

*When experience has brought conviction and faith that we can be acceptable to others, it is possible to emerge into the adult world and commit ourself to a course of action. It is this commitment to action that differentiates those of faith from the faithless.*

## The Fear of Faith\*

WE ARE exhorted often to have faith. We may be told to have faith in the future, faith in ourselves, faith in our fellow man. It is urged that if we may just reach the state where we have faith, we can then resolve our problems and deal with our lives sensibly and with happiness. The lingering question is, *how* do we come by this faith? Most religions urge us to adopt faith as a blinding hood which shuts out the unpleasant and the inexplicable. Politics often attempts the soft sell, with promises of the moon on a silver platter if only we will lend active support or passive acquiescence to some leader who is to be deified by our faith. Economic systems, whether capitalist or communist, offer utopia to those who will put their faith in the system, even in the face of obvious shortcomings.

As participants in a liberal religion we no longer trust so-called blind faith and we more than likely believe that salvation rests mainly in our own hands. Yet this too demands faith, and without it, self-steered courses ultimately seem directionless or misdirected, useless or faulty, dangerous or dull.

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As a psychiatrist I have the opportunity to listen at length to many of those with little faith. In fact, one of the problems shared in common by many psychiatric patients, is lack of faith. Some have never had it. Some held it fleetingly, to lose it in the first good sortie with life and living. Others lost it only after a long struggle with excessive adversity. Some few tell me loud and long of the power of their faith, but it is only a hollow shell, brittle and vulnerable to the smallest blow. All lack faith, and they come seeking it with the same magical expectation found at Lourdes, Mecca, and Delphi. Sometimes, just as at those other places, this kind of faith in a cure will produce dramatic results—even if they are short-lived and superficial.

We find agreement in the works of Tillich, a theologian, and Fromm, a psychoanalyst, that the main basis for rational faith is self-knowledge.<sup>1</sup> They

<sup>1</sup> See Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*,

each make it clear that only through a deliberate, rational, experimental approach to life can man find the faith in self which can lead to a faith in others, as well as faith in ultimate goals and conceptions. Only such day-to-day exploration of problems coupled with the kind of awareness which leads to self-understanding, can bring growth, maturation and, ultimately, faith. The ancient admonition to "know thyself" is still true today and is the essential beginning for all faith.

Ideally faith, like every other attitude, should have its beginnings firmly rooted in early childhood. There the mother's and father's faith that their child *will* turn into something more than his occasionally monstrous self, provides a model upon which he can hang his accumulating knowledge and experience about life. This model will provide the focus for creating a personal concept and symbol for faith. The oft-experienced parent-love creates and confirms faith in being lovable. Only this awareness will liberate the capacity to love others with faith that they will reciprocate. You can not fool a child, nor exhort him to have faith in his love-worthiness. He will *only* believe his senses.

**I**F CHILDREN (or adults for that matter) are constantly confronted with unloving and rejecting surroundings, they will inevitably make some psychological adjustment to meet this fact. They may develop a "stomach ache," play truant from school, become enuretic, or even use the more bizarre techniques of psychosis in order to gain the illusion of worth. Faith in being loved will be substituted by a faith in mental magic. The real world will become a place not to be trusted, and faith

in being loved will retreat before faith in psychotic, magical omnipotence; not faith in facts but faith in fantasy. This is the means occasionally resorted to by some religions to gain some sense of security and stability, but the price of this method is exorbitant.

Both Tillich and Fromm have labeled this as idolatry. Fromm has spelled out beautifully the way modern man has created an idolatrous relationship to his world without resorting to either statues or icons. The abstractions of science are treated as if they were real elements of life. Political parties or systems become ultimate truth, and industrial efficiency is viewed as a philosophical goal. This kind of irrational faith inevitably leads to blind acceptance of the kind of symbols which tend to make immutable the conditions of one's existence. No idol worshipper can surpass the zeal found in this kind of idolatry.

From what I have said before, it can be seen that in the ideal loving relationship between parent and child there lies the seed of future difficulty. I am referring to the fact that if a child has a trusting, comfortable relationship with his parents, he may be *so* comfortable that in part he will not want to leave them for the troublesome problems of map-making in strange lands. He will bend a great deal of his total effort toward securing perpetuity for the satisfying *status quo*. If circumstances are right, he may be led onto the dangerous ground of denying the existence of his own skills and value. In order to keep the pleasure of full parental care and support, he will act *as if* they were the only ones who could do anything, or be valuable in the eyes of the community. He will perpetuate and propagate his belief that he is only a child that no adult will really value as an equal, and this attitude will persist long after a burgeoning body has forced him off mother's lap and father's piggyback.

Harper and Brothers, N.Y. (1957); Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving*, Harper and Brothers, N.Y. (1956).

His sole orientation, or at least all that appears operative superficially, will be to emulate his parents so closely that he will come to be known as "his father's son and spitting image."

Such an attitude is fine as a beginning—in fact, it is necessary. But with the passage of time, all it can lead to is the loss of a human personality, with the creation of an inferior image of another. What was effective and noteworthy in the father may not fit at all into the time and personality of the son. A century or so ago, when life was more static and the population more homogeneous, emulation was the order of the day and it seemed to work. Now it does not. The virtue our generation might have gained from shoveling coal and banking the furnace when we were boys has no value to our sons, who in fact may just barely know what coal is. For this reason, it is necessary to teach our children a *process* for living, rather than a set of stereotyped tasks which probably will become obsolete before they reach their teens.

As a child develops awareness of his intellectual and mechanical skills through repeated and gratifying successful experience, he has his best chance to *know* what he can or cannot do with day by day problems. When reinforced by family attitudes which accurately reflect self-knowledge and the observations gotten from others, a reciprocating faith-in-self—faith-in-others is developed and strengthened. In time, this leads to *rational faith* in one's self.

At the other extreme, are those children reared by neurotic parents who may punitively restrict, casually deprive, guiltily flatter, or wish-fulfillingly aggrandize their children. Such children can only evolve unrealistic pictures of themselves, and the irrational faith they must develop in themselves would represent but idolatrous clinging

to a rusting rote from the past.

**A**LL PERSONS have to pass through this phase of development, and the capacity to love and be loved is determined by the degree of rational faith we achieve. The belief in our power to elicit love must be so engrained as to be automatic and without need for conscious consideration. It must be grounded and derived from rational experience. It is an essential ingredient for all maturity.

I have mentioned some of the steps in the genesis of rational and irrational faith, but how can an adult achieve rational faith if he is not fortunate enough to have it? What can we do to help ourselves reach this much heralded state of effectiveness? From what I said before we can see that lack of faith often brings people to the office of the psychiatrist. More often it brings them to the minister's study, the shoulder of a friend, the local bar, endless driven involvement in unsatisfying work, or to play that gives no pleasure.

The first requirement for gaining rational faith is what psychiatrists call *insight*. This is the stuff which Old Testament prophets and oriental mystics achieved by going off into the wilderness to meditate. This is what people seek by the various routes mentioned before. However, these solutions work only when they exist, and for those who know how to use them. Few have capacity for productive introspection. Only the unusual minister can provide intuitive empathy coupled with the maturity and emotional security necessary to help another gain self-knowledge; and it goes without saying that the dreams and ideas unshackled by alcohol are of little use in gaining self-awareness and self-respect. To avoid being guilty of exhortation myself, let me describe some possible leads for gaining insight.

*Insight* is knowledge of the self—of the “I.” It requires “looking into” the inner workings of one’s mind and perfecting the tools to carry on this self-examination. However, this operation is constantly blocked, impeded, or sidetracked by the fear of what we shall see there. This is where idolatrous faith in the parental admonitions of childhood works to inhibit, incapacitate, and distort the self-examination process which is so vital to the development of maturity and rational faith in the self. How does this happen?

We are always striving to balance the conflict between our inner impulses and wishes, and the risks, demands, standards, and opportunities in the external world around us. When young, and before we learn what the “world is really like,” our parents keep harm or complete destruction from befalling us by imposing a standard of behavior which, if followed, is supposed to guarantee our survival. A child can not evaluate the efficiency or inefficiency of this imposed standard—he is not given the opportunity to test, nor does he often have the means. For example, the rule: “*Thou shalt not go into the (empty) street*” explains little of the danger from absent but forthcoming vehicles. The only apparent jeopardy to the child is the ominous parental anger/fear, or his own burning *derriere*. These signals he can understand and these cues he will follow. Clearly they are not rational risks of the road, though they are of primary importance to the child. Such a standard is accepted, though reluctantly, as Good, in contradistinction to Evil. It is taken on faith and usually is not open to critical examination, at least until much later. It becomes sacrosanct—idolatrous.

**A**S WE grow up, there is a strong tendency for these early patterns of belief to become widely separated

from their sources, more untouchable, and less subject to criticism. They become the rigid, compelling, emotionally charged, and morally superior substrate, upon which all subsequent behavior is predicated. They are the major articles of a man’s faith, though they may be occasionally resurfaced with new and more shining veneer. There is a strong tendency for them to remain unchanged. If these articles early included the freedom and capacity to question and examine the world objectively, then that fortunate person has the ingredients for a rational faith built into his personality. If the scope for critical observation of self and surroundings is narrow, blind idolatrous faith becomes inevitable and essential. It is a basic psychological fact that what can not be mastered by knowledge with the help of the senses, must be controlled, manipulated, or placated by the kind of magic which we have designated as idolatrous and irrational faith. I will say more later of how religion may play into this tempting trap.

This discussion gives clues of how we may avoid and escape from idolatry. Obviously, a basic need is knowledge—the kind of knowledge which can come only from exploration. It is not easy to throw away old maps and re-scout the territories of our experience. This essential step will always be resisted because the reconnaissance of strange and unknown surroundings filled with both real and fantasied dangers, stirs anxiety and fear, if not panic—reactions which are inevitable. Such fear can only be mastered by repeated experience in carrying out such forays. After the repeated and more or less successful accomplishment of such anxiety-producing ventures, fear of the unknown is transmuted into the ability to enjoy curiosity. The knowledge will develop that while the only certainty is uncertainty, ways and means can be found to

solve most of life's problems well enough to get some satisfaction from them *most* of the time. And even when there is no success, there will be at least a broadened understanding of the problem so that there is greater likelihood of success the next time around. This concept, based not on dogma, but on the firm ground of empirical experience, is the basis of rational faith.

Many of us have experienced this phenomenon during our efforts to master public speaking. Before experience was gained, mere contemplation of the subject for the projected speech was enough to stimulate the specter of a departing or sleeping audience, disgusted with the poverty of our presentation. After painful preparations and anxiety-ridden presentations, we slowly acquired the knowledge that it *was* possible to survive such an ordeal. In fact, invitations to speak were renewed! With the gradual accumulation of skill and success, anxiety abated, confidence grew and a rational faith developed that public speaking was possible. Thus the original discomfort was utilized to stimulate appropriate preparation for meeting and eliminating the source of uneasiness. A resolution was forged.

**T**HIS is not an easy road to travel. It does not have a pat and ready answer for everything which dogmatism offers. Yet, it does suggest a way for approaching any problem with the feeling that there is a reasonable chance of finding some way to arrive at a solution. It provides flexibility so that there is no need to divorce oneself from the senses in order to avoid seeing what would disturb the calm of apparent certainty. It saves one from walling off and separating the different levels of awareness, which if done, starts one on the unreal road of mental illness. This is a costly route, but not nearly so expensive as the dark and blind way

of denial where there is not only the risk of terrible bumps and bruises, but which is also devoid of any promise whatsoever for today's world. Many dogmatic faiths at best can *only* provide for hope in the hereafter. Psychiatrists know nothing about the hereafter, but it is clear that few people can survive only on the hope of reward there—they need sustenance in the here and now.

By frequently living through the sort of difficult experiences which lead to development of insight, a person builds up in his mind, in his very bones and muscles, and in his gut, a sense of confidence and self-reliance. This is not blind confidence that God or some super-being will care for him in the clinches, but rather that within one's own person there is the strength to meet adversity. There is solid awareness that most of the time one can find the means to solve the problems at hand and, if not, can seek and obtain the help of others.

Let me discuss now some of the clues which can help one deepen awareness and understanding of experience. One of our best clues that something is remiss in our understanding of what is going on, comes from an area of experience which we are likely either to overestimate or reject altogether. I refer to our emotional reactions. During the early phases of the recent era of scientific development, emotions were relegated generally to an inferior position of importance. There is now a great deal of solid scientific evidence to support what the ancients well knew—that emotional clues are one of the most important parts of the communication process between people. In fact, some eminent authorities state that at least 60% of our significant communications are non-verbal, and consist of the multitude of facial expressions, body attitudes, gestures, and the emotional

nuances with which words are impregnated. For this reason we must learn to deal more effectively with this crucial source of information. Becoming aware of the emotional surcharge imposed on our communications through a myriad of highly personal clues will help us to understand why people react to us as they do. At least we may learn to assume that such gestures as the pointed finger to emphasize an argument, lowered eyes in response to a conversational point, or a period of transient restlessness while listening, signal significant feelings, even though we may not know at once what they mean. Learning to pay attention to these clues can lead to important self-knowledge which helps us to understand our interactions with others.

**A**NOTHER rule of thumb is that whenever we find ourselves moved by powerful emotions in settings and under circumstances which do not seem to justify such strong reactions, it is highly likely that there is something going on, of which we are not aware. It can be assumed that if we are able to pause and accurately reflect, we will find a hidden and forbidden thought or feeling which we feel we must hide. Ask the questions, "Am I angry?" "Am I jealous?" "Do I covet?" "Do I wish to attack him?" Though any or all of these thoughts and feelings may be undesirable socially *if acted upon*, to be handled rationally they *must* be acknowledged, for they can not be abolished. Fear and moralizing about emotions cause massive waste of psychological energy and many persons literally lose a lifetime running away from themselves. We can learn much from the contemplative religions of the Far East about this, for they all stress the acceptance of the self, not its obliteration.

This is also a point at which others can help us. They can lead us and support us in acknowledging ourselves and our emotions. They can let us know that *they* know what we are feeling and thinking. It is this acceptance which is the key, and group therapy in its formal as well as casual settings, can help a person gain insight and ultimately more confidence. (Here I'm referring to the informal therapy which takes place in ladies' sewing circles, fraternities, and "conversation" clubs in general.) Yet, all too often we attempt to help others by playing right into their neurotic conflicts with such remarks as "don't be angry," "forget it," "it doesn't make any difference," and other similar platitudes. These are regarded by the distressed as strong evidence that their conscience was right all along in its assertion that it was bad to even *have* such thoughts or feelings.

There are other places close at hand where we can learn about ourselves. One of these is from our children. As we all know *very* well, children have the capacity to disturb us deeply with their behavior. Though we might wish to deny this, usually it is because their acts are so much like our own thoughts or actions that we are upset by the confrontation. Because they are closer to their impulses than we are, they can express what they see and feel in a great many situations. Whenever we have feelings of undue bridling toward them, it is more than likely that they have trodden on some one of our pet fears. By watching our reactions to the children carefully, and when upset always asking ourselves, "Are they doing something that I would really like to do but about which I am even afraid to think?" we can often gain new insights into our own personalities. Our children, at all ages, can teach us much. They give us new opportunities

to relive our own childhood, and master old problems.

Another source of possible insight, though it is perhaps more difficult to use than those I have earlier discussed, is through our reading. We have a good chance to live the lives of others vicariously through identification with the characters in the books we read. In fact, one hallmark of all great literature is its power to submerge the reader so deeply in the lives of its characters that he feels "as if" he were experiencing the events himself. Yet the very thing which makes it great also diminishes its power of persuasion and its creation of insight. Because we know that these are only characters in a book, it is easy to write them off as fictional and unrelated to us. When we use this kind of rationalization, we close the gate to greater self-knowledge. The more productive alternative is to know that we appreciate the character *because* we are like them at least in thought. From this approach we can learn. The thought of "there but for the grace of God go I," is not only more charitable, but it is more rewarding to the one who can perceive it.

**F**INALLY I will mention some of the possible values that come from listening to sermons on Sunday. Presumably we get something out of church or we would not continue to come. But do we get what we come for? Is there any way in which we can attempt consciously to gain more? How can we listen to the ideas of another and bring them to our own uses? First, as we listen, I think it is necessary to concentrate on the notion that what we are hearing *does* apply to us and forget about how it may apply to others. So it may, but to focus on that belief generally facilitates our all too strong tendency to see everything as the other



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fellow's problem. This is especially true on those occasions when the remarks stir emotion in us. Anger, fear, sadness, or humor, are clues that *we* are the unmarked subject of the comments. Though we quite likely will get angry at the person who stirs up our discomfort, in fact we should thank him, for this is the only way to improve our insight.

There is a line in *Romans* 5:3 that impresses me greatly with its psychological insight. It states, ". . . trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope." This describes in different words the process for acquiring rational faith. Any other kind of faith offered by a religion will more than likely be idolatrous. We all cherish the child's hope that somehow we will find *something* which will give us certainty. Many religions and religious beliefs seductively hold forth the promise of this kind of security. But this is a counterfeit security which cheats us of the very essence of our humanity. We are the sole possessors of the mental equipment to explore our universe, and then to conceive symbols and abstractions of a religious and non-religious nature with which we can describe it. When we use this capacity to petrify and make idols of our symbols, we are truly irreligious

and we throw away our most godly attribute.

When experience has brought conviction and faith that we can be acceptable to others, it is possible to emerge into the adult world and commit oneself to a course of action. It is this commitment to action that differentiates those of faith from the faithless. The recluse, the timid, and the side-line cynic who finds fault with everything but produces nothing, are all without faith and they lack commitment. Their external facades are different, but underneath they are all afraid to act for fear they will be wrong, be criticized, or become unlovable and thus lose all. To avoid losing all, ironically they throw everything away. Salvation from this failure by default comes through somewhere and somehow gaining the needed insight to *begin* to experiment. This can lead to the discovery of new possibilities for living; it can destroy old ghosts and replace them with more useful and pleasant companions; it can provide a route to reunion with one's fellows. Then the truly amazing and awe-inspiring aspects of Man can emerge—his capacity to think, love, remember, plan, believe. In short, he will have capacity for the open mind, the open arms, and the open heart of rational faith, which we cherish.

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**C**HRISTIAN thought has much to learn from modern psychiatry in assessing the human situation. It must not be deviated from this task by polemical attitudes toward either Freudianism or neo-Freudianism. We must strive in all humility to enrich the basic insights about human nature, as we have it in Biblical faith, by whatever light may be thrown upon the human situation by any of the disciplines of modern culture. We cannot scorn insights in which truth has been distilled from the half truths of both Freudianism and neo-Freudianism, particularly when that truth corrects the half truths of both Christian pessimism and Christian optimism.—REINHOLD NIEBUHR, "The Christian Moral Witness and Some Disciplines of Modern Culture," in *Making the Ministry Relevant*, Charles Scribner's Sons