

THE ESSENTIALS OF SPIRITUALITY

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The Essentials of Spirituality by Felix Adler

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FELIX ADLER

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BY FELIX ADLER

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The Essentials of Spirituality

THE first essential is an awakening, a sense of the absence of spirituality, the realized need of giving to our lives a new and higher quality; first there must be the hunger before there can be the satisfaction.

Similar effects are often produced by widely differing processes. In the psychical world that quality which we call spirituality may be associated with and evoked by Theism, or the belief in a Divine Father; by Pantheism, as in the case of Spinoza, whose face at the very first glance impresses you with its spiritual cast; or even by the Buddhist belief in Nirvana. It may also be attained by following the precepts and striving after the ideals of Ethical Culture. For spirituality is not indissolubly associated with

any one type of religion or philosophy; it is a quality of soul manifesting itself in a variety of activities and beliefs.

Before we proceed further, however, we must hazard a definition of the word. In the region of mental activity which is called the spiritual life vagueness is apt to prevail, the outlines of thought are apt to be blurred, the feelings aroused are apt to be indistinct and transitory. The word *spiritual* becomes a synonym of muddy thought and misty emotionalism. If there were another word in the language to take its place, it would be well to use it. But there is not. We must use the word *spiritual*, despite its associations and its abuse. We shall endeavor, however, to attach a distinct and definite meaning to the word. Mere definition, however, is too abstract and nakedly intellectual. Perhaps a description of some types of character, combined with definition, will be the better way.

Savonarola is surely one of the commanding figures in history. His fiery earnestness, his passion for righteousness, the boldness with which he censured the corruptions of

the Roman Court, the personal qualities by which he—a foreigner and a mere monk—made himself for a short period the law-giver, the prophet, and virtually the dictator of Florence—that Florence which was at the time the very gemmary of the Renaissance—his sudden fall and tragic death; all combine to attract toward him our admiration, pity, and love, and to leave upon our minds the impression of his extraordinary moral genius. And yet, though a spiritual side was not wanting in Savonarola, we should not quote him as an outstanding exemplar of spirituality. The spiritual life is unperturbed and serene. His nature was too passionate, he was too vehement in his philippics, too deeply engrossed in the attainment of immediate results, too stormy a soul to deserve the name of spiritual.

Again, our own Washington is one of the commanding figures in history. He achieved the great task which he set himself; he secured the political independence of America. He became the master builder of a nation; he laid securely the foundations on which succeeding generations have built. He was

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calm, too, with rare exceptions; an expert in self-control. But there was mingled with his calmness a certain coldness. He was lofty and pure, but we should hardly go to him for instruction in the interior secrets of the spiritual life. His achievements were in another field. His claim to our gratitude rests on other grounds. The spiritual life is calm, but serenely calm; irradiated by a fervor and a depth of feeling that were to some extent lacking in our first president. Lincoln, perhaps, came nearer to possessing them.

Again, we have such types of men as John Howard, the prison reformer, and George Peabody, who devoted his great fortune to bettering the housing of the poor and to multiplying and improving schools. These men—especially the latter—were practical and sane, and were prompted in their endeavors by an active and tender benevolence. Yet we should scarcely think of them as conspicuous examples of the spiritual quality in human life and conduct. Benevolence, be it never so tender and practical, does not reach the high mark of spirituality. Spirituality is more than benevolence in the ordinary sense of the

term. The spiritual man is benevolent to a signal degree, but his benevolence is of a peculiar kind. It is characterized by a certain serene fervor which we may almost call saintliness.

But perhaps some one may object that a standard by which personalities like Savonarola, Washington, Howard and Peabody fall short is probably set too high, and that in any case the erection of such a standard cannot be very helpful to the common run of human beings. Where these heroic natures fall short, can you and I hope to attain? To such an objection the reply is that we cannot be too fastidious or exacting in respect to our standard, however poor our performance may be. Nothing less than a kind of divine completeness should ever content us. Furthermore, there have been some men who approached nearer to the spiritual ideal than the patriots and the philanthropists just mentioned—some few men among the Greeks, the Hindus, and the Hebrews. And for the guidance of conduct, these more excellent spirits avail us more than the examples of a Savonarola, a Washington or a Howard. To be