

THE RELIGION OF BEAUTY.

THE devout mind is a lover of nature. Where there is beauty it feels at home. It has not then to shut the windows of the senses, and take refuge from the world within its own thoughts, to find eternal life. Beauty never limits us, never degrades us. We are free spirits when with nature. The outward scenery of our life, when we feel it to be beautiful, is always commensurate with the grandeur of our inward ideal aspiration; it reflects encouragingly the heart's highest, brightest dreams; it does not contradict the soul's convictions of a higher life; it tells us that we are safe in believing the thought, which to us seems noblest. If we have no sense of beauty, the world is nothing more than a place to keep us in. But when the skies and woods reveal their loveliness, then nature seems a glorious picture, of which our own inmost soul is the painter, and our own loves and longings the subject. It is the apt accompaniment to the silent song of the beholder's heart.

The greatest blessing, which could be bestowed on the weary multitude, would be to give them the sense of beauty; to open their eyes for them, and let them see how richly we are here surrounded, what a glorious temple we inhabit, how every part of it is eloquent of God. The love of nature grows with the growth of the soul. Religion makes man sensible to beauty; and beauty in its turn disposes to religion. Beauty is the revelation of the soul to the senses. In all this outward beauty,—these soft swells and curves of the landscape, which seems to be the earth's smile;—this inexhaustible variety of form and colors and motion, not promiscuous, but woven together in as natural a harmony as the thoughts in a poem; this mysterious hieroglyphic of the flowers; this running alphabet of tangled vine and bending grass studded with golden points; this all-embracing perspective of distance rounding altogether into one rainbow-colored sphere, so perfect that the senses and the soul roam abroad over it unsated, feeling the presence and perfection of the whole in each part; this perfect accord of sights, sounds, motions, and fra-

grance, all tuned to one harmony, out of which run melodies inexhaustible of every mood and measure;—in all this, man first feels that God is without him, as well as within him, that nature too is holy; and can he bear to find himself the sole exception?

Does not the season, then, does not nature, does not the spontaneous impulse of an open heart, which has held such sublime worship through its senses, more than justify an attempt to show how the religious sentiments may be nourished by a cultivation of the sense of duty?

This should be a part of our religious education. The heart pines and sickens, or grows hard and contracted and unbelieving, when it cannot have beauty. The love of nature ends in the love of God. It is impossible to feel beauty, and not feel that there is a spirit there. The sensualist, the materialist, the worshipper of chance, is cheated of his doubts, the moment this mystery overtakes him in his walks. This surrounding presence of beautiful nature keeps the soul buoyed up forever into its element of freedom, where its action is cheerful, healthful, and unwearied; where duty becomes lovely, and the call to worship, either by prayer or by self-sacrifice, is music to it. He, in whom this sense is open, is put, as it were, in a magnetic communication with a life like his own, which flows in around him, go where he may. In nature we forget our loneliness. In nature we feel the same Spirit, who made it and prevades it, holding *us* up also. Through the open sense of beauty, all we see preaches and prophesies to us. Without it, when no such sensibility exists, how hard a task is faith! how hard to feel that God is here! how unlovely looks religion! As without the air, the body could not breathe; so without beauty, the heart and religious nature seem to want an element to live in. Beauty is the moral atmosphere. The close, unseemly school-house, in which our infancy was cramped,—of how much natural faith did it not rob us! In how unlovely a garb did we first see Knowledge and Virtue! How uninteresting seemed Truth, how unfriendly looked Instruction; with what mean associations were the names of God and Wisdom connected in our memory! What a violation of nature's peace seemed Duty! what an intrusion upon the mind's rights! What rebellion has been nurtured within

us by the ugly confinements to which artificial life and education have accustomed us! How insensible and cold it has made us to the expressive features of God's works, always around us, always inviting us to high refreshing converse!

I hold, then, that without a cultivation of the sense of beauty, chiefly to be drunken from the open fountains of nature, there can be no healthy and sound moral development. The man so educated lacks something most essential. He is one-sided, not of a piece with nature; and however correct, however much master of himself, he will be uninteresting, unencouraging, and uninviting. To the student of ancient history, the warm-hearted, graceful Greek, all alive to nature, who made beauty almost his religion, is a more refreshing object, than the cold, formal Jew. And here around us, resist it as we may, our hearts are always drawn towards the open, graceful children of impulse, in preference to the stiff, insensible patterns of virtue. The latter may be very unexceptionable, but at the same time very unreal. The former, though purposeless and careless they play through life, yet have trusted themselves to nature, and been ravished by her beauty, and nature will not let them become very bad.

Consider a few of the practical effects upon the whole character of a growing love of beauty in the young mind.

It disposes to order. It gives birth in the mind to an instinct of propriety. It suggests imperceptibly, it inclines gently, but irresistibly, to the fit action, to the word in season. The beauty which we see and feel plants its seeds in us. Gazing with delight on nature, our will imperceptibly becomes attuned to the same harmony. The sense of beauty is attended with a certain reverence; we dare not mar what looks so perfect. This sense, too, has a something like conscience contained in it; we feel bound to do and be ourselves something worthy of the beauty we are permitted to admire. This feeling, while it makes alive and quickens, yet is eminently conservative, in the best sense. He, who has it, is always interested on the side of order, and of all dear and hallowed associations. He, who wants it, is as destructive as a Goth. The presence of beauty, like that of nature, as soon as we feel it at all, overcomes us with respect, and a certain sensitive dread of all violence, mischief, or

discord. The beautiful ideal piece of architecture bears no mark of wanton pen-knife. The handsome school-room makes the children neat. The instinct of obedience, of conciliation, of decorum, reverence, and harmony, flows into the soul with beauty. The calm spirit of the landscape takes possession of the humble, yet soul-exalted admirer. Its harmony compels the jangling chords within himself into smoother undulations. Therefore "walk out," like Isaac, "at even-tide to meditate," and let nature, with her divine stillness, take possession of thee. She shall give thee back to thyself better, more spiritual, more sensible of thy relationship with all things, and that in wronging any, thou but woundest thyself.

Another grace of character, which the sense of beauty gives the mind, is freedom—the freedom of fond obedience, not of loose desire. The man, whose eyes and soul are open to the beauty there is around him, sees everywhere encouragement. To him the touch of nature's hand is warm and genial. The air does not seem to pinch him, as it does most narrow-minded ones, who can see no good in anything but gain; to whose utilitarian vision most that is natural looks hostile. He is not contracted into himself by cautious fear and suspicion, afraid to let his words flow freely, or his face relax in confidence, or his limbs move gracefully, or his actions come out whole and hearty. He trusts nature; for he has kissed her loveliness; he knows that she smiles encouragement to him. Now think what it is that makes virtue so much shunned. Partly, our depravity, if you please. But partly, also, her numerous ungraceful specimens. For it is the instinctive expectation of all minds, that what is excellent shall also be beautiful, lovely, natural, and free. Most of the piety, we see about us, is more or less the product of restraint and fear. It stands there in spectral contrast with nature. Approve it we may; but we cannot love it. It does not bear the divine stamp; it chills, not converts. The love of nature makes in us an ideal of moral beauty, of an elevation of character which shall look free and lovely, something that shall take its place naturally and as matter of course in the centre of nature, as the life of Jesus did.

Again, the love of beauty awakens higher aspirations

in us. He, who has felt the beauty of a summer like this, has drunk in an infinite restlessness, a yearning to be perfect, and by obedience free. He can never more rest contented with what he is. And here is the place, to attempt some account of the true significance of beauty, and of what is its office to the soul.

Beauty always suggests the thought of the perfect. The smallest beautiful object is as infinite as the whole world of stars above us. So we feel it. Everything beautiful is emblematic of something spiritual. Itself limited, its meanings and suggestions are infinite. In it we seem to see all in one. Each beautiful thing, each dew-drop, each leaf, each true work of painter's, poet's, or musician's art, seems an epitome of the creation. Is it not God revealed through the senses? Is not every beautiful thing a divine hint thrown out to us? Does not the soul begin to dream of its own boundless capacities, when it has felt beauty? Does not immortality then, for the first time, cease to be a name, a doctrine, and become a present experience? When the leaves fall in autumn, they turn golden as they drop. The cold winds tell us of coming winter and death; but they tell it in music. All is significant of decay; but the deep, still, harmonious beauty surpasses all felt in summer or spring before. We look on it, and feel that it cannot die. The Eternal speaks to us from the midst of decay. We feel a melancholy; but it is a sweet, religious melancholy, lifting us in imagination above death—since above the grave of the summer so much real beauty lingers.

The beautiful, then, is the spiritual aspect of nature. By cherishing a delicate sensibility to it, we make nature preach us a constant lesson of faith; we find all around an illustration of the life of the spirit. We surround ourselves with a constant cheerful exhortation to duty. We render duty lovely and inviting. We find the soul's deep inexpressible thoughts written around us in the skies, the far blue hills, and swelling waters.

But then to this desirable result one stern condition must be observed. If the sense of beauty disposes to purity of heart; so equally purity of heart is all that can keep the sense of beauty open. All influences work mutually. "One hand must wash the other," said the poet. The

world is loveliest to him, who looks out on it through pure eyes.

Sweet is the pleasure,
Itself cannot spoil!
Is not true leisure
One with true toil?

Thou that wouldst taste it,
Still do thy best;
Use it, not waste it,
Else 't is no rest.

Wouldst behold beauty
Near thee? all round?
Only hath duty
Such a sight found.

Rest is not quitting
The busy career;
Rest is the fitting
Of self to its sphere.

'T is the brook's motion,
Clear without strife,
Fleeing to ocean
After its life.

Deeper devotion
Nowhere hath knelt;
Fuller emotion
Heart never felt.

'T is loving and serving
The Highest and Best!
'T is ONWARDS! unswerving,
And that is true rest.

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