

## A Habit of Being

---

*Sow a thought, you reap an act.*

*Sow an act, you reap a habit.*

*Sow a habit, you reap a character.*

*Sow a character, you reap a destiny.*

Those words have been attributed to Charles Reade. Others say they were written by Thackeray, yet others that they are anonymous. Whoever wrote them, I learned them when I was very small and have never forgotten them.

The words always sounded menacing to me. There was a threat in every sentence. I wonder now why it should have been like that. It didn't need to be, because the reaping of a destiny by the sowing of thoughts, acts and habits can be good as well as bad. Perhaps it was because my mother would rebuke and warn me with the old saying when I hadn't been doing well. Whatever the reason, it seems to me now that we were too often warned about bad habits and not frequently enough encouraged to establish good ones.

Good habits may be very useful indeed, not just because they are good but because they are habits. Doing things habitually means that we hardly need to think about them, and so they save us time and energy. When I lived in London, Ontario, there were at least six ways I could drive from my house to the church. Yet I always drove the same way. I decided which streets of all the streets I might have taken were the most beautiful, and drove down them every morning and up them every evening. I didn't have to think about it and so my mind was free to decide other matters. Always going the same way saved me energy, as all good habits should.

It is useful to remember this when we gather for worship. A thoughtful order of worship, used habitually, means that we need give little thought to what is coming next. We become so familiar with the regular order of hymns, prayers and readings that our minds are free to attend to what they say. Then our time is spent doing what we came to do, not thinking about it. If we are considering the order of service we are not worshipping. The habit of worship enables us to stay our minds on God without distraction.

And, of course, the forming of good habits is of great importance in the nurture and discipline of the spiritual life. Attending church regularly, for example, is a very good habit to establish. Saint Luke tells us that when our Lord visited His home town of Nazareth He went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath day "as He regularly did." Professor Barclay translates the words, "as was His habit." That tells us it was a practice He didn't have to think about. He did it habitually. It did not need to be debated and decided every week, but formed part of the pattern of His days.

Let me carry this thought of the usefulness of habit a bit farther. Flannery O'Connor borrowed a phrase from Jacques Maritain and spoke of what she called "the habit of art" in attempting to describe how she wrote her novels and short stories. She said that the successful writer must master the techniques and methods of her craft; all the tricks of the trade, learned both by instruction and experience.

## A Habit of Being

---

But the techniques and methods, used habitually, gain depth and power. They sink deeper than the conscious mind and begin to shape the writer's work in ways she can neither control nor understand. It is as though they had a life of their own. The writer's work, then, proceeds on two levels. The first is the level of conscious thought. But the second level is deeper and may shape the artist's work in ways of which she may not be aware, though she may recognize them in retrospect.

This is what Flannery O'Connor calls "the habit of art." And it has the power to astonish the artist with its energy and novelty. Miss O'Connor tells us, for example, that she did not know how one of her most famous short stories was going to end, she had to discover how it was going to end. Robert Frost once made the comment, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader!" And not long before his death Ernest Hemingway told a journalist who visited him that when he wrote *The Old Man And The Sea*, and described the great fish as it circled the old man's boat and sniffed his bait, he himself did not know whether or not it was going to take it.

It is this "habit of art" that gives an artist's work its distinctiveness and shapes the expectation of those who read it, or listen to it, or look at it. All the great writers, composers, painters, performers, have a habit of art. What they do is the expression of what they are, of all that has gone to the making of them. That is why we cannot mistake the music of Delius for that of Wagner, or the novels of Dickens for those of Hardy. Each writer, composer and painter comes at his work with his own distinctive style, bringing to it more than his learned technique.

Now, let me ask you, "What is your habit of art?" You don't have to be a writer or composer or artist to have one. What quality do you bring to your work, and what style? Is there a level not only of competence, but of grace below which you could not bear to see it fall? Do you bring to it only the thought of your head or is it infused, permeated, by the quality of your person? Is your daily round and common task marked by what is superficial or is it touched by depth, informed and elevated by what you are? I have a friend who for years built houses, and he tells me that we build what we are. I believe this to be true whether we are building a house, or making a home, or running an office, or writing a book.

Flannery O'Connor speaks of "the habit of art." But when her friend Sally Fitzgerald writes about Flannery O'Connor she tells us that she not only had "a habit of art" but "a habit of being." By this she means that Flannery O'Connor lived day by day in accordance with her formative beliefs; in a manner consistent with the basic truths she accepted and the fundamental principles she embraced.

For Miss O'Connor, this meant living her Christian faith by being a good Roman Catholic. She tells us that she did not have to discover a new set of values every day, for her values were given to her by her religion. She was always aware, too, of a continuity with the life of Christ, and she believed that every person is valuable and that every person is responsible. She was deeply aware of the reality and depravity of evil and was at the same time a prisoner of hope, grasped by the optimism of grace. Her stories sometimes chill us by their portrayal of human wickedness and move us by their expression of the mercy of God and the grace of life. These

## A Habit of Being

---

fundamental beliefs, this practiced Catholicism, formed her character, shaped her perceptions and became her habit of being.

We can have great fun with this idea of a habit of being, especially if we begin with our friends. What is their habit of being? I have a friend and it is characteristic of him that everything he touches, he improves. I have come to expect that from him. He has a way of putting things together and drawing out of them something better. His is a happy habit.

But C.S. Lewis tells us of a woman he knew who complained habitually. Finally it was no longer possible to describe her accurately by saying that she had a complaint; the truth is that she had become a complaint. It was impossible to separate her from her complaining. She became what she had practiced habitually. If she had nothing to object to, she had nothing to say and didn't know who she was. Her dissatisfaction with everything had become a defining characteristic.

There are those who, if they did not dwell in self-pity, wouldn't know who they were. Their self-pity is not their problem, it is their solution. Others would have no identity if they were separated from their grief, or their sense of grievance, or their despair. We know how they will answer any question we ask, how they will react to anything they have to face. Their habit of being has made them unhappily predictable. Others are not like that. They look at life with steady eyes and meet it with courage, cheerfulness and a quiet mind. What a benediction they are to our spirit, and what strength they give us!

Now when we speak of our habit of being it means that we are responsible for it. It is a habit of being, not something that has happened once as the result of an accident, or a mistake, or some isolated event. It is not a passing act but a settled disposition. The phrase reminds us of our responsibility for our own character by telling us how we have formed it:

Little drops of water  
Little grains of sand  
Make the mighty ocean  
And the pleasant land.

Do you know what has made us, and why we are the way we are? It is because of all the little decisions we made. Do you know what determines the big things in our lives? All the little choices that have been shaping us over the years. Sometimes, as William James tell us, we may say of what we have done, "it won't count this time." But it does count. It is registered deep within us, shaping our personality, influencing us at levels of which we are not even aware, and finally, if repeated often enough, making us what we are. Every decision and action counts. And the things we do habitually count most.

This suggests a theory to explain the great differences among elderly people. Sometimes I look at an old woman I know and say to myself, and sometimes to her, "You're wonderful!" and she is. She is wise and interesting and gracious. Others

## A Habit of Being

---

appall us by the thought that we might grow to be like them. What makes them the way they are, some a weariness to the spirit and others a benediction? I think that what we are in old age is what we were becoming all along. Someone said once that we are not better or worse when we are old, just more ourselves. All the little drops of water, all the little grains of sand have formed a waste of seas, or oceans of depth and beauty; a wilderness or a land pleasant and fruitful.

Do you remember how in *The Lion In Winter* King Henry loved Eleanor his Queen? In their youth they came together with passion, and revelled in the joy of loving. They loved splendidly. But it is later now. He keeps her locked up in the Tower and allows her out for a Christmas visit. And even then they meet with daggers drawn, to cut and wound each other. In a reflective moment, one asks the other, "How, from where we were, did we get to where we are?" And the other replies,

"A little bit at a time." That is how we made our faces. They were given to us when we were six; they are what we have made them now that we are sixty. The wrinkles are not accidental; where they are and what they convey of grace and humor is a revelation of the character it has taken us years to make.

Now we must move to the heart of the message! It is that the life of faith is a habit of being; that our religious discipline and devotion should produce a certain sort of character, a person shaped to the likeness of Christ. Lynn Harold Hough once said, "Religion begins in discovery and adventure. It ends in Christlike character."

When Dr. Fosdick preached in the Christian University at Beirut he addressed men and women of many faiths. What could he say to them that would speak to every religion represented in his audience? With characteristic insight and sensitivity he asked them what their religion was doing for their character. Not, "How long have you belonged to the church?" not, "Are you Baptist, or Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Roman Catholic?" He asked them all, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, "What is your religion doing for your character? What sort of person has it made you?"

We must admit that sometimes our religion has not done much for our character. It has not challenged our smallness, but has been an extension of it. It has not rebuked our prejudices but confirmed them. How is it that with so much Grace, we remain graceless? With so much Mercy, we are still merciless?

In *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* we read:

Snale is a contemptible cur; and yet it is not his fault. He has heard sermons about all sorts of supernatural subjects for thirty years and he has never once been warned about meanness, so, of course, he supposes that supernatural subjects are everything and meanness is nothing.

He supposes that meanness is nothing! Does it not matter that we are mean? But meanness makes us mean people. Does it not matter what kind of people we are?

## A Habit of Being

---

No wonder the little boy is alleged to have prayed, "Make all the bad people good, and the good people nice."

Or listen to George Eliot as she describes Hetty in Adam Bede:

Religious doctrine had taken no hold on Hetty's mind: she was one of those numerous people who have had godfathers and godmothers, learned their catechism, been confirmed and gone to church every Sunday and yet for any practical result of strength in life or trust in death have never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling.

The New Testament knows nothing of a faith that is unrelated to character. The goal of Christian devotion is that our bearing towards one another should arise out of our life in Christ Jesus. Worshipping Him, we should become like Him. One of the early saints of the church used to say that every true Christian practices being God. The practice of faith is a habit of being. Our belief, worship and work are intended to build character of a particular sort, inspired and fashioned by our vision of Christ and our love for Him.

Now, if we were to recognize our failure to allow our faith to form our character, and wanted to change, how would we do it? Of course, not everyone wants to change even when they know they need to. Auden tells us that many of us would rather die than change. Change is difficult, for we are set in our ways and hate to surrender them. I notice this in some who come to see me to tell me their troubles and to share their predicament. Together we seek a solution; but one suggestion after another is rejected as too difficult until neither I nor they have any suggestions left. They want their life to change without changing anything. Then I have to tell them that if they do not change anything, nothing will change!

But suppose we do wish to change, how are we to do it? By going back to the phrase, "A Habit Of Being" and going over the words again.

### **I. First, then, what we seek is a new habit of being.**

Do you remember Emile Coué who practiced the art of auto-suggestion and told us that we should tell ourselves daily, "Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better"? Now, I don't like that much. I have no wish to say those words every day, for they may not be true, and repeating them will not make them true, however great the power of auto-suggestion. But there are some truths I do wish to affirm every day. I wish to affirm God's presence, and love and forgiveness, for this daily affirmation will deepen my sense of God's presence and goodness. Every morning I can happily affirm, "This is the day which the Lord hath made; I will rejoice and be glad in it," or, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me power," or, "My God, in His loving kindness, will meet me at every corner."

One of the most serious problems of faith is that while we say that God is love we do not really believe the love God is. We say that God forgives us, but do not feel forgiven. We say we believe these truths of faith, but even though we think about

## A Habit of Being

---

them and believe them with our heads we do not think about them emotionally, and they never touch our hearts. As a result, they are not gathered into our deepest awareness of self. They never possess us.

We must learn to affirm the truths of faith daily, habitually, until they pervade our deepest consciousness and form our character. We need to affirm them habitually because the battles we fight against inferiority, guilt and fear are not fought only once, and we do not win a permanent victory. They are fought over and over again. These dark, menacing forces of despair and self-hatred assert themselves every time we are made vulnerable by fatigue or disappointment. We may think we have beaten them, but just when we are sure that we have, our self-esteem is threatened and the old inferiority reappears with renewed power. We need to remind ourselves every day that God loves us, that we are forgiven, that we live in a forgiven universe. We must affirm these truths habitually until the sense of God's grace is like the air we breathe; until we know that we dwell in a ceaseless flow of loving acceptance and our sense of the divine mercy is as deep as our consciousness of self.

Henry Drummond used to tell people that if they would read Paul's great hymn of Christian love every day, they would find their lives transformed by it. What he did not say, and what his friends knew, was that he had learned the truth of this in his own experience. He had done it. He had read the chapter which he said Paul wrote with Jesus Christ in mind until it permeated every nook and cranny of his character with the love it described. Those who knew him said that while others made an occasional sortie into I Corinthians 13, Henry Drummond lived in it all the time. He read it every day until the love of Christ became his habit of being.

### **II. The second thing we must learn is a habit of being.**

It is not a matter of mere thought, or will, or emotion. It is not a matter of "mere" anything. It is a habit of the whole personality, the full character, the total being. It is such a habit of being that we think it, feel it and do it. Someone remarked that there are two ways in which we can change our character. We can think ourselves into a new way of acting, or we can act ourselves into a new way of thinking. But the methods are not mutually exclusive. We can do both. And even then there is still room for feeling. Emotion is the energy of our thought and will, and without it we have little vitality or power to change. We must allow our habit of being to engage the whole person.

That is why worship can be so helpful in this matter. Have you noticed how our experience of worship today has touched every part of our being? It appeals to the rational mind by the truth of faith, and very powerfully to our emotions by the beauty of music, and to the will by its power to strengthen our obedience. There are things here to think and feel and do. William Temple expressed this perfectly in one of the finest descriptions of worship ever written:

Worship is the submission  
of the whole being to the object of worship.

## A Habit of Being

---

It is to declare our need to be fulfilled by God,  
To subject our desire to the control of God,  
To quicken the conscience by the Holiness of God,  
To feed the mind with the Truth of God,  
To purge the imagination by the Beauty of God,  
To open the heart to the Love of God  
To devote the will to the Purpose of God.

### **III. Here is the last thing: We must bring our faith and our habit of being together.**

Always when people come to talk to me about what is troubling them we “lend our mind out” and listen with care, trying to discover the wisest and best thing for them to do. And sometimes when we have spent an hour doing so, as they rise to go they will say, “Well, I’ll pray about it anyway!”

Now, when they say that I find myself growing a little impatient, even resentful. I sometimes say to them, “Is praying about it something different from what we have been doing? Will it yield any insight different from what we have reached by the best thought of our minds and the deepest sensitivity of our spirit?” They seem to think that praying about their troubles is something remote from our efforts to understand and relieve them in our deepest thought and conversation. It isn’t. Our interview has been prayer from beginning to end. We may not call it that, but when we seek to understand our difficulties through minds informed by the truth of faith, and hearts moved by love, and a conscience quickened by Christian awareness, then whatever we call it, it is the deepest kind of prayer. Prayer is not something we do when we have stopped thinking; prayer is a way of thinking. It is not something we do to avoid the hard choices we have to make, but a way of discovering the wisest choice and finding the strength to make it. Faith is not something separate or different from how we think or decide, or act: it informs our choices, directs our decisions and strengthens our resolve. In other words, it determines our habit of our being.

I heard once of a man who complained, “I asked God for guidance, and when He didn’t give it to me I just talked to my friends and used my common sense.” He would have been wiser to recognize that the advice of his friends, and his common sense, are among the ways in which God answers our prayers for guidance!

Now here is the really joyous thing about our habit of being: We can begin to shape or reshape it in this very moment. It all begins with one drop of water, one crystal of sand. Or, as Jesus put it, in faith as tiny as a grain of mustard seed.