

Aspiration and Environment

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IT has been wisely remarked that the old adage, "The truth lies between two extremes", does not necessarily imply that it lies exactly in the *middle*. That can only be the case where the exaggerating and the underrating have been precisely equal, which can very seldom occur, if ever. The truth will generally be found to lie much nearer to one extreme than to the other, according to the preponderance of abuse over disuse or the reverse.

With regard to the subject of this paper there are two diametrically opposed schools of thought. One—at present in the heyday of popularity — asserts that man is in the most absolute sense the *creature* of his surroundings, that character is merely a mechanical product of circumstance. The other — comprising most of the mystics and enthusiasts of all [Page 18] ages — declares that by subtle but invariable laws man is the *creator* of his surroundings, that circumstance is merely the fruit of character. The truth lies between the two extremes, but much nearer to the latter than to the former.

Undoubtedly we are influenced, and that most powerfully, by our environment. Until we begin to think in earnest, we have no idea of the extent to which our thoughts, feelings, likes and dislikes are coloured by the conditions of our birth, training, and position in the world. Not one man in a million is able even by the most strenuous and prolonged effort to free himself entirely from these invisible chains, or so to "purge the eyes with euphrasy and rue" that he can see Truth in what Bacon calls a "dry light". On the mists of our passions and affections the white rays of the absolute break and disintegrate, and we see, not the pure Eternal Light, but the rainbow; beautiful, indeed, but *partial*.

(I do not forget or ignore the action of Karma. The environment with which each one starts in every fresh incarnation is determined by the net product of acquired tendencies — that is, by "character", only modified by the national and cyclic Karmas. But the self-causation of our position in the world does not affect the fact that circumstances have a powerful influence in the further development of "character", which is all for which I am contending.)

Nevertheless, that character moulds circumstance is equally patent. Books of "Good Advice to Young Men" (who are somewhat advised to distraction, by the way) abound in instances. It would be a waste of precious space to quote. Everyone knows, or at any rate has read, of scores of such cases.

Are then the two forces equal? Natural Philosophy teaches that when two opposed forces are equal the result is a deadlock. *One* of the two must be the stronger. And the Higher Wisdom asserts most positively

that the power of aspiration excels the power of environment. For the former is of the Spirit, Divine; the latter of the body, Human. The one has the *vis inertiae* of dead matter ("dead", that is, relatively to our normal perceptions); the other the creative energy of the One-Life.

Very subtly does the higher force work, as is evidenced by the fact of its mere existence being so often denied; but so, for that matter, does the law of electrical affinity, which no one dreams of doubting. That the magnet, plunged into a heap of mingled sawdust and iron filings, should draw to itself the latter, is as mysterious every whit as that the spirit should draw to itself those material surroundings which best suit its present state. There are modes of action of which our physical senses can take no cognizance. But they are none the less real.

It should be observed that this force is what we call "moral" rather [Page 19] than what we call "mental". It is *Aspiration* which influences environment, rather than *Intellectuality*. A man's surroundings will be shaped more by his character than by his abilities. Doubtless the latter have much to do with the matter; they exert an influence analogous to the power of his muscles on a lower plane. But it is the former which is the chief factor in the equation of life.

"Like to Like!" It is the law of the universe. Our desires, impulses, longings, aspirations, if they do not influence the material world directly, do so indirectly, by constantly generating a stream of psychic or soul forces, which act upon the objects of the bodily senses. Too abstruse in its undercurrents to be easily traced, it can be seen at work plainly enough in some of its phases. That we seize or let slip this or that opportunity as it comes, depends very largely upon the frame of mind in which we are at the time. To the soul that aspires, circumstances are stepping-stones; to the soul that creeps, they are hindrances.

The application of this truth to the social life must for brevity's sake be left untouched, beyond the remark that the paramount aim of all reformers should be the inspiring of a better spirit. The *paramount*; not, of course, the *only*. It is true that little higher development is possible for those whose lives are one long drudgery, whose homes are kennels and whose bodies mere machines. Material progress and moral or spiritual must advance "pari passu", with equal steps. But the material improvements must be regarded as a means, not as an end. And it must never be forgotten that the strongest incentive to a change of surroundings is a change of spirit.

But it is in its application to the individual life that this truth is of special interest and value. How common is dissatisfaction with one's lot, not because it is particularly hard, but on account of the limitations which it imposes (or seems to impose) on one's aspirations! How frequent the cry, "O that I had more leisure, more wealth, a different station, more congenial occupations and surroundings! O that I had room to spread my wings! How I would *then* develop myself and grow liker to the unattainable Ideal!" Aye? That depends. It is one of the saddest but not least unfrequent sights of life to see aspirations wither away in the very atmosphere for which they craved, it being obtained; to note how the man who, poor, longed for wealth that he might have opportunities of unfolding his higher nature, rich, forget all dreams and become like Bunyan's man with the muckrake. "Set a beggar on horseback and he will — !" Why? Because he is still a "beggar" at *heart*. Only the *clothes* are changed; the man remains the same. And as a rule it may be safely prophesied, that those who have so little knowledge of themselves and of the meaning of Life as to sigh [Page 20] idly for an Eldorado in which they might be what they have made up their minds they cannot be where they are, will not know how to use that for which they long, if Fortune is cruel enough to

answer their prayers.

And anyway, it is beginning at the wrong end. "FIRST DESERVE, THEN DESIRE." Though the restrictions inseparable from material conditions, though the injustice of others may surround us with barriers in which the aspirations cannot burst into glorious fruition, at any rate they can (as a rule) put forth the first tender shoots. And do not fear that the growing tree cannot shatter its prison walls. A seed lodged in the crevice between two blocks of hugest and most firmly cemented masonry can force them apart by sheer force of growth. For they are dead, and it is alive.

Is there not many a Theosophist who longs to enter with full consecration upon the Path, but is prevented by sheer force of his environment from gaining admittance into even the lowest rank of Chelas ? Let such a one be wise. If the hindrance is indeed real and not merely apparent, no clearer proof could be given that he is not yet *ripe* for Chelaship. If his longing is genuine and pure, and not an emotional flash of ambition or curiosity, he will steadily set himself so to live that upon his next return to earth he may find himself environed suitably for the solemn initiation.

He who is wise will not long for better environment; he will strive rather to "better *himself*". in the true sense of those terribly misused words, knowing that the fitter environment will come of itself. He will leave to children the desire for that for which he is not fitted. The baby would clutch at and cut himself with the razor; the modest youth leaves it alone till he needs it ! by which time, it is to be hoped, he will know how to use it.

Aspire! aspire! only aspire! Believe that matter is but the shadow of spirit; it is the truth. If you are not in that condition of life where you want to be, it is strong presumptive evidence that you are not *fit* for it: and if not fit, its attainment would be a curse and not a blessing. Promotion is sure, when earned; but it must be earned first. The promotion, however, may not be — seldom is — rapid; for it is only by hairbreadths at a time that we can raise ourselves — our *Selves*, mark; perhaps not enough in one short lifetime to bring about any very appreciable change in environment. Nevertheless, making every allowance and deduction, the truth of the matter may be summed up in one sentence: if you are dissatisfied with your lot in life, and would change it, *change yourself*.