

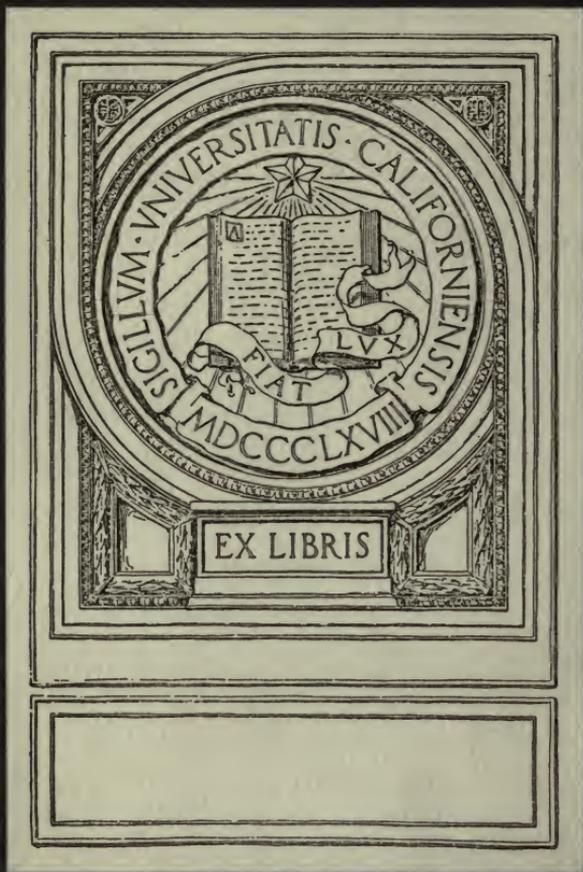
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ESSAYS ON VOCATION

EDITED BY BASIL MATHEWS

VOCATION
IN THE HOME

BY

EMILY E. WHIMSTER

HUMPHREY MILFORD

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE

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VOCATION IN THE HOME

BY E. E. WHIMSTER

THE world is in the remaking. Everywhere is change. Crowns have fallen, nations have crumbled, but out of chaos voices cry aloud for a new earth. Reconstruction is our shibboleth. Some among us are anxious to shore up existing institutions to avert collapse; others forage among the broken fragments of systems gathering materials to rebuild the old order of things; or they recklessly sweep away the débris of the past in a supreme effort to lay foundations for the establishment of new ideals. To all these builders history shouts the moral that the unit of construction in civilization and progress is the home.

From the dim far-off past, before ever history was, comes the fainter echoing cry that the *hearth* is the sacred spot. Round the fire gather the man, woman, and child, a family, united by a tie that resists the ages. The primitive instinct that hallowed the hearth was essentially true. The common feeding-place and the common resting-place in cave, wattled hut, or tent of rough skins slung on poles possessed the indefinable sacredness that men call 'home'.

The home is a group; a small group of individuals. Through the ages the world has marched forward because some individual of clearer insight or greater skill than his fellows has inspired a group with his own enthusiasm for a new idea, and through the common thought and corporate action of this group the idea has gained ground until it has become part of the life of the community.

Any group devoted to the development of an idea or principle must be a powerful factor for good or evil. A small group broke the slave-trade, another plunged Europe into the hideous Great War. A handful of men established the ascendancy of the Crescent in the East, and our Lord trained a little band who were to revolutionize the history of the world.

Every home is a group, the spirit of which will influence other groups, while its dynamic force must depend largely on the characters of the individuals that make the group and the strength of the bond that unites them. The nation is built up of individuals, but of individuals bound to others; so that a man is stronger or weaker than himself in proportion as his home is a spur to the realization of his ideals or a drag on his highest aims.

The home or group is not necessarily made up of parents and children. Life calls into existence splendid homes where there is neither the tie of marriage nor of blood kinship. A group may be brought together by business, mutual affection, a common aim, or a hundred circumstances not to be catalogued. A common hearth is established, and because of the union brought about by common tastes or ideals the sacred fire of home is kindled. These may be homes in the truest and best sense of the word.

The group consisting of husband, wife, and children remains the ideal. That is as it should be, because of what should underlie the partnership. Oftentimes in the age of darkness men slew a victim, a human being for choice, and buried him beneath the hearth that his blood might propitiate the gods and bring good luck to the household. In this curious superstition of ignorance, the child of dark minds groping for the light, we seem to discern the faint glimmer of an element of truth, since

every true and beautiful home is built on loving sacrifice. The man and woman have risked the future. Believing in each other they have joined in a union which is to be dissolved only by death. They have undertaken great responsibilities. The man is prepared to work to keep a wife and family. The woman will risk life and health in bringing children into the world, and will devote her time and energies to fitting them for life. The essential element of sacrifice is there, and the sacrifice is unconscious because love calls it forth. Together they will spend a large proportion of life in living directly for the good of their offspring.

But if the home is made up of unmarried people, a home it is in very truth if the same principle works in it. Each lives for the other and in each life there is the unrecognized sacrifice, which ennobles but does not sadden the spirit. Each takes his or her place in the home life and fills it. Each is a formative influence and an essential. There will be differences of opinion and occasional clash of wills, since the members are but human, but there will be that freedom of spirit and action which is only possible where love is. The atmosphere will encourage and promote harmonious development of mind and character. St. Paul's great hymn in praise of love declares that 'love never faileth'. It will bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. It will challenge time and eternity and persist triumphant.

The hearth is the beginning of the home, and there must be a home-maker who sweeps the hearth and keeps the fire burning brightly. Although the man and woman share the responsibility of the home, nearly always the woman is in a special sense the home-maker. And where homes are made of friends there is usually one on whom

the others depend for inspiration and whose presence makes the home atmosphere. For most women and some men the home is indeed a vocation. They are called by the Divine voice to minister on the hearth.

The home is not the house, whether it be the mansion of a modern millionaire or the hovel of some primæval savage. It is the place, poor or palatial, in which the home-maker is to be found: and deep in the heart of the home-maker is hidden the knowledge of the sacrifice, buried securely beneath the stone of the hearth and cementing the foundations. The children reared in the home will bear its mark. Influence will flow from this group to others and the home forces will act and react on other homes.

The village multiplies and becomes the town and the town grows into the city. But as the ideals of the homes are, so will be the aspirations and desires of the town and of the country. Always and everywhere it is the home-maker that counts. In some poor home an ambitious, self-restrained mother will challenge all the giants that poverty can marshal for the sake of her clever boy, and braced by many conflicts the youth will go forth to do great deeds in the big world. Science, art, music, literature, politics, all owe much to such products of the true home. Civilization, progress, religion have been carried forward by the intrepid individual who has seen and dared to follow the vision. Of these great-hearts an enormous proportion have received the first impulse to achievement in their own homes, from the words or deeds of a devoted mother or an heroic father. What unknown silent influences have been the real world-makers and world-breakers!

In the dark places of the world where men were little more than beasts, even killing and eating their own kind, heroic men and women have settled and made a home.

A light has been kindled that violence and death have been unable to extinguish. For the first time the sacred fire of Love has burned upon the hearth and poor degraded men and women have been irresistibly attracted. They have drawn near to warm themselves at the flames, and they have turned away to cleanse their own hearths and to build their own altar. The home has proved more powerful than any sermons over and over again. It is a living influence.

Viewed from afar, through the long vista of the ages, the home is transfigured, bathed in mystic glory. It is the heart of romance, of adventure, of glorious action. Its splendour is inherent. When it wears the dull greys of the commonplace it is only because we cast a shadow over the glory by standing too near. It is so natural to feel that :

Near is a drop of sand,
Now is a perishing clod, .
But afar is a faëry land
And beyond is the bosom of God.

Vocation in the home sometimes falls upon the ear as an unmeaning phrase. To many women home is the only possible sphere for their energies, and they remain at home without any sense of vocation, impelled by inertia. Quite passably they perform their duties and rarely rebel against their circumstances and limitations. But high and noble enthusiasm is wanting. They lack the true spirit which alone can transmute the every day into romance. Yet nowhere is vocation more intensely real than in the lives of those women who have chosen to devote themselves to home and who have renounced all for their choice. How much our mothers have meant, and how little did they realize that they had a vocation! To indulge in heroics was their last thought, yet for most of us home and mother are synonyms. Were we all

artists we could furnish the most transcendently beautiful portrait gallery in the world—a gallery of mothers. There is one portrait :

Seated in a low chair with projecting arms that ward off draughts sits a very small elderly lady. Her face is delicate, with faintly pink cheeks ; her greyish hair is parted meticulously and brushed smoothly on either side. The brow is wide, giving a noble-seriousness to the face ; the mouth strong and sweet. Her hands, twisted with years of pain, lie white and almost useless on her lap. About her there is an air of stillness, of great repose of spirit, and of quiet dignity.

Some one enters the room. Her eyes lift from her book—such seeing, understanding eyes—and the frail sweet face is alive with interest. Nothing passes unnoticed. The birds in the garden that she can see from her chair, the unfolding buds, the flying clouds, the rooks nesting in the elms, sunset colours, the first snowdrop, the field bright with buttercups, all minister to her never-fading pleasure.

Shy herself, the self-conscious and timid open out in her presence and confide in her. The poor are sure of her true sympathy and never shrink lest she should patronize. They recognize her strength and power where some only see her sweetness.

Not for twenty years has she walked across the threshold of her room, but the household moves in harmony with her will and she rules her kingdom with gracious dignity. Pain, trouble, and anxiety have failed to dim her interest in people and things. Boredom is utterly foreign to her ; indeed every one who knows her brings her the most trifling details of their doings, certain of her absorbing interest in them.

I see now those maimed hands clasping her little red Testament in which she read daily. We never heard her

talk religion, but we knew of her faith by the testimony of her strong, saintly, joyous life. She was

A heart at leisure from itself
To soothe and sympathize.

Home a vocation! Her children will never think lightly of such a calling. They often look back on their home life and wonder just how she gave them her ideals and how under adverse circumstances and overwhelming difficulties she managed so splendidly to equip them for the battle of life. They can hardly remember any words of hers directed to those ends. They breathed the atmosphere she created and developed as she prayed.

Some two years after her passing her only son fell at Poelcapelle. After a short spell in the trenches he wrote to his sister, 'I would like all of you to know that in the very worst part of the do, when it was too much to be borne, I had the consciousness of Mother like a protection—not so much over my life as around my soul—so that the beastly thing could not hurt what really mattered'. That was her vocation in life too. She was the essential spirit of the home, sustaining, comforting, stimulating, by virtue of her own selfless goodness.

As you read you too will paint your portrait in the Home gallery on your knees, with a loving hand, thankfully acknowledging that these heard the call of the Highest in the duties of every day.

When we think of the last hard week in the life of Our Lord there comes to us some sense of comfort in the remembrance that He left the city and went out to Bethany each night. Here was the home of two sisters and a brother—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Nearly two thousand years have failed to dim the tender radiance of love that streamed from that village home.

There is a tendency among energetic and intellectual women to feel that home life crushes individuality, cramps original enterprise, and gives self-expression no place.

Something is fundamentally wrong if home does not give liberty for development. The ideal that would compress all housewives into a common mould is absurdly unworthy and futile. To be her best a woman must be herself. Oftentimes the woman who has chosen home as her vocation, and in that life has become stunted in mind and soul, has only herself to blame. She has chosen the path of least resistance and atrophy treads on the heels of apathy in awful vengeance. It is the woman of insight, sympathy, and conscientious endeavour who sees that home is not a prison but a training-ground of glorious enterprise. A woman absorbed in her children to the exclusion of the claims of others, limits her own possibilities as a mother, leaving to other less sacred hands the task of flinging back the curtain and showing the child the great avenues of service that lead from home to the confines of the world.

Nor is this a purely modern conception of the wider duties of the home-maker. The 'virtuous woman' of the book of Proverbs was not oppressed by the limitations of her sex or her vocation. The wise one who recounted the long list of her achievements did not seem to think the home-maker lacked opportunities for self-expression. She is praised for the faultless discharge of her ordinary housewifely duties. She spins, weaves, feeds and clothes her family to perfection, directs the energies of her helpers to good purpose, keeping all well and wisely occupied. Such is her home influence that her husband is free to take a dignified place among the elders in the life of the city. But she looks beyond the immediate home circle. She finds time to make goods, garments, and girdles, which she sells to the merchants. She buys land and

cultivates it profitably. The poor and needy find her a generous friend. She is no weakling, but a strong, self-reliant woman that 'girdeth her loins with strength', who is 'clothed in strength and dignity'. Her judgment is reliable, and 'she openeth her mouth with wisdom; and the law of kindness is on her tongue'. The most ultra-modern of women might be justifiably proud of such a record. Few of us would wish to emulate her activities altogether, but she is a stimulating person even to-day, and in spite of the long list of her achievements the ancient writer has managed very wonderfully to convey to us a sense of pervading calm. There is much work well done, but no hurry and rush. We gladly miss the whirl that tends to mar so much of our own lives.

No two women will fulfil their destinies by just the same paths. For each individual to avail herself of all discipline that life offers will not produce uniformity. Life develops, if we will, the true self which is truly the individual. Living, loving, serving, we grow into likeness to the Divine, but we need not become so many replicas of each other. Two poets write of their wives. One says :

She doeth little kindnesses
Which most leave undone or despise ;
For nought that sets one heart at ease
And giveth happiness or peace
Is low esteemed in her eyes.
Blessing she is : God made her so,
And deeds of week-day holiness
Fall from her noiseless as the snow ;
Nor hath she ever chanced to know
That aught were easier than to bless.

Another sings :

Steel true and blade straight
The great artificer
Made my mate :

Honour, anger, valour, fire,
A love that life could never tire,
Death quench, or evil stir,
The mighty master
Gave to her.

In each case the man has found his mate and the woman her vocation. Exchange would have proved a terrible failure.

The last few years with all their opportunities for women have stirred us strangely. Avenues of service have opened of which we never dreamed. Now some of these are closing and many women are feeling that life is narrowing once more; thrusting them back into the narrow confines of home.

Let us stand back and see the home in its right setting. Let us note its altar on the hearth where Love makes the sacrifice. Let us look through its windows that give on the wide roads that stretch to the ends of the world. This home is the beating heart that supplies the impulse to the great happenings of the world. It is a life-giver, and the energies that develop here will be felt through the centuries and across the continents.

In the lands far away where Christian ideals have not held sway through the long years, where women are playthings or beasts of burden, and where the children receive little training, the home often seems hardly worthy of the name. Some high-minded white man (trader, missionary, or government servant) makes a home in such a foreign land for his wife and children. A new light shines in a dark place. That home is the centre of new ideals of far-spreading influences.

The call comes to men and women alike to bear the burdens of the world, to fare forth in the service of humanity, to make the deserts blossom into fertile plains. The clarion voice of vocation summons to high

endeavour and bids us all help to alleviate the sorrows of the world. Whether that high voice bids us travel or bids us stay, with us there must ever be the sacred hearth and the living flame.

Heart, are you great enough
For a love that never tires?
O heart, are you great enough for love?
I have heard of thorns and briers.

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