

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #9
HOW TO DISPEL LIFE'S SHADOW

Driving into the city this morning on a Parkway that was shrouded by a dense fog, I became aware of the problems that so often beset us in life that have a shadowy, elusive appearance. It seems we can't quite see where we are going; we can't quite know what our trouble is, and as a result we feel nervous, gloomy and discouraged.

I recall an old railroad engineer talking about running his train before the invention of the electric light. It was not the work that was the great challenge, but the shadows drifting back and forth across the tracks in the gloom of the night that completely exhausted him. The dim lights on his engine were almost useless in dispelling the shadows, and as his train sped on through open fields and wooded acres, the engineer was held in constant suspense holding the throttle in fear that there would be something lying across the rails. At the end of the run he would be mentally and physically exhausted.

Certainly shadows in many ways can get us down. They can steal our joys, sap our strength, leave us totally exhausted, and certainly add nothing to our accomplishments. One of the worse shadows that darken our lives, and the one that takes all forms and shapes and sizes, is worry. It's an old saying that worry kills more people than work. The feverish pace of modern living frequently tears down our lives faster than we can build them up. For some of us our entire lives are like moonlight rides in which shadows in all shapes and sizes fall across our path. When we come up to them, they are usually not there, but oh how they fray our nerves as we peer at them from a distance. So much of what we call trouble, whether we have it or fear that we will have it, is nothing more than shadow when we see it close.

The average person will not have a great deal of trouble in his world unless he brings it upon himself. Most of it will be shadow manufactured in his own imagination. How about you? You may not have given it much thought, but if you have any troubles, any serious problems, now's the time to stop and give yourself a careful once over inspection. No doubt you come from a good enough family and are well educated enough to do several things. You have as many opportunities as the average person, and yet it may be that you are bogged down, floundering around, stripped of hope, crushed by what are really no more than shadows in your life. Does it seem that you can see very little good around you? Do you feel that everything and everybody around you are against you? Make an effort to move on, try to do something for yourself in obtaining a brighter, more cheerful outlook, and you may be surprised how fast the shadows will disappear when you lift your consciousness, and you expand your mental horizons. There are so many things that appear crushing to us when actually they are little more than dark shadows.

Bankcroft, the historian, was still going strong at the age of ninety, and the secret of his health, strength, and mental alertness was he never surrendered to gloom and shadows. He said he never permitted himself to lose his temper, to expect trouble, or to become bogged down, discouraged or disappointed. He worked each day doing his best, and he just left the rest to God. Shadows never stood in his way. He gave them no bearing whatever. Most of us at some time have been confronted with unpleasant experiences, but by meeting them bravely and overcoming them, we can make them into stepping stones into higher positions, to more usefulness, to more important unselfishness and honor. They will not hurt us unless we scare at them and run away.

The grudge is another shadow that holds us down, keeps us back if persisted in. It can eventually turn what might have been victory into defeat. Someone refers to a grudge as being like a cobra. It is true that the bite of a cobra might prove to be almost instantly fatal and that a grudge doesn't work quite so fast, but when a grudge is carried long enough its poison saps a person's whole strength and makes

him unfit for whatever effort is necessary. Many a person has pulled himself down by being jealous of a person who is pulling himself up.

Now let's take notice of the one big cause of shadows in our experience. When we face the sun, our shadows fall behind us; when we turn around, the shadows fall in front of us. In other words, we see the shadows only when we turn away from the light. Whether we see the sunlight or the shadows does not depend at all on where we live, but on the direction in which we look. A temple was unearthed a few years ago from the ruin of Babylon, and one of the walls was carved with an image of a king forging chains from his crown. Nearby was the image of a slave forging a crown from his chains. Between the two images was engraved the words, "Your life is just what you make of it." Isn't that beautiful? What about you? Are you creating chains or crowns? Are you creating worry and fear out of your affluence? Or are you getting a sense of abundance in the midst of your seeming lack?

All of us with a little effort and a great deal of constructive thinking can make our lives happier, healthier, and more successful. The humblest person can be a king; he can be happy if he will. A king can be totally poor, and it depends solely on whether the person is turned toward the light or away from it, whether he makes his shadows fall in front of him or behind him. In deep forests the shadow is heavy because the sun is shut out; similarly, the so-called troubles of life seem heavy because we shut God out. But when God completely occupies a life, then the earth-born shadows just disappear entirely, and we might add that all shadows are earth-born. So happiness becomes a state of mind that can be cultivated and increased. In the world about us there is more sun than clouds; there are more bright days than rainy days.

So why let shadows which will soon disappear crush us? When the shadows oppress us, we need only turn toward the light, turn to God. With God in the midst of our needs we can always win. So we shall find as those who have gone before us have certainly found and discovered that our expected troubles will be sidetracked somewhere along the way. There will be a way revealed to cross the Red Sea; somehow over every disappointment there is a way, and we will find it if we believe it, act as if we believe it, and look for it.

Take a good look at yourself and your affairs today. What is it you need? What is the great desire of your heart? Is it your strength or your wisdom or your understanding? Do you feel the need for greater faith, an increased flow of love, patience, friendliness? Do you need more success, a better way to succeed, a fuller measure of prosperity? Maybe there are payments to be met, financial obligations that worry you. Remember, most of that which troubles us is mostly shadow; remember also that we see the shadows only when we turn away from the light. It all depends on the direction that we are looking.

Certainly most of us have had some unpleasant experiences, and perhaps will we yet have more, but by meeting these times bravely and overcoming them, we can make them into stepping stones for even better things, happier experiences. Remember that when we face the sun, our shadows fall behind us, but when we turn around our shadows fall in front of us. So we want to keep our faces towards the sun, to keep thinking about God, as Emmet Fox would say, instead of thinking about the problem; keep turning to the source of creativity, the source of happiness; keep in the flow of love, understanding, and forgiveness, of courage, of joy, of all that is good and true. Remember that the humblest person can be king and happy if he will, and that a king can be wretched and poor. Our lives are just what we make of them.