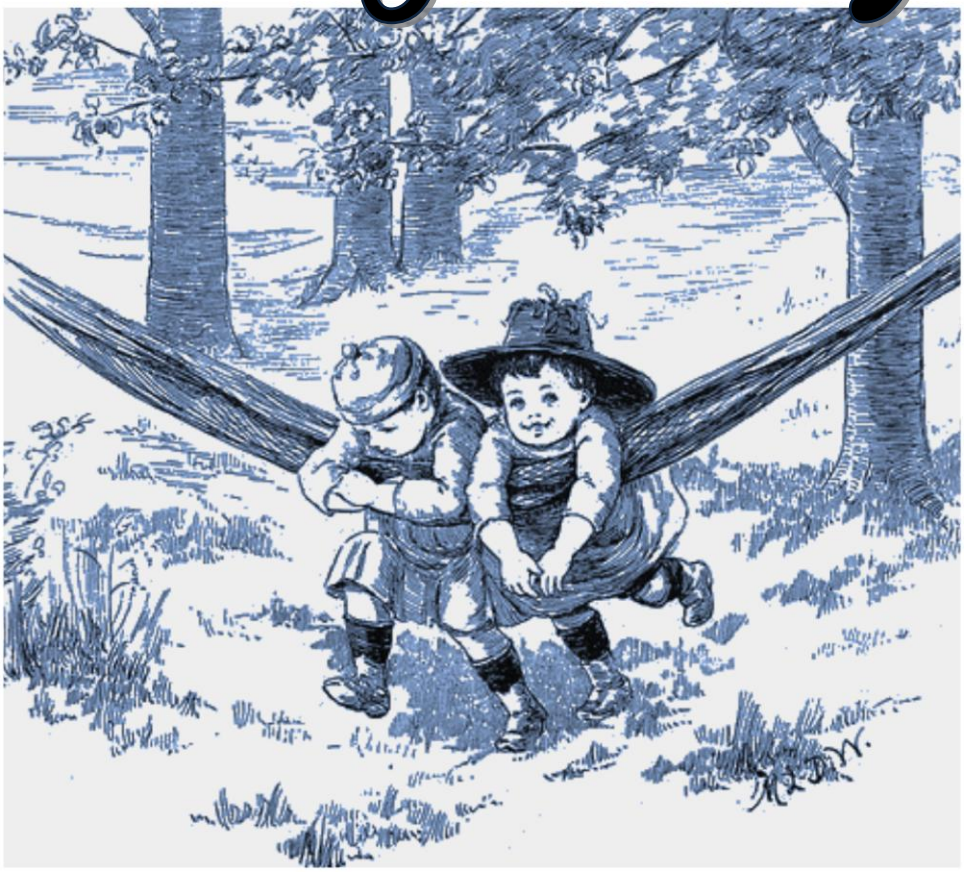
On Being Cheerful



On Being Cheerful

By:

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(one of the Paulist Fathers)

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On Being Cheerful

Be of good heart.—Saint 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 the 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 smoothes over the rough places in the road. In general he is more attracted by the smiling aspect of things than by their frown. Incorrigible optimist that he is, he fixes his attention on the circumstances that give most joy and hope to the heart. In memory, as in speech, he keeps dwelling on the inspirational and 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 that, 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 fault finding 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 kindliness 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 always 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 just the point," Aunt Mary responded promptly. "I should say she forgets full as much as she remembers—maybe more. That's part of what I call a royal memory.

Then, there are other folks who 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 are folks who don't ever forget one of them, or let you forget, either. I have one of those memories in mind this minute. I always feel like flying out the back door when I see them coming in the gate. But they aren't the only folks in the world."

Others, like Henrietta, 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 always freshen up when she comes round. I haven't ever heard it explained, but I have my theory. I believe it's because she always thinks folks up instead of down and they know it and sort of straighten up inside to meet it—that's my theory and that's what I call a "Royal Memory."

The girl did not answer, but in her heart remembered 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. 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-colored 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 instead we faithfully record each fault of a pupil. Futile is the effort to revive a waning affection, unless 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, which is 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. 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 simply 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 would have been 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, and 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 our unhappiness. After all, pleasure and pain are necessarily relative and personal. In great measure, a thing is distressing or not distressing depending upon how we are inclined 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. Besides all these, each man has still his purely personal fund of underlying emotional consciousness tending at the first impulse to flow over to this side or to that side, thus intensifying his sense of content or dissatisfaction.

Temperament extends a sort of standing invitation to moods of a certain type. Once the mood has come, it tends to diffuse itself and to reinforce the strength of the sentiment that invited it. Thus, we see how, at the 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 that drift us down toward an unhappy and sour view of life. We are inclined to lay overdue stress on unpleasant events, to paint heavily the details that tell against a bright and cheerful general effect.

Conspicuous Evil

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. In the one case, a single instance of insensitiveness would spell destruction, whereas in the other there might remain many opportunities to retrieve the error.

Whether or not we thus class this tendency among nature's protective illusions, it is certain that men's thoughts swing more readily toward the present evil than toward the present good.

Breaking down 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 that, 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 thus 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.

Finding Fault

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 what is noticed first, what is talked about most, or what sticks fastest in the mind is normally 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 previously 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 that it can ferret out. 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. Then, 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 that naturally swarm into consciousness. A further consideration is 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: 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 and 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. Consequently, they carefully endeavor to ward off ideas that 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. Then, 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, when they are called upon for their best work it is proverbial how carefully their attention must be diverted from every depressing or ominous incident.

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 reinforces the kindred mental images; it attracts into the field of consciousness unpleasant thoughts that harmonize with gloomy moods; and 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 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 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

Saint Paul tells us "We are saved by hope." Spiritual teachers of the Catholic Church have always laid the strongest emphasis on the fact that cheerfulness makes for godliness. Saint Philip Neri and Saint 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 that tend to make him fearful and depressed.

The Church, it is true, also preaches the virtue of fear. However, everyone acquainted with the type of sanctity she holds up for her children to imitate, with the standards used by her religious orders to determine vocations, with the principles her ministers use to guide souls, and with Saint Ignatius' famous rules for the discernment of spirits will easily 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—persons who always absorb or emit fragrance and music and

sunshine. These persons know the secret that transforms evil into good and pain into joy and on the great mass of their experience they exercise an influence that 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 pleasure what to another would have been a matter of indifference, if not of suffering.

To bear thankless burdens, undertake odious responsibilities, suffer unjust reproaches, serve the neglected and the impatient, act as oil on the troubled waters, be as a buffer to impending collisions and a breakwater to high running waves—these are not trials, but privileges to some people; or, at least, they are duties easily and gladly performed. To them, an inconvenience or a slight is, 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 that they thus enjoy, they have another advantage—their reaction against the common inclination to emphasize ills helps them achieve a more objective view than the average man ever attains.

Control of Feeling

It is idle, of course, to spend time or energy wishing we had been gifted as these souls were gifted, yet we may hope to profit somewhat by considering 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 were born cheerful. It is equally true however that many have strived to achieve cheerfulness. Not until a man realizes this, does he possess a proper sense of the opportunities that constantly glide by.

However, 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 happier in the future than in the past; for surely no one should permit his cheerfulness to be cut down without determined resistance.

One point, more than all others, 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 considerably their own and their neighbors' lives.

At the present moment, it is neither possible to go into the whole question of the volitional development of character nor 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 achieve 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, and 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. Generally, it is recognized by physiologists that an emotion is raised or lowered in intensity relative to the control shown over the physical manifestation of that emotion. In this way, we often restrain our emotions of anger, jealousy, vanity, and fear. The menace of pain drives the will to conquer an untimely exhibition of irritability by summoning up a violent emotional wave calculated to counteract the first impulse. In some degree, the same effort can be performed by a determined decision to suppress.

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 controlling a mutiny is harder than preventing its outbreak.

Control of Thoughts

Preventive steps can be taken by exercising control over contents of the mind. We can modify, alter, quicken, or slow down the flow of images and ideas continually passing through consciousness. Thus, we can elect to encourage or repress our thoughts appropriately towards producing 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, redirect the mind in another direction than that which it was following; that is to say, we can deliberately swim upstream, we can sail outside the channel, or we can pursue the less trodden path.

Second, we can voluntarily elect to form new associations of images by linking ideas in such a way as to 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 that will make for our elation as the old made for our depression.

Finally, even though unpleasant images are forced into consciousness, we still can say something as to the amount of attention that should be given those images and we can

remove all voluntary attention from those images by concentrating 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 person'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 as 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 counselors have had their say, it seems to remain clear that each of them attributes a good deal of usefulness to the exercise that 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. Now, we find it recommended by the representatives of modern psychology as a fine instrument for mental formation and character-building.

Meditation may be used specifically to develop a spirit of cheerfulness. When this is undertaken, we shall have at least one good result—men will be using their energy in the right direction and employing a means proven to be successful. Even though it is but the human side of the process that appeals to them, they will surely be in some way the better for it and, therefore, necessarily nearer to the kingdom of God.

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