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Psalm 90
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A FAILURE OF NERVE

It is difficult to analyze the age in which one lives. An adequate analysis requires a proper perspective and that we do not possess when we attempt to look at our own times with a critical and inquiring eye. We are too close to our age. We are too much a part of it. We look at ourselves from a biased point of view. But certainly if anything at all can be said about our age, then it is that ours is an age marked by loss of faith.

We have lost faith in our political institutions. Certainly they have not been beyond reproach, nor have they secured for us the perfect society. To be sure, we are history's most affluent people, but there still remains poverty, injustice, war and tremendous environmental threats which seem almost impossible of solution. Having lost so much of its prestige in the world, we no longer regard America as the nation chosen by God to lead mankind toward its "manifest destiny". Millions have lost faith in America and in the American way of life, not only in this country but abroad.

Obviously millions of our citizens have also lost their faith in traditional concepts of religion. For most Americans that religion has been Christianity, but large numbers of Jewish people have also deserted the faith of their fathers. Whereas in the early history of our country God and religion were the most dominating influences in society, pervading every aspect of man's communal as well as his personal life, today religion is relegated to a relatively minor role and individual men and women, if they have not deserted organized religion entirely, have looked upon it more as a form than as a force in their lives. Even Billy Graham's televised evangelism is a kind of warmed-over sentimental entertainment rather than an effective power for strengthening the tie between God and man. For the majority of Americans God is not real and religion not a significant force in life. We have lost our faith in God.

More millions of Americans have lost faith in themselves. A computerized, highly technical, densely populated society seems to transform the individual into a nameless, impersonal object whose sole function is to be manipulated by those who hold power. We find it less and less possible to be the master of our own destiny and the captain of our own soul. Against this nameless, depersonalized obscurity, young people in particular are rebelling. Their sensitive souls can find no satisfaction in dialogue with a computer or conversation with a teaching machine. There can be no personal relationships between a lecturing professor and 150

A Failure of Nerve - page 2

auditing students. The individual gradually sinks into nothingness, loses his self-awareness, and finally his self-respect. And so again we become more and more a people characterized by loss of faith.

II

Where there is a loss of faith we can be certain that it began with a failure of nerve. That failure of nerve had its roots in the 19th century and its flowering in the 20th. Its roots go back to the Darwinian theory of evolution when man was told he was the culmination of thousands of years of natural selection over which he himself had no control. It does not matter whether or not the theory of evolution is true or false. It is the consequences with which we are concerned, and the consequences among multitudes of men who found life a difficult struggle was to blame all their failures on their genes. Science had given them an excuse for their failures. Man was not to blame, he was the innocent victim of the evolutionary process and had no free will with which he could achieve a victory or a failure.

In his old age having become a victim of his own belief in evolution, Thomas Henry Huxley's only alternative to despair was his desperate cry, "Defy the cosmic process". But defying cosmic processes is not the kind of challenge grasped at by puny, mortal men.

These then are the roots of man's current despair. He is a victim of cosmic forces. He lacks free will to envision and attain to his own destiny. He is pushed and shoved and maneuvered by forces too great for him to understand, and if there is a God at all, that God is merely a mechanistic deity who brought the whole sorry process into being but who now is a mere observer.

III

Twentieth century man not only inherits this legacy of blind, inscrutable forces shaping his destiny, but now also finds himself caught up in the consequences of the industrial revolution which gives priority to machines over human beings. Human life has value only because it consumes the vast and varied products of the machine. Even labor leaders adhere to this theory. Mr. Woodcock of the United Auto Workers demands large wage increases for his union members in order to increase their purchasing power--their ability to consume more. Arguments about "a living wage" one no longer hears. The auto workers are far beyond that stage. Economic need is no longer the debatable question, but the degree of affluence. Even Mr. George Meany now doubts the efficacy of the strike as an economic weapon. The public is not tenderly sympathetic with workers who have middle class incomes and live in middle class suburbs.

Today's workers, whether they themselves realize it or not, are concerned not nearly as much with wages as they are with meaning for their lives. They have been deluded into thinking that more

money will procure more things which will in turn make life more meaningful and significant. Along that road lies nothing but complete disillusionment, frustration and despair.

To be sure, all of us would like to enjoy more of the world's good things. Money is nice to have whether one is rich or poor. But money and things are a poor and hopeless substitute for a life rich with meaning and studded with challenge.

If any one of us here this morning--anyone who has had adequate opportunity to think deeply about life and to be aware of man's past progress--if any such person names those whom he most admires in human history, he will name the men and women who have suffered and overcome, been challenged and met the challenge victoriously, been tempted and overcome temptation, and who in the face of tremendous obstacles have made their lives count for something significant. These are the people we admire, but they are not the people whom most of us wish to emulate. We do not have the nerve. What parent today seeks to inspire his son by urging him that he too can become president? What are the questions asked by job-seeking college students? What is the salary? What are the fringe benefits? How much vacation do I get? What about the retirement plan?

IV

A lack of faith due to a failure of nerve! That is the crux of our problem. It is not economic or political. What happens in economics and politics is merely symptomatic of our real sickness. If we want a restoration of health we must look to causes and not to the symptoms.

Previous generations had just as many problems as we confront today. They were not the same problems, but were relatively just as important. We are concerned with population control; they were concerned with life expectancy which not too many years ago was one-half of what it is today. We are concerned about the polluted environment; they were concerned with clearing the land and scraping from it enough to exist on. They sought the right answers to their problems just as carefully and sincerely as we are seeking the answers to ours. But there was a difference. They were far more aware than are we that every advance, every solution, every inch of progress requires patience and struggle. They didn't always achieve a victory, but they could be proud of their efforts and of their goals.

Today too many of us think all the answers can be supplied by government fiat, by the expenditure of vast sums of money, and by technology. We have no faith in ourselves or God. Our trust is in power and authority. A loss of faith due to a failure of nerve!

What happens when we meet trouble and despair today? No one tells us that it is the just consequences of our ignorance and sin visited upon us by a just God. No, the theologians tell us rather that God is dead. It is so much easier to accept that explanation. It removes the onus from ourselves.

What happens when we are frustrated and bored with the meaninglessness of life? No one tells us to "lose our lives in order to find them". No one urges us to sacrifice ourselves and let our love carry us where it will, even unto death. No, we are invited to adopt "situation ethics", which permits us to do what we please, when we please, as a form of neo-hedonism. So the great end of life has become not sacrifice and struggle for meaning, but happiness and pleasure.

One cannot discount, of course, the devastating effect of a nuclear "sword of Damocles" hanging over humanity's collective head. One cannot discount the effect of no-win wars in which lives are sacrificed to no apparent end. One cannot discount massive concentrations of the population in uninspiring central cities where the environment consists almost totally of steel and concrete. All of these factors have a depressing, disastrous and destructive effect on the human spirit.

But our main problem does not lie here. Again, we are speaking of symptoms rather than causes. The central problem is that man's deepest human needs remain unmet. We are starving to death spiritually. We crave love, meaning, understanding, sympathy, and all the spiritual qualities that machines and technology, government and politics, business and industry, wealth and power, can never give us.

V

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." Have we not yet discovered the eternal validity in those words spoken by Jesus 2,000 years ago?

The starving Bedouin finding a treasure in the desert cried, "Alas, it is only diamonds!" Men are crying out today in the midst of their affluence, "Alas, it is only bread!"

Thomas Carlyle once aptly pointed out that "Not all the finance ministers and upholsterers and confectioners of modern Europe. . . in a joint stock company" could, "make one shoeblack happy. . . above an hour or two." (1) Man does not live by bread alone.

(1) Sartor Resartus, Book 2, Chap. 4

Dr. Donald Hatch Andrews, the renowned scientist, makes the same affirmation:

"I suggest that we postulate that the intangibles of truth and beauty, human freedom, courage, honor, honesty are the core of the truly basic realities; and that the supposed realities which we see and touch and feel are really only shadows cast by these truly basic dynamic forms..." (2)

In the 90th Psalm there is the prayer we need to offer and the life we need to live:

"Teach us to order our days rightly,
That we may enter the gate of wisdom."

If we would strengthen and renew our nerve and our will we must regain our faith--the faith that God is and that God cares, faith that life is more than meat and the body than raiment, faith that life is of concern to the God who gave it, faith that He who knows our need is able and willing to meet that need if we will but walk in the way revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Again, may I urge each and every one of you to make this church a congregation of those who seek after God and his righteousness with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, to the end that the people of this nation might not perish, but enter into ever new and more glorious life.

(2) Donald Hatch Andrews, The Symphony of Life
(Lee's Summit, Mo.: Unity Press, 1966) p. 257