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The Freedom of Life

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THE FREEDOM OF LIFE

BY

ANNIE PAYSON CALL

*Author of "Power Through Repose,"
"As a Matter of Course," etc.*

FREEDOM

*LORD GOD of Israel, –
Where Thou art we are free!
Call out Thy people, Lord, we pray,
From Egypt unto Thee.
Open our eyes that we may see
Our bondage in the past, –
Oh, help us, Lord, to keep Thy law,
And make us free at last!*

*Lord God of Israel, –
Where Thou art we are free!
Freed from the rule of alien minds,
We turn our hearts to Thee.
The alien hand weighs heavily,
And heavy is our sin, –
Thy children cry to Thee, O Lord, –
Their God, – to take them in.*

*Lord God of Israel, –
Where Thou 'art we are free
Cast down our idols from on high,
That we may worship Thee.
In freedom we will live Thy Love
Out from our inmost parts;
Upon our foreheads bind Thy Law, –
Engrave it on our hearts!*

Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

INTERIOR freedom rests upon the principle of non-resistance to all the things which seem evil or painful to our natural love of self. But non-resistance alone can accomplish nothing good unless, behind it, there is a strong love for righteousness and truth. By refusing to resist the ill will of others, or the stress of circumstances, for the sake of greater usefulness and a clearer point of view, we deepen our conviction of righteousness as the fundamental law of life, and broaden our horizon so as to appreciate varying and opposite points of view. The only non-resistance that brings this power is the kind which yields mere personal and selfish considerations for the sake of principles. Selfish and weak yielding must always do harm. Unselfish yielding, on the other hand, strengthens the will and increases strength of purpose as the petty obstacles of mere self-love are removed. Concentration alone cannot long remain wholesome, for it needs the light of growing self-knowledge to prevent its becoming self-centred. Yielding alone is of no avail, for in itself it has no constructive power. But if we try to look at ourselves as we really are, we shall find great strength in yielding where only our small and private interests are concerned, and concentrating upon living the broad principles of righteousness which must directly or indirectly affect all those with whom we come into contact.

I

The Freedom of Life

I AM so tired I must give up work," said a young woman with a very strained and tearful face; and it seemed to her a desperate state, for she was dependent upon work for her bread and butter. If she gave up work she gave up bread and butter, and that meant starvation. When she was asked why she did not keep at work and learn to do it without getting so tired, that seemed to her absurd, and she would have laughed if laughing had been possible.

"I tell you the work has tired me so that I cannot stand it, and you ask me to go back and get rest out of it when I am ready to die of fatigue. Why don't you ask me to burn myself, on a piece of ice, or freeze myself with a red-hot poker?"

"But," the answer was, "it is not the work that tires you at all, it is the way you do it;" and, after a little soothing talk which quieted the overexcited nerves, she began to feel a dawning intelligence, which showed her that, after all, there might be life in the work which she had come to look upon as nothing but slow and painful death. She came to understand that she might do her work as if she were working very lazily, going from one thing to another with a feeling as near to entire indifference as she could cultivate, and, at the same time, do it well. She was shown by illustrations how she might walk across the room and take a book off the table as if her life depended upon it, racing and pushing over the floor, grabbing the book and clutching it until she got back to her seat, or, how she might move with exaggerated laziness take the book up loosely, and drag herself back again. This illustration represents two extremes, and one, in itself, is as bad as the other; but, when the habit has been one of unnecessary strain and effort, the lazy way, practised for a time, will not only be very restful, but will eventually lead to movement which is quick as well.

To take another example, you may write holding the pen with much more force than is needful, tightening your throat and tongue at the same time, or you may drag your pen along the paper and

relieve the tendency to tension in your throat and tongue by opening your mouth slightly and letting your jaw hang loosely. These again are two extremes, but, if the habit has been one of tension, a persistent practice of the extreme of looseness will lead to a quiet mode of writing in which ten pages can be finished with the effort it formerly took to write one.

Sometimes the habit of needless strain has taken such a strong hold that the very effort to work quietly seems so unnatural as to cause much nervous suffering. To turn the corner from a bad habit into a true and wholesome one is often very painful, but, the first pain worked through, the right habit grows more and more easy, until finally the better way carries us along and we take it involuntarily.

For the young woman who felt she had come to the end of her powers, it was work or die; therefore, when she had become rested enough to see and understand at all, she welcomed the idea that it was not her work that tired her, but the way in which she did it, and she listened eagerly to the directions that should teach her to do it with less fatigue, and, as an experiment, offered to go back and try the "lazy way" for a week. At the end of a week she reported that the "lazy way" had rested her remarkably, but she did not do her work so well. Then she had to learn that she could keep more quietly and steadily concentrated upon her work, doing it accurately and well, without in the least interfering with the "lazy way." Indeed, the better concentrated we are, the more easily and restfully we can work, for concentration does not mean straining every nerve and muscle toward our work,—it means *dropping everything that interferes*, and strained nerves and muscles constitute a very bondage of interference.

The young woman went back to her work for another week's experiment, and this time returned with a smiling face, better color, and a new and more quiet life in her eyes. She had made the "lazy way" work, and found a better power of concentration at the same time. She knew that it was only a beginning, but she felt secure now in the certain knowledge that it was not her work that had been killing her, but the way in which she had done it; and she felt confident of her power to do it restfully and, at the same time, better

than before. Moreover, in addition to practising the new way of working, she planned to get regular exercise in the open air, even if it had to come in the evening, and to eat only nourishing food. She has been at work now for several years, and, at last accounts, was still busy, with no temptation to stop because of overfatigue.

If any reader is conscious of suffering now from the strain of his work and would like to get relief, the first thing to do is to notice that it is less the work that tires him than his way of doing it, and the attitude of his mind toward it. Beginning with that conviction, there comes at first an interest in the process of dropping strain and then a new interest in the work itself, and a healthy concentration in doing the merest drudgery as well as it can be done, makes the drudgery attractive and relieves one from the oppressive fatigue of uninteresting monotony.

If you have to move your whole body in your daily work, the first care should be to move the feet and legs heavily. Feel as if each foot weighed a ton, and each hand also; and while you work take long, quiet breaths,—breaths such as you see a man taking when he is very quietly and soundly sleeping.

If the work is sedentary, it is a help before starting in the morning to drop your head forward very loosely, slowly and heavily, and raise it very slowly, then take a long, quiet breath. Repeat this several times until you begin to feel a sense of weight in your head. If there is not time in the morning, do it at night and recall the feeling while you are dressing or while you are going to work, and then, during your work, stop occasionally just to feel your head heavy and then go on. Very soon you become sensitive to the tension in the back of your neck and drop it without stopping work at all.

Long, quiet breaths while you work are always helpful. If you are working in bad air, and cannot change the air, it is better to try to have the breaths only quiet and gentle, and take long, full breaths whenever you are out-of-doors and before going to sleep at night.

Of course, a strained way of working is only one cause of nervous fatigue; there are others, and even more important ones, that need to be understood in order that we may be freed from the bondage of nervous strain which keeps so many of us from our best use and happiness.

Many people are in bondage because of doing wrong, but many more because of doing right in the wrong way. Real freedom is only found through obedience to law, and when, because of daily strain, a man finds himself getting overtired and irritable, the temptation is to think it easier to go on working in the wrong way than to make the effort to learn how to work in the right way. At first the effort seems only to result in extra strain, but, if persisted in quietly, it soon becomes apparent that it is leading to less and less strain, and finally to restful work.

There are laws for rest, laws for work, and laws for play, which, if we find and follow them, lead us to quiet, useful lines of life, which would be impossible without them. They are the laws of our own being, and should carry us as naturally as the instincts of the animals carry them, and so enable us to do right in the right way, and make us so sure of the manner in which we do our work that we can give all our attention to the work itself; and when we have the right habit of working, the work itself must necessarily gain, because we can put the best of ourselves into it.

It is helpful to think of the instincts of the beasts, how true and orderly they are, on their own plane, and how they are only perverted when the animals have come under the influence of man. Imagine Baloo, the bear in Mr. Kipling's "Jungle Book," being asked how he managed to keep so well and rested. He would look a little surprised and say: "Why, I follow the laws of my being. How could I do differently?" Now that is just the difference between man and beast. Man can do differently. And man has done differently now for so many generations that not one in ten thousand really recognizes what the laws of his being are, except in ways so gross that it seems as if we had sunken to the necessity of being guided by a crowbar, instead of steadily following the delicate instinct which is ours by right, and so voluntarily accepting the guidance of the Power who made us, which is the only possible way to freedom.

Of course the laws of a man's being are infinitely above the laws of a beast's. The laws of a man's being are spiritual, and the animal in man is meant to be the servant of his soul. Man's true guiding instincts are in his soul,—he can obey them or not, as he chooses; but the beast's instincts are in his body, and he has no choice but to

obey. Man can, so to speak, get up and look down on himself. He can be his own father and his own mother. From his true instinct he can say to himself, "you must do this" or "You must not do that." He can see and understand his tendency to disobedience, and *he can force himself to obey*. Man can see the good and wholesome animal instincts in himself that lead to lasting health and strength, and he can make them all the good servants of his soul. He can see the tendency to overindulgence, and how it leads to disease and to evil, and he can refuse to permit that wrong tendency to rule him.

Every man has his own power of distinguishing between right and wrong, and his own power of choosing which way he shall follow. He is left free to choose God's way or to choose his own. Through past and present perversions, of natural habit he has lost the delicate power of distinguishing the normal from the abnormal, and needs to be educated back to it. The benefit of this education is an intelligent consciousness of the laws of life, which not only adds to his own strength of mind and body, but increases immeasurably his power of use to others. Many customs of to-day fix and perpetuate abnormal habits to such an extent that, combined with our own selfish inheritances and personal perversions, they dim the light of our minds so that many of us are working all the time in a fog, more or less dense, of ignorance and bondage. When a man chooses the right and refuses the wrong, in so far as he sees it, he becomes wise from within and from without, his power for distinguishing gradually improves, the fog lifts, and he finds within himself a sure and delicate instinct which was formerly atrophied for want of use.

The first thing to understand without the shadow of a doubt, is that, man is not in freedom when he is following his own selfish instincts. He is only in the appearance of freedom, and the appearance of freedom, without the reality, leads invariably to the worst bondage. A man who loves drink feels that he is free if he can drink as much as he wants, but that leads to degradation and delirium tremens. A man who has an inherited tendency toward the disobedience of any law feels that he is free if he has the opportunity to disobey it whenever he wants to. But whatever the law may be, the results have only to be carried to their logical conclusion to make clear the bondage to which the disobedience leads. All this disobedience to law leads to an inevitable, inflexible, unsurmountable

limit in the end, whereas steady effort toward obedience to law is unlimited in its development of strength and power for use to others. Man must understand his selfish tendencies in order to subdue and control them, until they become subject to his own unselfish tendencies, which are the spiritual laws within him. Thus he gradually becomes free,—soul and body,—with no desire to disobey, and with steadily increasing joy in his work and life. So much for the bondage of doing wrong, and the freedom of doing right, which it seems necessary to touch upon, in order to show clearly the bondage of doing right in the wrong way, and the freedom of doing right in the right way.

It is right to work for our daily bread, and for the sake of use to others, in whatever form it may present itself. The wrong way of doing it makes unnecessary strain, overfatigue and illness. The right way of working gives, as we have said before, new power and joy in the work; it often turns even drudgery into pleasure, for there is a special delight in learning to apply one's self in a true spirit to "drudgery." The process of learning such true application of one's powers often reveals new possibilities in work.

It is right for most people to sleep eight hours every night. The wrong way of doing it is to go to sleep all doubled up, and to continue to work all night in our sleep, instead of giving up and resting entirely. The right way gives us the fullest possible amount of rest and refreshment.

It is right to take our three meals a day, and all the nourishing food we need. The wrong way of doing it, is to eat very fast, without chewing our food carefully, and to give our stomachs no restful opportunity of preparation to receive its food, or to take good care of it after it is received. The right way gives us the opportunity to assimilate the food entirely, so that every bit of fuel we put into our bodies is burnt to some good purpose, and makes us more truly ready to receive more.

It is right to play and amuse ourselves for rest and recreation. We play in the wrong way when we use ourselves up in the strain of playing, in the anxiety lest we should not win in a game, or when we play in bad air. When we play in the right way, there is no strain, no anxiety, only good fun and refreshment and rest.

We might go through the narrative of an average life in showing briefly the wonderful difference between doing right in the right way, and doing right in the wrong way. It is not too much to say that the difference in tendency is as great as that between life and death.

It is one thing to read about orderly living and to acknowledge that the ways described are good and true, and quite another to have one's eyes opened and to act from the new knowledge, day by day, until a normal mode of life is firmly established. It requires quiet, steady force of will to get one's self out of bad, and well established in good habits. After the first interest and relief there often has to be steady plodding before the new way becomes easy; but if we do not allow ourselves to get discouraged, we are sure to gain our end, for we are opening ourselves to the influence of the true laws within us, and in finding and obeying these we are approaching the only possible Freedom of Life.

