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MODERN SPIRITUAL MASTERS SERIES

LEO
TOLSTOY

Spiritual Writings



Selected with an Introduction by

CHARLES E. MOORE

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The Quest for Meaning



ASHAMED TO LIVE

I would like to say that I'm happy and cheerful, but I can't. I'm not unhappy, far from it, and I've not become feeble yet — still further from it. But I feel miserable. I can't help but notice the life around me, and this life is repulsive.

I went for a walk last night. On the way back I saw a tussle going on and heard a policeman shouting: "Take them away!" I asked what was going on. They had picked up some prostitutes: three were taken away but one was drunk and so dropped behind. I waited. A yardman with a lantern caught up with her: she was a girl of the same build as my thirteen-year-old Masha, in a filthy torn dress, with a hoarse, drunken voice; she wouldn't move and lit a cigarette. "I'll give it to you, you bitch's whelp," the policeman shouted. I looked at her snub-nosed, gray, old, coarse face. I asked how old she was: she was sixteen. Then they took her away.

They took her away. What did I do? Nothing. I didn't take her home, didn't give her a meal, didn't do anything at all for her — but I did grow fond of her. They took her away to the police station to sit in jail till morning, and then to the doctor's to be examined. I went off to my clean and comfortable bed to

sleep and read a book (and eat and drink figs and water). What did it all mean?

In the morning I decided to go and see her. I went to the police station, but they had already taken her away. A police officer answered my questions incredulously and explained what they did with people like that. It's a normal thing for them. When I said I was surprised at her youth he said, "There are many younger."

This same morning a lieutenant came around. He had fallen on hard times and now spends the nights in a doss house. He came to me in great agitation. "A terrible thing has happened in our place. A laundry woman lived in our house. She's twenty-two. She couldn't work and had no money to pay for a night's lodgings. The landlady kicked her out. She was ill and hadn't had a square meal for a long time. She wouldn't go away, so a policeman was summoned. He took her away. 'Where can I go,' she said. He said: 'You can die where you like, but you can't live here without any money.' And he sat her down in a church porch. In the evening she had nowhere to go and so she went back to the landlady, but before she could reach the apartment she fell down at the gates and died."

I walked there from the police station. There was a coffin in the cellar, and in the coffin was a barely clothed woman with a stiff leg bent at the knee. Wax candles were burning. A deacon was reading a sort of requiem. I was there out of curiosity.

I'm ashamed to write this, ashamed to live. But this is why I am so miserable. For at home a dish of sturgeon, the fifth course, was found not to be fresh. It was taken away. And my talk about all this terrible need with my friends was greeted with bewilderment — why talk about it if you can't put it right?

So I pray: "God, teach me how to exist, how to live, so that my life should not be so loathsome to me." I'm waiting for Him to teach me.

— *Tolstoy's Letters*

IS THIS LIFE?

From the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed our lives consist of a series of acts. Every day we must decide, from all the possibilities, what it is we will do. But without guidance in the choice of our actions we are lost.

How are we to decide? What will guide us? For the most part we turn to an interminable number of facts and actions that make up what is called propriety, custom, and duty, even sacred duty. We look around us to see what others are doing and believe that the people who do these things know why they are doing them. We become convinced that what we are doing has meaning, if not wholly known to us, at least known to others.

But these very same people whom we look to find themselves in the same situation. They do what they do only because others, who, as it seems to them, have an explanation of these deeds, demand the same from them. And thus, involuntarily deceiving each other, we each become ever more accustomed, not only to these things without understanding why, but become accustomed to ascribing to our deeds some mysterious, incomprehensible meaning. And the less we understand the meaning of what we do, the more dubious these acts become, the more importance we attach to them, and with all the greater solemnity do we carry them out.

Rich and the poor, we all behave and act like those around us and think we are doing our duty, reassuring ourselves by the thought that what has been done for so long by so many people, and is so highly prized by them, cannot but be the real business of life. And we live on to old age, and die, believing that even if we ourselves do not know why we live, why we are here, others know the reason for living—the very people who know precisely as little about it as we who depend upon them.

Add to this, new people come into existence, are born, grow up, and, looking upon this whirlpool of existence called life—

in which old, gray, respected men, surrounded by the reverence of the people, assert that this senseless commotion is life, and that there is no other — go away clueless after being jostled at life's doors. Such a one who has never beheld an assembly of people, having seen a crowding, lively, noisy throng at the entrance, and having decided that this is the assembly itself, after having been elbowed at the door, goes home with aching ribs and under the full conviction that he has actually been in the assembly.

The whole of our complicated, seething activity, with our busyness, our wars, our means of communication, our science and our art, is, for the most part, only the thronging of the clueless crowd about the doorway of life.

We pierce mountains, we fly around the world, we have electricity, microscopes, telephones, wars, parliaments, philanthropy, universities, scholarly societies, museums — but what is it all for? Is this life?
— *On Life*

A CONFESSION

When I got married my search for the meaning of life was completely diverted. My whole life became centered around my family and how to increase our means of livelihood. I tasted the temptation of authorship, as well as the immense monetary rewards and recognition that came with it, and managed to stifle all questions as to the meaning of my own life or life in general.

So I lived, but then something strange began to happen to me. I began to experience moments of perplexity where life “froze,” as though I did not know what to do or how to live, and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed, and I went on living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to reoccur more and more frequently, and invariably took the

same form. When they came, the same questions kept coming to my mind: “Why? What is it for? What does it lead to?”

At first it seemed to me that these were aimless, irrelevant questions. Besides, finding the answers wouldn’t be difficult. But these questions kept pressing themselves on me, pounding on me to find an answer. Their persistence was like drops of ink always falling on one place till they ran together into one black blot.

Then something happened to me, which was very much like what occurs to everyone stricken with a mortal disease. At first trivial symptoms of indisposition appear, to which the sick person pays no attention; then these symptoms reappear more and more frequently until they merge into uninterrupted periods of suffering. The suffering increases and, before the sick person can look around, what he took for a mere indisposition has become more important to him than anything else on earth — it is death!

This is exactly what happened to me. I became aware that my condition was not a chance indisposition, but something very serious, and that if all these questions continued to press on me I would have to find an answer to them. But the questions seemed so foolish, so simple, so childish, and yet, no sooner had I taken hold of them and attempted to answer them than I was convinced, first, that they were neither childish nor silly, but were concerned with the deepest problems of life, and, in the second place, try as I would, I was unable to solve them.

I was determined, however, to figure out *why* I was living as I was. As long as I did not know the reason *why* I could not do anything, I could not live. While thinking about the management of my household and estate, which greatly preoccupied me at that time, the question would suddenly occur: “Well, you have five thousands acres of land, and three hundred horses — What then? So what?”

I was absolutely muddled up inside, and did not know what to think. When thinking about how best to educate my children,

I would ask myself: "What for?" Or when thinking about how best to promote the welfare of the peasants, I would suddenly say to myself: "But what does it matter to me?" And when I thought about the fame that all my literary works would bring to me, I would say to myself: "Very well, I will become famous. So what? What then?"

I could find no answers, but the questions would not wait. They had to be answered at once, and if I did not answer them, it was impossible for me live. But no answer was being given. I felt that the ground on which I stood was crumbling, that there was nothing for me to stand on, that what I had been living from and for was nothing, that I had no solid reason for living.

My life then came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink, and sleep, for I could not help doing these things. But there was no real life in me because I did not have a single desire, the fulfillment of which I could feel to be reasonable. If I wished for anything, I knew beforehand that, were I to satisfy the wish, or were I not to satisfy it, nothing would come of it. Had a fairy appeared and offered me anything I desired, I wouldn't have known what to say.

I couldn't even wish to know the truth, because I surmised that life was ultimately meaningless. Every day of life, every step in it, brought me, as it were, nearer the precipice, and I saw clearly that before me there was nothing but ruin. And to stop was impossible; to go back was impossible; and it was impossible to shut my eyes so as not to see that there was nothing before me but suffering and death, absolute annihilation.



So here I was, a healthy, fortunate man, but with no reason for living. As a result, an irresistible power compelled me to rid myself one way or other of life. I cannot say I *wished* to kill myself. The power that drew me away from life was stronger, fuller, and more widespread than any mere wish. It was a force similar to that of wanting to live, only in a contrary direction.

All my strength drew me away from life. The thought of self-destruction now came to me as naturally as thoughts of how to improve my life had come formerly. And it was so seductive that I had to be cunning with myself lest I should carry it out too hastily.

Besides, I still wanted to do everything possible to disentangle the matter. "If I cannot unravel these riddles now, there will always be time." And it was then that I, a man blessed by fortune, hid a cord from myself lest I should hang myself from the crosspiece of the partition in my room where I undressed alone every evening. I also ceased to go out shooting with a gun lest I should be tempted by so easy a way of ending my life. I did not know what I wanted: I feared life, desired to escape from it, yet still hoped for something.

There is a tale, told long ago, of a traveler overtaken on a plain by an enraged beast. In trying to escape from the beast he crawls into a dry well, but immediately sees that at the bottom of the well is a dragon with open jaws ready to swallow him. And the unfortunate man, not daring to climb out lest he should be destroyed by the enraged beast, and not daring to leap to the bottom of the well lest he should be eaten by the dragon, seizes a twig growing in a crack in the well and clings to it. His hands are growing weaker and he feels he will soon have to resign himself to the destruction that awaits him above or below; but still he clings on.

Then he sees two mice, a black one and a white one, going regularly around and around the stem of the twig to which he is clinging and gnawing at it. And soon the twig will snap and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveler knows that he will inevitably perish; but while still hanging on he looks around, sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the twig, reaches them with his tongue and licks them.

So I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces; and I could not understand why I had fallen into such torment.

I tried to lick the honey that formerly consoled me, but the honey no longer gave me pleasure, and the white and black mice of day and night gnawed at the branch by which I hung. I saw the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tasted sweet. I only saw the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them. And this is not a fable but the real unanswerable predicament that faces every human being.

The deception of the joys of life that formerly relieved my terror of the dragon now no longer deceived me. The two drops of honey that diverted my eyes from the cruel truth of my existence, my love of family and of writing, were no longer sweet to me.

“Family” . . . I said to myself. But my wife and children are also human. They are placed just as I am: they must either live in a lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live? Why should I love them, protect them, nurture them? Loving them, I cannot hide the truth from them: each step in knowledge leads them to the truth. And the truth is death.

But what about “writing”? Wasn’t this one thing I could do that could escape the clutches of death? But soon I saw that this too was a fraud. As long as I believed that life had meaning, though one I could not express, the reflection of life in writing afforded me pleasure. It was pleasant to look at life in the mirror of literary works. But once I began to seek the meaning of my life, I could no longer soothe myself with what I now saw in the mirror, namely, that my life made no sense and was desperate. Once I grasped how meaningless and terrible my own life was, the play in the mirror could no longer amuse me. No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me once I saw the dragon and saw the mice gnawing away my support.

But this was not all. Had I simply understood that life had no meaning I could have borne it quietly, knowing that this was my lot. But I could not satisfy myself with that. Had I been like a man living in a jungle in which there was no exit, I could have lived. But I was like one lost in a jungle who, horrified

at having lost his way, rushes about wishing to find the path. He knows that each step he takes confuses him even more, but still he cannot help rushing about. In my search for answers to life's questions I experienced just what a person feels when lost in a forest. He reaches a glade, climbs a tree, and clearly sees the limitless distance, but sees that his home is not and cannot be there. Then he goes into the dark wood and sees only the darkness; his home is not there.

My life was indeed terrible. And to rid myself of the terror I was ready to kill myself. I felt a horror of what awaited me and knew that it was more horrible than the position I was in. Yet I could not just wait patiently for the end. The horror of the darkness was too great to bear, and I longed to free myself from it as quickly as possible with a rope or a bullet. This was the feeling that, above all, drew me to the brink of suicide.



My question — that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide — was the simplest of questions, a question lying in the soul of every person. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: “What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my life? What is life for?”

Differently expressed, the question is: “Why should I live, why hope for anything, or do anything?” It can also be expressed thus: “Does my life have any meaning that death cannot destroy?”

To this one question, variously expressed, I sought an answer in philosophy and science. According to philosophy, the essence of life and all that exists, is designated as “idea,” or “substance,” or “spirit,” or “will.” It's all one and the same: that the essence of life exists and that I am of that same essence.

But why this essence exists the philosopher does not know, and does not say, if he is a careful enough thinker. I ask: “Why should this essence exist? What results from the fact that it is

and will be?" Philosophy not only cannot answer this question, but can only put forth the same question. If it keeps firmly to its proper sphere, it can only answer the question, "What am I, and what is the universe?" by saying, "All and nothing," and to the question, "Why?" by adding, "I do not know."

When I turned to the study of science the result was the same. "What is the meaning of my life?" "There is none." Or: "What will come of my life?" "Nothing." Or: "Why does everything exist that exists, and why do I exist?" "Because it exists."

I fared no better in turning to the more exact sciences. "What is the meaning of my life?" The biologist answers: "You are what you call your 'life'; you are a transitory, causal cohesion of particles. The mutual interactions and changes of these particles produce in you what you call your 'life'. That cohesion will last some time; afterward the interaction of these particles will cease and what you call 'life' will cease, and so will all your questions. You are an accidentally united little lump of energy. That little lump undergoes decomposition, which we call 'life'; the lump disintegrates, decomposition ends, and with it all the questions."

So answers the scientist.

What I found in philosophy and science I confronted elsewhere among history's sages. For Socrates, life in the body was a deception. Its destruction was thus a blessing, and we should desire it. According to Solomon, everything in the world—folly and wisdom and riches and poverty and mirth and grief—all was vanity and empty. We die and nothing is left of us. It is all very senseless. For the Buddha, we must ultimately free ourselves from life, as life itself consists of suffering. For Schopenhauer, life is something that should not exist at all; it is an evil. Only the passage into Nothingness is good. And what these thinkers have said has been said and thought and felt by millions upon millions of people like them. I too have thought it and felt it.

So my search in philosophy and among the sciences and sages of history, far from freeing me from my despair, only increased it. All was vanity! Happy is he who has not been born. Death is better than life, and one must free oneself from this life.



I then turned my attention to the people around me, hoping to find an answer from them. I began to observe how people like myself lived, and what their attitude was to this question that brought me into such despair.

Some simply asserted that life was an absurdity. There was no answer to life's questions. Others, the majority, argued that while life had no ultimate meaning, one should just eat, drink, and be merry. Still others argued that life consisted in strength and power, in destroying life. The absurdity of life could be overcome by taking one's own life in defiance, promptly ending the stupid joke. Though small in number, more and more in our circle were choosing this path. Finally, some admitted that life had no meaning, but in weakness we had to pretend that it did. In short, among my peers the terrible contradiction of life was simply evaded.

I could no longer do this. Had I enough courage I would have ended my life, but I see now that I didn't kill myself because inside me there was a dim awareness that something was not quite right in the way I was approaching my dilemma. I knew that my very act of thinking affirmed the validity of my life. Or to put it another way: were there no life, reason itself would not exist. Reason was life's son. Reason was the fruit of life, yet my reason rejected life itself. Something was wrong here.

There was another thing that nagged me. It was easy to see the pointlessness of living, yet the simplest, most down-to-earth folk around me lived and did so believing that life had meaning. How was this? How did they possess a sense of meaning when all I could conclude was life was pointless?

I instinctively felt that if I wished to live and understand the meaning of life, I must seek this meaning not among my cultured peers, those who lived for no satisfactory reason, but among the masses of those simple, uneducated, and poor people who live and affirm life's meaning, despite the conclusions delivered by reason. Their lives, though rationally groundless, had purpose. They lived by a faith that I, in all my reasonableness, had rejected.

With this realization, however, my situation became even worse. The path of reason led me to reject life. Yet to turn to faith demanded that I deny reason, which was yet more impossible for me than a denial of life. To understand the meaning of life I would have to turn to faith, but to do this I would also have to renounce my reason — the very thing for which alone meaning could be determined. And yet I had to admit that besides rational knowledge there seemed to exist a kind of knowledge — faith — that enabled people to live and that provided them answers to the questions I was asking.

And then it dawned on me that in order to live at all one must believe in something. Faith was the strength of life. Without believing that life was worth living, we would not live. And if I did not acknowledge the illusory nature of the finite, then I had to believe in the finite; or, if I saw the illusory nature of the finite, then I had to believe in the Infinite. Either way, I realized that no one lives without faith, not even the strictest rationalist.



My new realization about the necessity of faith forced me to go back to my original question, which, in turn, helped me to see that the answer I wanted had to do with the Infinite's relation to the finite, and vice versa. What I needed to know was what the meaning of my life had *beyond* time and space, and not what my life meant within the confines of time and space. The answer to that, of course, was: "None."

By appealing only to reason I could not get myself out of the quagmire of finitude, and thus life was meaningless. But by faith I could find an answer to life's meaning. For faith alone offered the key to understanding why life was worth living and why it was we instinctively don't end our own lives. Faith pointed me away from myself to the Infinite, of which I was a part.

What I eventually discovered was that the conception of an infinite God, along with the divinity of the soul, the connection of human affairs with God, the unity and existence of the soul, and our conception of moral goodness and evil — that all of these are hidden in the infinity of human thought. They are the very things without which neither life nor I would exist.

With Solomon, I began to understand that *our* wisdom was folly. I also saw that reason by itself always ran in a vicious circle, like a cogwheel the teeth of which no longer catch in another. However much and however well we may be able to reason we cannot get an answer to our question by reason alone; it will always be $0 = 0$. Finally, I began to grasp that the answers given by faith were stored up in the deepest recesses of human wisdom and that I had no right to deny them on the basis of reason, and that those answers were the only ones that truly solved life's riddle.

So the key to my quest was faith. But not the faith of my self-indulgent peers. These "believers," like myself, lived in comfort and ease while still being gripped by a fear of suffering and death. Like myself, they lived to satisfy their desires and lived just as badly, if not worse, than those who didn't profess any faith. No arguments could convince me of the truth of their faith. Only deeds that would free me from what I dreaded — poverty, sickness, and death — could convince me. And so I turned to the faith of the common people and to those outside the church.

The more I looked at their life the more I became convinced that they were the ones, despite their various superstitions, who had real faith. I found, contrary to those in my own circle, that

these folks were content with life — despite a life of heavy labor and hardship. In complete contrast to their ignorance, they knew the meaning of life and death, labored quietly, endured deprivations and suffering, and lived and died seeing therein not vanity but good. And after living among these folks for several years I understood that *that* is life itself, and that the meaning given to that life was truth: and I accepted it.



How then was I able to return to my original faith, the one I once held when I was younger but later rejected? What repelled me in the past, as I discovered, was not the faith but the meaninglessness of those lives who lived in contradiction to the faith they professed. This included my own. I went astray not because I erred in my thinking but because I lived badly. It was not an error in my thought that hid the truth from me so much as my life itself, with its epicurean pursuit of satisfying one's pleasures. I asked myself what my life amounted to and got the reply: an evil and an absurdity. And so it was.

But then I made the mistake of concluding that life in general was absurd. I loved the darkness more than the light, but instead of recognizing this I lashed out at life itself. The truth was always as true as that two and two are four, but I refused to acknowledge it, because on admitting two and two to be four I had also to admit that my life was bad and that it was I who had made it so. But I could not do this. I felt I was a good person.

But then I came to love good, honest people. Now everything became clear to me. Compared to them, I had been living as a parasite. My comfort, my welfare, and all my learned discussions were at the expense of those who really earned their living. Yet it was these very people who knew how to live and were happy, not I.

If a naked, hungry beggar has been taken from the crossroads, brought into a building belonging to a beautiful estab-

ishment, fed, supplied with drink, and made to move a handle up and down, it is evident that the beggar, before seeking to know why he was taken, why he should work the handle, and whether the arrangements of the establishment are reasonable or not, must first move the handle. If he moves the handle he will understand that it works a pump, that the pump draws water, and that the water irrigates the garden beds. Then he will be taken from the pumping station to another place where he will gather fruits and will enter into the joy of his master, and, passing from lower to higher work, will understand better and better the arrangements of the whole establishment; and he will take part with them without once stopping to ask why he is there, nor will he ever think of reproaching the master of that place.

So it is with those who do the will of their master, the simple, uneducated working folk, whom so many of us educated ones regard as cattle. They do not reproach the master, but we, the wise, eat the master's food but do not do what the master wishes, and instead of doing it sit in a circle and discuss: "Why should that handle be moved? Isn't it stupid to move such a handle?" And when we have thought it all out, what is our conclusion? Why, that the master is stupid or that he doesn't even exist, while we wise ones ultimately feel we are fit for nothing, and that we must somehow or other end our lives.

The conviction that the truth could only be found by living it eventually led me to doubt the rightness of my own life. I began to understand that to grasp life's meaning I had to stop living like a parasite and live a real life. I also had to heed more attentively to my heart, from which my search for God needed to proceed. For I knew that any conception of God I might have would still be but a conception, one that I could evoke or refrain from evoking in myself. That was not what I wanted to seek. I wanted that without which there could be no life. Only then could I truly live. For based on fading memories of

my past, I only lived, really lived, when I felt him and sought him with my whole heart.

And then finally, more than ever before, everything within me and around me lit up. "What more did I have to seek?" exclaimed a voice within me. "This is He. God is that without which you cannot live. To know God and to live is one and the same thing! God is life. Live seeking God, and then you will not live without God." This light that had dawned inside and around me never again abandoned me. And I was saved.



I had come full circle. In short, what happened to me was something like this: I was put into a boat and pushed off from an unknown shore, shown the direction to the opposite shore, had oars put into my unskilled hands, and was left alone. I rowed as best I could and moved forward, but the further I advanced toward the middle of the stream, the more rapidly grew the current, bearing me away from my goal. More and more I encounter others, like myself, borne away by the stream.

There were a few rowers who continued to row, but then there were others who had abandoned their oars. There were large boats and immense vessels full of people. Some struggled against the current, others yielded to it. And the further I went, the more, as I watched the long line floating down the current, I forgot the course pointed out to me as my own.

In the very middle of the stream, amid the crowd of boats and vessels floating down, I had altogether lost the course and so threw down my oars. From all sides the joyful and exulting navigators, as they rowed or sailed downstream, assured me — and each other — that no other direction was possible. And I believed them and floated right along. And I was carried far, so far that I heard the roar of the rapids in which I was bound to perish, and I could even see boats that had been shattered from them.

Then I came to my senses. It was long before I clearly comprehended what had happened to me. I saw before me nothing but destruction, toward which I was rushing, which I dreaded. I saw no safety anywhere and did not know what to do!

Yet on looking back, I saw a countless number of boats engaged in a ceaseless struggle against the force of the torrent. Then I remembered the shore, the oars, and the course, and at once I began to row hard up the stream and again toward the shore. That shore was God, that course was the wisdom of the Ages, those oars were the free will given me to make for the shore and unite with God. And so the force of life was renewed in me and I again began to live. — *My Confession*

I, LIKE THE THIEF

Five years ago I came to believe in Christ's teachings, and my life suddenly changed. I ceased to desire what I had previously desired and began to desire what I formerly did not want. What had previously seemed to me good seemed evil, and what seemed evil seemed good. It happened to me as it happens to a man who goes out on some business and suddenly decides that the business is unnecessary and returns home. All that was on his left is now on his right; his former wish to get as far as possible from home has changed into a wish to be as near as possible to it. The direction of my life and my desires became different, and good and evil changed places.

I, like that thief on the cross, have believed Christ's teaching and been saved. This is no far-fetched comparison, but the closest expression of the condition of spiritual despair and horror at the problem of life and death in which I lived formerly, and of the condition of peace and happiness in which I am now. I, like the thief, knew that I had lived and was living badly. I, like the thief, knew that I was unhappy and suffering. I, like the thief to the cross, was nailed by some force to a life of suffering and

evil. And as, after the meaningless sufferings and evils of life, the thief awaited the terrible darkness of death, so did I await the same thing.

In all this I was exactly like the thief, but the difference was that the thief was already dying, while I was still living. The thief might believe that his salvation lay there beyond the grave, but I could not be satisfied with that, because besides a life beyond the grave, life still awaited me here. And I did not understand that life. It seemed to me terrible. But suddenly I heard the words of Christ and understood them, and life and death ceased to seem evil, and instead of despair I experienced happiness and the joy of life undisturbed by death.

— *What I Believe*

THE TRUTH THAT SETS FREE

Every person, somewhere during his life, finds himself in regard to truth in the position of one walking in the darkness with light thrown before him by the lantern he carries. He does not see what is not yet lighted up by the lantern. He does not see what he has passed which is hidden in the darkness. Yet at every stage of his journey he sees what is lighted up by the lantern, and he can always choose one side of the road or the other.

All the difficulty and seeming insolubility of the question of freedom results from trying to solve the question by imagining our situation as being stationary in our relation to the truth. We are certainly not free if we imagine ourselves being stationary, and if we forget that our life is but a continual movement from darkness into light, from a lower stage of truth to a higher, from a truth more alloyed with errors to a truth more purified from them.

We would not be free if we knew no truth at all, and in the same way we would not be free and would not even have the notion of freedom if the whole truth, which was to guide us in

life, had been revealed once and for all to us in all its purity. But we are not stationary in regard to truth. Each of us is passing through life, and we are continually confronted with learning to know a greater and greater degree of truth, and growing more and more free from error.

Our liberty does not consist in the power of acting independently of the progress of life and the influences arising from it, but in the capacity for recognizing and acknowledging the truth revealed to us, and becoming the joyful participator in the eternal and infinite work of God in the world. Failing this, and refusing to recognize the truth, we become a miserable and reluctant slave dragged where we have no desire to go.

Truth not only points out the way along which we ought to move, but reveals the only way in which to move. And therefore all of us must willingly or unwillingly move along the way of truth, some spontaneously accomplishing the task set us in life, others submitting involuntarily to the law of life. Our freedom lies in the power of this choice. And more than that, this freedom is the sole means of accomplishing the divine work of the life of the world. — *The Kingdom of God Is within You*

THE MILLER

Imagine a man whose only means of livelihood is a mill. It just so happens that this man begins to hear different ideas about the mill's mechanism, and so he begins to reflect upon the construction of the mill and observe what part is turned by what other part. From the flywheel to the grindstone, from the grindstone to the millrace, from the millrace to the wheel, from the wheel to the gate, the dam, and the water, he comes clearly to conclude that the whole mill operation lies in the dam and the river.

The man rejoices so greatly in his discovery that instead of examining, as he did before, the quality of the flour which

comes forth, instead of raising and lowering the millstones, of shoeing them, of tightening and slackening the belt, he begins to study the river. As a result, the mill is thrown entirely out of gear. The people begin to tell the miller that he is not doing his work properly. Yet he argues with them and continues to study the river. He studies the river so much that he finally becomes convinced that the river is the mill itself.

To those who try and prove the faultiness of his course of reasoning, the miller replies, "No mill grinds without water. Consequently, in order to know the mill, it is necessary to know how the water works, to know the force of its current as well as its source. To know the mill, it is necessary to know the river."

The miller cannot be logically dislodged from his line of reasoning. The only means of dispelling his illusion is to show him that good reasoning depends first of all on the object, or on one's objective. This determines the order in which the separate trains of thought are to be arranged, in order that they can be understood. Reasoning not bound together by a common aim is foolish, no matter how logical it may be.

The aim of the miller consists in producing good flour, and this aim, if he will keep it in view, will determine how best to understand the workings of the mill—about the millstones, the wheel, the dam, and also the river. But without this relation to the aim, the miller's arguments, no matter how fine and logical they may be, will be inherently irregular and, what is the principal consideration, useless.

And such, in my opinion, are the arguments addressing the contemporary approach to life.

Life is the mill that we desire to investigate. The mill is necessary to grind well, to produce flour; life is necessary in order that it may be good and for the good. We cannot abandon the quest of understanding for a single moment with impunity. If we abandon it, our deliberations infallibly lose their place.

For this reason, we should study life in order that it might become better, more fruitful. Those who have already sincerely

contemplated life's meaning, history's sages, have helped to advance humanity in the path of wisdom. But there have always existed, and there exist now, so-called philosophers and theologians who have abandoned the real aim of reasoning, and who, in its stead, investigate questions unrelated to life — as to why the mill turns. Some assert that it is by reason of the water, others, that it is in consequence of the arrangement. The dispute is heated, and the subject of discussion just moves farther and farther away, and is completely replaced by utterly pointless and obscure topics.

There is an ancient jest about a dispute between a Jew and a Christian. The story runs that the Christian, replying to the confused subtleties of the Jew, slapped the latter on his bald pate with his palm, so that it cracked. He then put forth the following question: "Did the crack come from the pate or from the palm?" At this, their dispute about matters of faith was replaced by a fresh and insoluble problem.

Something of the same sort always happens when it comes to questions about life. The scientific mentality, for instance, is preoccupied with the origin of life. Does it consist of an immaterial beginning, or from the combination of various forms of matter? In science, especially, there is no end to these kinds of questions. All the while, the aim of life's quest gets abandoned.

If our understanding of life is not first implanted within us, then science, or any other branch of knowledge, will be erroneous. It will be as useless as it is aimless. It is not "science" that determines life's meaning, but our conception of life that determines what should be acknowledged as science. And therefore, in order that science may be science, that is, knowledge that helps life along, the question must first be settled as to what is, and what is not science, and to this end our idea of life must be elucidated. This is the greatest task.

— *On Life*

DEATH COMES KNOCKING

Whatever names we dignify ourselves with, whatever uniforms we wear, whatever clergy we have ourselves blessed by, however many millions we possess, however many police are stationed along our streets, however many so-called criminals, revolutionaries, and subversives we punish, whatever exploits we have performed, whatever states we may have founded, buildings we may have erected — from Babel to the Eiffel Tower — there are two inevitable conditions of life, confronting all of us: (1) death, which may at any moment pounce upon any one of us, and (2) the transitoriness of all our works, which so soon pass away and leave no trace.

Whatever we may do — found companies, build palaces and monuments, write songs and poems — none of it remains for long. Soon it passes away, leaving no trace. And therefore, however we may conceal it from ourselves, we cannot help seeing that the significance of our life cannot lie in our personal fleshly existence, the prey of incurable suffering and inevitable death, nor in any social institution or organization. Whoever you are reading these lines, think of your position and of your duties — not of your position as landowner, businessman, lawyer, politician, minister, soldier, which has been temporarily allotted you by society, and not of the imaginary duties laid on you by those positions, but of your real position in eternity as a creature who, at the will of Someone, has been called out of unconsciousness after an eternity of nonexistence to which you may return at any moment at his will.

Think of your real duties, the duties that follow from your real position as a being called into life and endowed with reason and love.

Are you doing what God has sent you into the world for, and to whom you will soon return? Are you doing what he wills? Are you doing his will, when as landowner or entrepreneur you rob the poor of the fruits of their toil, basing your life on this

plunder of the workers, or when, as judge or governor, you sentence them to execution, or when as soldiers you prepare for war, killing, and plunder?

Even if you are told that all this is necessary for maintaining the existing order, and that greater disasters would ensue if the way things are were destroyed, isn't it obvious that all this is said by those who profit by such an arrangement, while those who suffer from it — and they are ten times as numerous — think to the contrary? And at the bottom of your heart you know yourself that it is not true, that the existing order of things is not how things are supposed to be.

More importantly, even if such a life is necessary, why do you believe it is *your* duty to maintain it at the cost of your best feelings? Who has made you the nurse in charge of this sick and moribund system? Not society nor the state nor anyone. No one has asked you to undertake this. You who fill your position of landowner, businessman, politician, priest, or soldier know very well that you occupy that position not because you are so concerned about other people's happiness, but simply to satisfy your own interests, to satisfy your own security and well-being. If you did not desire that position, you would not be doing your utmost to retain it.

Try the experiment of ceasing to compromise your conscience in order to retain your position, and you will lose it at once. Think about it. — *The Kingdom of God Is within You*

WHY IS THIS?

Every one of us wants to love and be loved. Why then, after so many thousand of years, has humankind, though knowing the means of happiness, failed to practice it? Why does the sentiment of love, so natural and so beneficent, fail to rule our lives?

It is obvious that it is not enough to say: Love one another. That has been said for centuries, and has been repeated *ad nauseam*, in all tones, from all platforms, religious and secular. And yet we continue to war instead of love one another. Why is this? No one can doubt that if we — instead of tearing one another to pieces each seeking our own happiness, that of our family, or that of our country — would but help one another, if we would replace selfishness by love and would organize our lives to build up community instead of self-interest, if we loved one another as each of us loves ourselves, if, at least, we did not do to others what we would not like done to us, as was said two thousand years ago, our happiness would be far greater, and human life in general would be reasonable, instead of being what it is now, a succession of contradictions and sufferings.

Most decent human beings acknowledge, if not the law of love, at least the obligation “not to do to others what they would not that others do to them.” But even with this we fail to act upon it. Evidently some secret but overwhelming reason prevents us from doing what is ultimately to our advantage, what would save us from the perils that menace us, and what the law of God and our conscience alike dictate. Are we to conclude that love applied to life is a chimera? If so, how is it that for so many centuries we have allowed ourselves to be deluded by this unrealizable ideal? We can neither resolve to follow the law of love in our lives nor to give up the idea.

Why is this? What is the reason for this enduring contradiction? Do we simply lack the desire or is it because we lack the possibility to do what our hearts tell us? Are we just too busy, too engrossed in work, too distracted to pause and collect our thoughts and reflect on what truly ought to be? Why is this?

— *Stop and Think*

KILLING CONSCIENCE

We are both spiritual and physical in nature. We may thus be moved by things that influence our spiritual nature, or by things that influence our physical nature, as a clock may be moved by its hands or by its main wheel. And just as it is best to regulate the movement of a clock by means of its inner mechanism, so we are best regulated by means of our conscience. Unfortunately, too many of us care less about whether our conscience is working properly than about whether it should appear to be working right. In fact, we deliberately make use of substances in order to keep our conscience working at all.

Why do people drink and get high? Why do we spend ourselves on outer diversions and distractions? It is not to cheer ourselves up, or because it is pleasant to do so, but in order to drown the voice of conscience in ourselves. And this always leads to devastating consequences. Think for a moment what a building would be like if it was erected by people who did not use a straight plumb-rule or right-angled square. The walls would never be perpendicular nor the corners correct. What good would it be to use a soft rule that would bend to suit all the irregularities in the walls, or a square that expanded to fit any angle, acute or obtuse? But this kind of thing happens whenever we dull ourselves and fail to heed our conscience by making use of intoxicants.

Each of us at various periods of life is confronted with certain moral questions that need to be solved. It takes a great deal of effort to attend to them and to seek answers. In every labor, especially at the beginning, there is a time when the work is painfully difficult, when we are tempted to give up. Physical work is painful at first, mental work still more. As Lessing says: people are inclined to cease to think at the point at which thought begins to be difficult; but it is just there, I would add, that thinking begins to be fruitful.

We often feel that it takes too much work to decide the important questions of life. We are thus inclined to evade them. We will do anything to avoid the struggle. By drinking and getting high, or by becoming obsessed with trivial objects and activities, we try, even if unconsciously, to drive from our consciousness these very questions. For these questions torment us, and in order to avoid the disquietude evoked by them, we excite our senses so as to deaden ourselves inside. Eventually, our conscience ceases to demand a solution to the riddles of life, and for months, years, even for a whole lifetime, we can stand before those same moral questions and not be a step closer to their solution. Yet it is in the solution of these moral questions that life's whole movement consists.

We each want to be happy. But we are like the person who needs to see to the bottom of some muddy water to obtain a precious pearl, but who is also afraid of having to dive deep down to get it. So instead of leaping off the edge, we take a stick and stir up the water the moment it begins to settle and become clear. In this way we never quite see where the pearl lies. Isn't this what we each do with our conscience? We muddy the waters of our soul, and, as the years go by, we never break through to life's real meaning. Instead, the sharp point of truth is so blunted that it no longer enables our conscience to do its work.

When we do not live as our conscience demands, and then try to deaden its voice by means of various poisons and fleshly pursuits, we gradually lose the strength to live according to the truth. And to our shame, we become like a person who covers his eyes to hide from himself what he does not wish to see. The diversions we pursue may distract our attention away from conscience, but only for a while. Either we will turn and begin to take heed, or else we will go on disregarding the indications and warnings of our conscience and end up with stale lives of discord and misery.

— *Essays and Letters*

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

To the question, "What must be done?" I reply first of all that we must cease deceiving others as well as ourselves. We must stop being afraid of the truth, whatever it might be. This comes down to little things: "Not at home," when I am in; "Very well," when I am not that at all; "Not enough time," when we know there is. But there is something more vital here. And this is the matter of how we deceive ourselves. It is this lie that must be overcome if we wish to answer the question, "What must be done?"

How can I truly answer this question if my life is based upon a lie, and when I carefully cast this lie as if it were truth, to others and to myself? Not to lie, in this sense, means not to be afraid of truth; not to invent excuses, and not to accept the excuses of others. It means living according to one's conscience and not being afraid of living in contradiction to all that is false, however dreadful the consequences of doing so might be.

Pretending to others, whether consisting of conventional half-truths or outright lies, is always disadvantageous in the long run. Wisdom alone tells us this much. But lying to one's self leads to complete ruin.

If I consider a wrong road to be a right one, then my every step only leads me farther from my aim. If I have been walking for a long time on a wrong path, I may yet discover that it is the wrong one. But if I, being afraid of the thought of how far I have gone astray, try to assure myself that I may, by following this wrong way a bit further, still come across the right one, then surely I will never find it. If I am afraid of the truth, and then, on seeing it, refuse to acknowledge it, and instead take further steps away from it, I will never come to know what is to be done in life.

If we would only avoid deceiving ourselves, we would find out what to do, where to go, how to live, and do so with clarity. But how can we learn to come to terms with ourselves?

The answer lies in repentance. We must entirely change the estimation we have ourselves and how we are living. Instead of viewing our lives as decent and competent, we must acknowledge them as being harmful and trifling. Instead of resting on how much we think we know, we should feel how ignorant we are. Instead of imagining ourselves as being kind and good, we must see how hard-hearted we are. And instead of seeing how important we are, we must see our own insignificance.

Without repentance we will think of ourselves as somehow special or exceptional, above others, able to serve them as if we ourselves lacked nothing. Not until we see ourselves as ruined are we able to benefit others. For those of us who have been given much, we especially must lay aside our pride about our education, our cultural sophistication, our talents and skills, and let go of the idea that we are the benefactors of society. No, it is we who have been stealing from humanity. We are the guilty ones for the world's suffering. We are good-for-nothing people. We are not benefactors of the people, but offenders who humiliate them.

The question should be put thus: "How can I, a helpless, useless person, seeing now the misfortune of having lost my best years, rectify my life and truly serve others?" How can I really turn over a new leaf?

A person will never be able to answer the question, "What must be done?" until he stops deceiving himself and repents. And repentance is not dreadful, even as truth is not dreadful, at least not to those who seek a life that leads to the good.

— *What Is to Be Done?*

STOP, LOOK, CONSIDER!

If I were asked for the most important advice I could give, that which I considered to be the most useful to the people of our time, I would simply say: In the name of God, stop a moment,

cease your work, look around you, consider what you are and what you ought to be — think of the ideal!

The ideal is neither something supernatural nor the realm of the unexplained. It appeals to our conscience with more certainty than anything else. The ideal in geometry is the perfectly straight line, and the circle, the radii of which are equal. In science it is exact truths. In morals it is perfect virtue, excellence. Although all these things — straight line, exact truth, perfect virtue — have never existed, they are not only more natural, more known, and more explicable than all our other knowledge, they are also the only things we truly know.

It is said that reality is that which exists. Or, to put it differently, only what exists is real. However, the contrary is the case. True reality, that which we indubitably know, has itself never yet “existed.” The ideal is the only thing we know with certainty, but it doesn’t actually exist. Yet it is only thanks to the ideal that we know anything at all. The ideal alone can guide us, both individually and collectively.

The Christian ideal — the law of love — has been before us for centuries, and it shines in our time with such intensity that it is virtually impossible to avoid seeing that our problems proceed from that fact that we do not reach for it.

There are those who wish to discount this ideal because it is, as history proves, unattainable. They want to persuade us to close our eyes so as not to see it. They claim that in order to be absolutely certain of arriving safely in port, we ought, before all else, to throw overboard the compass and forge straight ahead. Now we resemble people who, desiring to pull down some object that annoys them, drag at it in opposite directions and have no time to agree as to the direction in which we ought to pull.

Should we then just throw out the ideal? Where would this leave us?

But let us stop all our activity for a moment and consider — comparing the demands of our reason and of our heart with

the actual conditions of our lives — in order to see how our whole life and our every action are in incessant and outrageous contradiction to the yearnings of our soul.

Before we can change our way of living and feeling, we must undergo a change in our way of thinking. But before this can happen we must stop and give proper attention to our lives. To hear what those who wish to save us are shouting, we who run singing toward the precipice must cease our hubbub and stop short.

So let us pause and reflect on the state of our lives. If we do, we can't help but be turned toward the ideal. We will grasp anew a conception of life so natural, so simple, so fresh that the needs of our heart and mind will resonate with gladness; we will spontaneously feel what it is that will liberate us from the complications and entanglements of our life and work.

— *On Life*