

Eric Butterworth Speaks

Essay #20
A KEY TO SELF-MASTERY

"What is life all about?" Have you ever asked that question? "Why am I here? And why am I like I am? What is the meaning of life's challenging experiences?" The simplest thing in the world would be for me to give you an answer to such questions. However, an answer that is that simply given would be an over-simplification of life. Someone has said that man is not in the world to set things right, but to see them rightly.

The experiences of life, particularly the unhappy and discouraging experiences, may be compared to a mountain stream tumbling down a mountainside. The stream starts down the mountain as a small brook, singing as it goes. Then suddenly it smacks against a great bolder jutting out that seems to impede its progress, but it bounces back and merrily takes up its journey into unknown experiences, rushing onward, onward, toward its destiny, carrying joy and leaving sustenance in its wake.

Man starts his earthly journey; he encounters many hard stones of experience along his path; he comes up smack against boulders of frustration, heartaches, handicaps, and all the many tests that seem to hinder the progress of his journey into self-realization, and self-fulfillment. Does he chuckle and try to see the bright side of his frustration? Does he bounce back from his disappointments and heartaches, still able to sing, to pick up his load and go on? Do you? Some do, and you can too--not by setting things right, but by seeing them rightly.

In Ireland, there was Arthur MacMorrough Kavanagh who was born without hands and feet. He could not play with the other children, but they all loved him because of his ready smile. His smile never failed even though he suffered constantly as the result of an operation performed in an endeavor to make his arms and legs more useful. When he learned that this operation was unsuccessful and saw the great anguish in the eyes of his parents and family, it was he who tried to cheer them up. Everyone expected that he would be a helpless cripple for the rest of his life. But Arthur was determined to do everything that his brothers and sisters could do. His parents had a steel hook made and attached to one of his arms. With this he learned to do almost anything a normal child could do with his hands. He even rode a pony by being strapped to a special saddle to keep him from falling off. He drove the family carriage with its four horses.

However, there were times when things seemed almost too hard to bear. Then, he would take a long ride on his pony and pray to be given strength and courage. At these times he would write in his diary, yes, he learned to hold a pencil, "Though dark my path and sad my way, let me be still and murmur not." A pretty wonderful attitude for a young fellow, don't you think? A good attitude for anyone. He resolved to make something of his life, and set himself a course of study to that end. There were some things he couldn't do much about. He couldn't set right...but he could see them rightly. He could think positively. He could be the "master of his fate, the captain of his soul," as the poet William Henley says. Eventually, he married a lovely girl and became the father of seven children. The world remembers Arthur Kavanagh, not at all as a cripple who got along, but as a brilliant success in his own right. He was a famous member of the Irish Parliament, where he played a historic part in that governing body of his country. His success was due to his discipline of mind, his persistence in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers, his sunny disposition, and his ability to chuckle over his handicaps.

You may be possessed with the feeling that your case is different, that life has dealt you a cruel blow, that your handicap has limited your whole experience. All right, let's grant, for the sake of agreement, that you may not be able to change some things. But you can change your attitude. You can be joyous and confident in spite of your condition. And in meeting it at the highest level of thought, you will succeed in spite of it, or perhaps even because of it. Johnny Weissmuller, the husky Tarzan of the movies, was once a victim of paralysis. He

started to swim as a therapy to develop his muscles, and how he developed them! Samuel Untermyer, the noted attorney, who was unable to sleep at night because of asthma, prepared his briefs during these hours, and what intelligent and clear-minded briefs they were!

When you are sick of being sick, tired of being tired and defeated and discouraged, you can rise up and declare with faith and fervor, "I am master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul." And to the degree that you really believe it, and continuously work to provide the thought aggregates through which it may manifest, it will work for you. Cheerfulness in the face of disappointment, frustration, even of searing tragedy, where there is seeming hopelessness, is the stuff from which saints are molded. A smiling countenance can open many a door that gloom or a frown shuts fast.

Sunshine comes naturally into our days--it is we who seek the shadows, but if we could but know it, our handicaps and frustrations can be a blessing. Perhaps it may be that we are stopped in our mad rush toward that which we think we desire in life. Such a stop could be our opportunity to bring out the real, the hidden depths of our ability, an ability that may be genius. Sometimes, it seems that we must suffer before we can really know ourselves, and thus rightly discern that which is our right place in life. It is not that God wills the suffering--that I will never accept. But it is that the suffering is a refining process by which we can come to the place where we can accept God's will for us, which is always and altogether good! Sometimes a physical handicap can give a person the opportunity and the time to prepare for the expression of the innate possibilities of his life. Thus, he succeeds, not in spite of his handicap, but because of it. And if he persists, then one day he will find himself singing because of it, like the little mountain brook, as he moves ahead, for he too will have found his way to his particular destiny. Had the little brook not eagerly persisted in its path down the mountainside, despite that which impeded its way, the beauty of a crystal-clear lake, or even the great expanse of the mighty ocean with its white-crested waves, would not be.

Perhaps the most outstanding living example of this concept is found in the life of a man I want to tell you about. For many years this man has lain prone in a wheel chair, unable to move a muscle, a sufferer from arthritis. In his home he conducts a typing service and sells greeting cards. When you enter his little office, you are met with a cheery "Hello," and as big a smile as he can physically manage. He is interested in the activities of his church and has had much of the church's typing done by his assistant. Like the little brook he chuckles as he progresses along his painful way. Yes, he literally chuckles as he writes humor sketches for various magazines. His cheery self should make many of us ashamed of our petty complaints.

Regardless of the problems we may feel that we face, let us climb out of our darkness and despair. Let us remember the little brook singing and chuckling as it meets and conquers each barrier along its journey to the sea of its destiny. Like the little brook, we can leave joy and sustenance of mind and spirit as we travel along. We can be bigger than our problems, stronger than our fears, happier than our sadness, and wiser than our years. We can be, if we accept the ideal that the only real handicap that man can have is in his morbid, limited, negative state of mind. Remember, the great goal of your life and mine is not to set things right, but to see them rightly. See your problems, your difficulties, even your handicaps as opportunities. They are the challenges that can impel you to dig a little deeper into the potential of your being. One man referred to his particular crisis in life with the classic statement, "All I had was sheer necessity." He went on because he had to. And that necessity led him to make a new life, which was a life much more successful and personally fulfilling than the one he had previously known.

Perhaps all you have is a lot of sheer necessity. All right, that is a good starting point. Resolve that you will go forward joyfully, confidently. Affirm, "I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul."