

ON BEING CHEERFUL

By JOSEPH McSORLEY
of the Paulist Fathers

Be of good heart.—St. *Matthew*.

True piety is cheerful as the *day*—*Cowper*.

Be Cheerful, Sir.—*Shakespeare*.

Greet the unseen with a cheer.—*Browning*.

WE live in a world of defects and limitations, where no character is without a flaw, no life without its tempering of pain.

Only on the farther side of the river of death can unalloyed bliss be hoped for. On this side, all is relative and imperfect; the bitter is mixed with the sweet, thorns hide amid the fairest roses, and, sooner or later, the coarse, seamy side of men and things will begin to chafe the most fortunate and the most patient of us.

“Medio de fonte leporum

Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat.”

To be cheerful means to make little of these hardships we encounter. The good-natured man looks on the brighter, sunnier side of his surroundings, accentuates the pleasant and beautiful features of life, and smooths over the rough places in the road. In general he is more attracted by the smiling aspect of things than by their frown. Incurable optimist that he is, he fixes his attention on the circumstances which give most joy and hope to the heart. In memory, as in speech, he keeps dwelling on the inspiring, encouraging elements of every situation, and on the amiable characteristics of every acquaintance. In a life, his presence is a ray of sunshine; as a friend, he is a man of men.

Few people need to be told that cheeriness is a precious treasure; that the power to overlook or to smile away some of the distressing details of existence is a necessary condition of happiness; that in each life much must be ignored, and in each personality much forgiven and forgotten.

In every situation there are attendant circumstances which, if dwelt upon, are sure to impair harmony. Unless a mind is able to disengage itself from the consideration of these, it rapidly becomes morbid and unhealthy—like the mind of Swift, who is said to have developed so aggravated a cynicism that he could see nothing fair without at once adverting to its hidden elements of ugliness, could look on no beautiful face without imagining the loathsome appearance it would present under the microscope.

The man who is thus hypercritical and faultfinding soon becomes an object of dread to his acquaintances. No matter how witty his mind and interesting his conversation, we quickly learn to fear him; we run away from the sound of his approaching footstep. We prefer the less sparkling but more comfortable speech of the simple good—the people from whom we part with a renewed sense of trust in the innate worthiness and kindness of human nature, the people who inspire conversation that leaves a good taste in the mouth. One type of this sort is described in the following quotation.

A Royal Memory

“I ALLUS did say,’ remarked Aunt Mary, ‘that Henrietta Wood had a real royal memory.’

Aunt Mary’s niece looked up curiously. ‘A royal memory?’ she repeated. ‘I don’t believe I understand. Doesn’t she ever forget anything?’

‘That’s jest the point,’ Aunt Mary responded promptly. ‘I should say she forgets full as much as she remembers—mebbe more. That’s part of what I call a royal memory. There’s folks that don’t forget anything; the way you acted the day everything went wrong, hasty judgments that you repented as soon as they were made, words that popped out before you knew your mouth was open—there’s folks that don’t ever forget one of them, nor let you, either. I have one of those memories in mind this minute; I allus feel like flyin’ out the back door when I see it comin’ in the gate.

‘But they ain’t the only folks in the world; there’s others that never seem to remember anything except the good in

people. I'll warrant there isn't a man or a woman in Lockport so shiftless or good-for-nothing that Henrietta wouldn't remember some good about them. People allus freshen up when she comes round. I ain't ever heard it explained, but I have my theory. I believe it's because she allus thinks folks up instead of down, and they know it an' sort of straighten up inside to meet it—that's my theory.'

The girl did not answer, but in her heart echoed those wonderful words:

'Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.'

What fitter name for such a gift than "a royal memory"? They who possess this characteristic are the best loved people in the world. And they are the most loving people in the world, too; for we can neither attract, nor can we be attracted by, those whose faults and weaknesses we set down with all precision. Only when we see through rose-coloured glass can we truly be said to love; and, if we never view a soul through this medium of fond illusion, the chances are that we do not belong to the class of those who are privileged to love.

Vain is the intention to be fond and sympathetic, unless we can allow for frailties in a friend; hopeless is the attempt to develop perfection, if we faithfully record each fault of a pupil; and futile is the effort to revive a waning affection, except we are ready to forego our fancied right to reproach. A human heart cannot be won by harshness or scolded into tenderness, any more than the hard buffeted traveler, in the fabled contest between the wind and the sun, could be forced to unwrap his cloak as the blast grew fiercer. The genial warmth of fault-forgetting love will always triumph over the drastic criticism of fastidiousness hard to please. Only in the presence of the loving look and the excusing word, do we consent to stand revealed in all our weakness, to humble ourselves, and to enter upon the way of amendment.

He who desires to teach, or who hopes to be loved, must indeed have something of "a royal memory." He will find that people will gladly pardon the oversights he is guilty of when there is question of a neighbor's faults; and that his success will in the long run be none the less for his having forgotten many of the weaknesses of men.

The Personal Equation

THE foregoing implies that the difference between the cynic and the optimist is in the main a difference of mental dispositions. And so, of course, it is. A man's sourness is to be traced less often to his actual experiences than to the view he takes of life. Other women, in the position of "Mrs. Wiggs," would have been incorrigible grumblers, and their lives immeasurably less happy than hers. Our general view of the world and its worth, our estimate of the relative proportion of good and bad in men, our final sense of content or dissatisfaction with life, depends chiefly on our temperament, and on the habitual policy we voluntarily adopt.

It is well for us to understand this, and to appreciate the large measure of subjectivity in our happiness and unhappiness. After all, pleasure and pain are necessarily relative and personal; in great measure, a thing is distressing or not, accordingly as we do or do not give in to the inclination so to regard it. What hurts the civilized man is smiled at by the savage; what depresses the child of fortune, raised in the lap of luxury, has little influence on the self-made toiler, for whom the air has never been tempered, from whom no protecting shield has warded off rude criticism, and to whom, therefore, there has come a certain degree of indifference to the ordinary blows of adversity.

Again, a man's impressions depend much on the state in which he finds himself at the moment of a given experience—on whether he is at ease, or in a condition of excitement and nervous tension. These elements all contribute to the forming of his judgment about the general pleasantness or unpleasantness of a situation or a life; and beside all these, each man has still his purely personal fund of underlying emotional consciousness tending to flow over to this side or that, at the first impulse, and to intensify his sense of content or dissatisfaction.

The temperament extends a sort of standing invitation to moods of a certain type; and once the mood has come, it tends to diffuse itself, and to re-enforce the strength of the sentiment which invited it. Thus we see how at bottom much of our misery may be, or rather actually is, an effect of organic sensitiveness, a matter of nervous and muscular tissue.

Hypersensitiveness to pain is thus the source first of the disproportionate attention, then of the unduly strong impression, then of the tenacious imagination, and finally of the abiding general sense of misery and unhappiness, as well as of the accompanying amazement that our neighbor, who has been through similar experiences, is not as

wretched as ourselves.

Unless we exert ourselves to stem the tide, and drive our wills strongly in the direction opposite to our natural bent, most of us will find that we are living at the mercy of a set of tendencies which drift us down toward an unhappy and sour view of life. We incline to lay overdue stress on unpleasant events, to paint in heavily the details which tell against a bright and cheerful general effect.

Conspicuous Evil

FIRST of all, it seems plain that what is evil and threatening attracts attention more imperatively and irresistibly than what is good. Possibly this is a wise provision of Nature to secure the preservation of life since it is more important for man to overlook nothing harmful than to perceive all the good; since in the one case a single instance of insensitiveness would spell destruction, whereas in the other there might remain many opportunities of retrieving the error. Whether or not we thus class this tendency among Nature's protective illusions, certain it is that men's thoughts swing more readily toward the present evil than toward the present good. The breaking down of a single preacher is likely to impinge more sharply on the mind than many successful sermons; the one hearer who makes his exit draws more attention than the contented thousand who remain; the long series of correct constructions attracts less notice than the first grammatical slip. This is the lesson we learn by observing others.

When we introspect, the story is no different. Our own hurts and dangers, like the affronts and the disappointments we experience, penetrate deeper into our consciousness, and dwell more indelibly in our memories than the strokes of good fortune and the little courtesies which, in point of fact, are neither less frequent nor less significant. It is the old tale told again— evil springs from any defect whatsoever, *malum ex quocumque defectu*; but good demands a situation without even a single flaw, *bonum ex integra causa*.

Moreover, those same things that bespeak our attention thus successfully, also loom largest in consciousness when once they have succeeded in entering. On this account, they get a disproportionate value; they keep cropping out in conversation; and so they repeat and intensify the original impression. It is hard for us to rid our minds of them; meanwhile the obscure little good is hiding away out of sight and out of mind as well.

Faultfinding

TAKE for instance the impulse to turn thoughts and conversation into the channels of criticism and faultfinding. Is it not much more dominant in the average man than the interests of accuracy would dictate? Look around and observe how what is noticed first, what is talked about most, what sticks fastest in the mind, is ordinarily something in the nature of an evil, a blunder, or a fault. Note the newspapers, which are at once the stimuli and the reflectors of the public mind. Does not a casual glance at the headlines of the least sensational of them at once flash a vision of crimes and disasters before the imagination? Here and there we may, indeed, discover the record of an act of heroism, or the account of a life

“Serene and resolute and still; and calm and self-possessed.”

But who will pretend that, on the whole, the two elements—the good and the bad—are presented in anything like a fair proportion? How many a hitherto happy family is unheard of until the “interesting” moment when it ceases to be so because one of its members has gone astray?

To devote equal attention to the good and the bad would, of course, not be journalism; it would not be giving men the news they want. So the press must serve up for our daily contemplation all the startling and ugly details of current history which it can ferret out; and, for the most part, happy people are let alone. The very fact that the public appetite demands pabulum of this sort proves that, antecedently, men's minds have a predominant set toward the less cheerful aspect of things; and, undoubtedly, the nourishment they daily absorb helps along the prevalence of an untrue, because ill-proportioned, view of life.

Note again how our ordinary daily behavior confirms the judgment given above. The absence of some trifling comfort to which a man has been accustomed, excites a feeling of distress more noticeable than the joy springing from

his luxuries; his ills and his aches always speak louder to him than his escapes and his lucky windfalls. And as the evils impress him more forcibly, so, too, they dwell longer in his memory and echo louder in his speech. All in all, then, it seems fair enough to say that the average man is accustomed to lay far less emphasis on his pleasant than on his unpleasant experiences.

Depressing Thoughts

THUS far we have been concerned mainly with calling attention to the fact that truer valuations would result from an effort to control, and in some measure to repress, the prevalence of impressions which naturally swarm into consciousness. There is this further consideration to be made, that the interests of action still more imperatively demand some such interference with the spontaneous drift of things. And—to waive for the moment the issue whether or not such interference brings us nearer the truth—this much is undeniably certain, that if we allow our minds to be a free pasture for ill-omens and for depressing thoughts, we shall be comparatively inactive and lifeless; the edge will be taken off our interest in life; pessimism will wax strong in us.

An authoritative observer points out that of all the emotions fear is notoriously the most apt to induce trembling and helplessness, to numb activity, and to block the exercise of reason. The usual and obvious signs of fear imply organic derangement: and disturbing thoughts are the beginning of these signs. The amount of pleasure nullified by a sudden fright, or the great cost of restoring the system afterwards to a condition of equanimity, might be used as a standard for measuring these deleterious influences.

In everyday affairs people practically recognize this deadening influence of cheerlessness; and, in consequence, they carefully endeavor to ward off ideas which suggest the possibility of failure. They assume as a matter of course that discouragement implies depression, and that depression involves a diminution of power and a lessening of the chances of success.

Conversely, they take it for granted that confidence is an element of victory. The athlete leads up gradually to his supreme test of strength by undertaking first the lesser tests where success is certain. In this way the physiological, as well as the psychological, predispositions for a record-breaking feat are secured; and if a candidate has failed in his preparatory trial, the “coach” takes care that the real test is not attempted until confidence has been restored by a success of some sort. As for public speakers and singers, it is proverbial how carefully their attention must be diverted from every depressing or ominous incident, when they are called upon for their best work.

The reason for all this is obvious enough. Following the general law of mental representations, unpleasant images awaken corresponding emotional disturbances of a devitalizing kind; the painful idea suggests and induces depression. Like every emotion, this depression in turn reacts upon and re-enforces the kindred mental images; it attracts into the field of consciousness the unpleasant thoughts which harmonize with gloomy moods; it repels whatever is hopeful or bright. Thus the general set of the mind is toward the prospect of failure, and disaster becomes a foregone conclusion.

Once the mind has been thus depressed—and especially if in the first instance failure or misfortune has actually followed—the mind henceforth finds it harder, or perhaps actually impossible, to expel gloomy ideas and to calm disturbance. There ensues an almost superstitious subjection to the sovereignty of the evil and hateful elements of life. It seems useless to strive; and so one yields to the stress of circumstances, and becomes their veritable slave. Perhaps the invalid who is thus progressively losing strength may never attempt to walk again, unless there happens along a physician who will actually drive and bully him into making an effort to exercise muscles so atrophied from disuse that groans accompany their every movement.

Uplifting Cheerfulness

ST. PAUL tells us that “We are saved by hope”; and the spiritual teachers of the Catholic Church have always laid the strongest emphasis on the fact that cheerfulness makes for godliness. St. Philip Neri and St. Francis de Sales, for instance, talk of the need of being merry and glad and cheerful, as if it were an undeniable and indispensable requisite of true Christian perfection that a man should struggle against thoughts which tend to make him fearful and depressed.

The Church, it is true, preaches the virtue of fear, too; but every one acquainted with the type of sanctity she holds up for the imitation of her children, and with the standards by which her religious orders determine vocations, and

with the principles her ministers make use of in the guidance of souls, and with St. Ignatius' famous rules for the discernment of spirits, will be ready to affirm that Catholicism is as far away from gloomy ideals as it is possible to be without falling into exaggeration at the other extreme. The highest motive of all therefore, the pursuit of the supreme ideal of spiritual perfection, impels us to the cultivation of a cheerful temper.

The common tendency to dwell upon depressing things is fortunately not dominant in every soul.

We can find models for our imitation in those persons who rise above the reach of life's ills, little and great, and are always either absorbing or giving out fragrance and music and sunshine. They know the secret which transforms evil into good, and pain into joy; and on the great mass of their experiences they exercise an influence which makes discomforting things amusing and commonplace things delightful. Possessing as it were a great surplus store of cheerfulness, they can, by a sort of divine alchemy, plate dross with gold, and transform into a pleasure what to another would have been a matter of indifference, if not of suffering.

To bear thankless burdens and undertake odious responsibilities and suffer unjust reproaches, to serve the neglected and the impatient, to act as oil on the troubled waters, to be as a buffer when collisions are impending, and a breakwater when the waves run high—these are not trials, but privileges to some people; or, at least, they are duties easily and gladly performed. An inconvenience or a slight is to them, for the most part, but an occasion for the exercise of their ingenuity in discovering excuses and explanations. Apart from the fine opportunities of spiritual growth and happiness which they thus enjoy, they have this other advantage, that their reaction against the common inclination to emphasize the ills of existence, helps them to a more objective view than the average man ever attains.

Control of Feeling

It is idle, of course, to spend time or energy in wishing that we had been gifted as these souls have been, but we may hope to profit somewhat by the consideration of their behavior. They show what a determined will can do toward securing a happy disposition and perennial peace of mind. It is true that most cheerful men have been born so; but equally true is it that many have achieved cheerfulness. Not until a man realizes this, does he possess a proper sense of the opportunities which are constantly gliding by.

But when the awakening comes, then, at least, it is to be hoped, he will be inspired with the firm determination to be more cheerful, more lovable, and more happy in the future than in the past; for surely no one should permit his cheerfulness to be cut down without making a determined resistance.

There is one point, more than all others, which needs to be impressed on those who, as yet, possess no power to smile away misfortune; namely, their own ability to acquire this power and, by its exercise, to brighten very considerably their own and their neighbors' lives.

It is not possible, at the present moment, to go into the whole question of the volitional development of character; neither is it necessary. Everyone recognizes that persistent effort can do much to affect the habitual temper of the mind. A system voluntarily toned up is, within certain limits, capable of throwing off the depressing influences to which, in a less buoyant mood, it would have offered an inviting entrance. To some extent, a resolute will can do by effort what a cheerful disposition effects spontaneously.

Obviously this is the case, at least with our choice of topics of speech; we can avoid the unpleasant, the critical, the discouraging. It may require a little self-restraint, at first; but we can succeed if we are willing to pay the really trifling price.

Then, too, we may do something by means of inhibiting the outward expression of unpleasant emotions; for it is recognized generally by physiologists that an emotion is raised or lowered in intensity, accordingly as the physical manifestation of that emotion is forbidden or allowed. It is in this way that we often restrain our emotions of anger, jealousy, vanity, and fear. The menace of pain goads the will to the conquest of an untimely exhibition of temper, by summoning up a violent emotional wave calculated to counteract the first impulse; and, in some degree, the same office may be performed by a determined suppressive volition.

The voluntary control of emotion by restraint of this last sort is, in a way, more direct than the control we exercise over emotion by means of our thoughts; yet, as it supposes the emotion to have already been aroused, it necessarily implies that the task is going to be more difficult; for to quell a mutiny is harder than to prevent its outbreak.

Control of Thoughts

PREVENTIVE steps can be taken by the exercise of control over the contents of the mind. We can modify, alter, quicken, or retard the current of images and ideas continually flowing through consciousness, and thus we can foster or repress the thoughts apt to beget cheerfulness. In this regard, the power of the will over ideas is three-fold.

First, we can interfere with the natural association of thoughts, and by sheer force shunt the mind off on another line than that which it was following; that is to say, we can deliberately swim upstream, we can sail outside the channel, we can pursue the less trodden path.

Again, we can voluntarily elect to form new associations of images, by linking ideas in such a way as shall serve the interests of cheerfulness, forming and reforming the connection, until a groove has been made, a habit set up, and a new current created which will make for our elation as the old made for our depression.

And finally, even though unpleasant images be forced into consciousness, we still can say something as to the amount of attention which shall be given them, and we can take away all voluntary attention from it, by concentrating it, with all our power, upon some other object. Let us at least do all we can to enlarge our dominion in the land of hope and cheerfulness and to be numbered among those delightful and valuable people who all their lives long have

“Never doubted clouds would break,
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, Sleep to wake.”

It would be idle, of course, to pretend that ability of this sort is ready to every man's hand, or that it can be developed in a moment. The important point is that it *can* be developed, if we are earnestly resolved to acquire it. A strong determination and persistent effort will soon give us some power in such matters, no matter how rudimentary our faculty may at first appear to be.

Meditation An Aid

AS TO the means we should employ to carry out a course of self-development in cheerfulness, the question may be looked at from many points of view; we can get suggestions from the hygienic, the pedagogic, the ethical, and the religious fields. When all counsellors have had their say, it seems to remain clear that each of them attributes a good deal of efficacy to the exercise which the Catholic Church has for ages recommended and practiced under the name of “meditation,” namely, the methodical presentation to the imagination and intellect of pictures and ideas calculated to awaken beneficent emotions, healthy affections, and good resolutions.

Among the curious sights presented to us nowadays, is the vindication of many a good old Catholic practice by means of the new principles which, to so great an extent, have been supposed to discredit the Church. Meditation is one such practice; and we find it recommended now by the representatives of modern psychology as a fine instrument for mental formation and character-building.

A specific use it may be put to, is the development of a spirit of cheerfulness; and when this is undertaken, we shall have at least one good result, that men will be using their energy in the right direction and employing an efficacious means. Even though it be but the human side of the process which appeals to them, they will surely be in some way the better for it, and, therefore, necessarily nearer, to the kingdom of God.
