assuming it that he becomes sure of it. If he would not proceed until he had demonstrated it, science would be at an end.

In the same manner, as we have seen in other studies, the only way to be sure of God is to assume his constant presence in our lives and live accordingly. That will make any man sure of him. The foundation of religion, as of science, is an assumption. It is no more unreasonable to begin in religion by taking God for granted, than it is to begin in science by taking the uniformity of law for granted. It is no more unphilosophical to assume that Reason and Goodness and Love are universal, than to assume that Order and Law are universal. No man can prove the one by logic or scientific evidence any more than he can prove the other; but any man who will assume that Love is infinite and omnipresent and omnipotent; that it rules

the universe; that it waits at every portal of sense and spirit to bring him light and joy and liberty; any man who will assume this as true and build his life upon it, will know by an experience which all the logic in the world cannot confute, that God is, and that he is the rewarder of those who put their trust in him. To his intellect as well as to his heart this confidence will bring repose.

To assume that there is a good God who is over all and through all and in us all does make life rational. There is still much that we cannot explain — just as there is much that we cannot yet reconcile with the uniformity of natural law — but we feel that a universe of which that was true would be a rational universe; that it would “make sense of life,” in Mr. Dole’s good phrase: that we could go on and do our work in it hopefully and happily, no matter what suffering and loss might be required of us; that if all things were working together for good, life would be worth living. And there is no other interpretation of the world which any sane man

can accept without intellectual confusion and moral paralysis. Any other theory of life makes it a blind struggle, a hopeless, bewildering tangle; all is dark, meaningless, unintelligible. The theory of a good God, overruling it all, with eternity to work in, making the wrath of man to praise him, from seeming evil still educating good, is a theory that makes sense; when we assume that this is so, there are clear and strong motives for virtue. It is worth while to fight the evil in ourselves and in the world about us; it is worth while to follow what we know to be our own highest promptings in the face of peril and scorn; it is worth while to hold fast and push on in the lines of progress, for we know that though we die fighting the victory is ours.

And not only to the intellect but to the heart peace and assurance come, as the result of this sublime assumption. We come to know Him whom we have believed. He does not fail us. When we assume that he is with us, that he is working in us, that his

infinite grace is never beyond our reach, that he will always help us to be brave and true and faithful; that whatever may happen to our goods or gains, the real manhood, the real womanhood are safe in his keeping,—that we shall be strong in his strength to do and to bear what we ought to do and to bear; that we are a hundred thousand times safer trusting him and doing his will than we could be with all the money of the mart in our hands and all the armies of the empires at our back, — when we are able just to *assume* this—to make it the fundamental principle of life,— we are not left in any doubt as to whether there is a God. No man who was ready to risk everything upon his faith in God was ever left in any doubt about the existence of God.

And we shall get our assurance of immortality, I think, in just the same way. The way to be sure of it is to assume it as one of the fundamental facts, and build your life upon it. There is not much use in arguing about it; you are no more likely to prove it

by logic than you are to prove by logic the uniformity of the natural order, or the universality of the divine love. There are arguments which will come in to confirm your conviction of its truth, but the sure foundation is laid by taking it for granted and living as if it were true.

Here, too, you will find that it verifies itself to your reason and your experience. It makes sense of life. If this world is not the end, if there is a life after death, if eternity carries forward and completes the work of time, then the universe is rational. Things that would be dark and hopeless and intolerable if death were the end, wear a very different look when this light is thrown upon them. If we can say, with Abt Vogler:—

“There shall never be one lost good! What was shall
live as before;

The evil is null, is naught, is silence, implying sound;
What was good shall be good with, for evil, so much
good more;

On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, the perfect
round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall
exist ;
Not its likeness, but itself ; no beauty nor good nor
power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
melodist,
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too
hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the
sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
Enough that he heard it once ; we shall hear it by
and by," —

if such confidence as this be ours in the fruitions and completions and compensations of the future, then it is possible to construe the universe in terms of reason. For the wrongs that never are righted here, there is recompense hereafter ; the rogues that go unwhipped, the hypocrites that stalk abroad unsuspected, the giant oppressors who gather by tribute the wealth of continents and build their fortunes on the ruins of homes, — for all these sure retribution is coming ; the mills of the gods grind slowly, but no malefactor

is done with them when men screw down his coffin lid ; on the other shore he will awake to hear the sullen music of their fateful wheels, and before they are through with him, he will be ground exceeding small. Do not distrust that sense of justice in your breast which cries out against the honor and power and fame which come to greedy and unscrupulous and cruel men ; there is a day after to-day ; and you will live to see every one of these men measured up for just what he is worth and put just where he belongs. The eternal years of God are long enough for justice.

So, too, the great army of sufferers and burden bearers ; the hapless millions who were born in the dark and never had a chance ; the poor little babies whose whole experience of life was suffering, and who have gone wailing out of this world with the curse of prenatal sin upon them — for all these there is a day after to-day ; wait for the recompenses of the world to come before you estimate the worth of life to them !

And there are few of us who do not feel, sometimes, that justice demands for us another and a larger opportunity; that there are possibilities in us, which, in this world, can never be realized; needs, crying needs of our souls, which this world may never satisfy; that if we should know, at the end, that we were going away into nonentity, we should feel that this is a lying universe; that it equips us with powers which can never be used and fills us with longings which can never be satisfied. Assume that death ends all, and you have a theory of the universe which confounds your reason, and scoffs at your sense of justice, and takes the nerve out of your courage, and freezes hope at the bottom of your heart. Assume that death ends all, and the spring-time has no promise for you, and the sunrise no gospel, and the stars in the black vault overhead mock you at your prayers.

You simply cannot assume any such theory. If you think you do, it is only because you have not thought it through; you do not know what it means. You cannot thought-

fully and consistently accept a theory of life which brings intellectual confusion and moral paralysis. You know that that cannot be a right theory. You know it, because the moment you try to live by it you find that it does not work. It makes nonsense of your thinking and foolishness of your toiling and striving.

Assume the other theory then. One or the other you have got to assume. On one or the other you have got to rest your soul. To the one or the other you must make your life conform. Assume the affirmation instead of the negation of life beyond the grave. Assume it, just as you assume the uniformity of law, the universality of love. Indeed, after you have assumed God, you cannot, without doing violence to your reason, fail to assume immortality, for if love is the heart of the universe, the universe is not a fraud, and the deepest instincts of our lives can be trusted. Assume that they are telling you the truth, and build your life on that foundation; live as you ought to live, if life goes on forever

and the future is the harvest of the present. Think as you must think, if there is a day after to-day and the eternal years of God belong to truth and justice and righteousness. Bring your own sorrows, disappointments, losses, struggles, privations, under that æonian light and consider them there. Let that light shine into the city slums, into the sodden faces of the sinking throng, into the lives of the men and women who have been the victims of greed and cruelty, into all the hopeless entanglements of earth and time. Think of all these children of men as heirs of immortality and as the sons and daughters of One whose mercy endureth forever. What a great uplift of hope and confidence and courage comes to you with this assurance! If this is true, God's in his heaven, and it is all right with the world. If this is true, life does make sense; and all the tangles will be straightened out in God's own time. It is worth while to fight and wait and endure; the end is sure. The spring renews her promise, the sunrise tells again of life after

death, and the stars rekindle in our hearts the assurance of hope. We walk abroad under the sun with the light of God in our faces, and in the slow watches of the night we

“Hear, at times, a sentinel
Who moves about from place to place,
And whispers to the worlds of space
In the deep night that all is well.”

And this, my friends, I believe to be the only sure remedy for doubt concerning this great matter. The only thing for you to do, if you want to be sure of it, is just what Aristotle told you to do many centuries ago, — “Live as nearly as you can the immortal life.” Live it, and it will prove itself. Live the kind of life you ought to live if you are to live forever, and your doubts will disappear. And the principle which has come to light in this discussion — that all fundamental things have to be assumed — makes it plain that this is no rash venture, but the soundest and sanest philosophy.

A good man of the Catholic faith has

written a book entitled "The Practice of the Presence of God." What a luminous title! That is just what religion is. It is the practice of the presence of God; living all the while as if you were always in his presence; as if he were, as the Psalmist says, at your right hand, momentarily, to shield you, to keep you, to guide you, to inspire you. What a true, brave, quiet, strong, victorious life a man would live of whom this was true! And how sure he would be of God! Is there any other way to be sure of him?

The truth of the life to come will be verified in the same way. As Aristotle tells us, we must practice immortality. We have theorized about it, argued about it, hunted the universe over for proofs of it, sought it, alas! in many incantations and juggleries; suppose we stop speculating about the immortal life and begin to practice it. That is not a mystical injunction. You know well enough what kind of life it is that ought to continue. Live that life. Take all its great implications and expectations and assurances into your

thought, and let them rule there. Take its great hopes into your heart and make them welcome there. Be the kind of man you ought to be if this doctrine is true. What will happen to you if you do? Do you not know? Are you not sure that it would make you a strong, brave, happy man? Would you not face life with courage and confidence? Do you not feel that St. John's words would prove true: "Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself?"

If this is the kind of fruit the doctrine would bear in a good man's life, is not that a pretty strong evidence that the doctrine is true? If you know that to believe in the eternal life and live by that belief would make you a stronger, happier, better man, is there not in that about as good reason as you could find for faith in the eternal life? When a theory works you know that it is true.

Here, then, for you and me, is the path of certitude, as we stand in the presence of that Shadow, feared of man, "who keeps the keys of all the creeds." My two friends who have

disappeared behind that Shadow were not afraid of it. It had often fallen athwart their path, but it had no terrors for them. I never heard from either of them a note of apprehension. They were living the immortal life every day; how was it possible for them to doubt its reality? As life wore on with them into the sunny afternoon, and ripening wisdom made them more sure of their relations to the universe, there must have come to them a deepening consciousness of an outfit of natural powers wholly unsuited to this span of earthly life; a growing sense of time as only the beginning of existence, the threshold of achievement; a certainty that for the mighty inward imperative which summoned them to be men, to complete their manhood, there must be time and room somewhere in God's universe. And so I cannot doubt that they went away into that darkness, with a great expectation in their hearts. They are in the light now, with many more, dear to you and me. They understand some things better than we do,

no doubt. Yet for them there are yet problems to solve, summits to gain, manful and helpful work to do. They would not be happy in any other kind of world.

So, comrades all, who have gone on, and to whom the Great Hereafter has become the Glorious Here, we send our thoughts after you to-day, with no misgiving. We are one with you, —living the same life, the Eternal Life. The frontier of mortality is but an imaginary line. With the great multitude of heroic and faithful men on the earth who have accepted their inheritance of immortality instead of waiting for it, and have traveled on through all their days in the joy and strength of it, we seek to join ourselves. It is their voice we hear, ringing through the poet's martial lines : —

“No, at noonday, in the bustle of man's work-time,

Greet the unseen with a cheer !

Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be :

‘Strive and thrive,’ cry, ‘speed, fight on, fare ever

There as here !’”

K. H.

