A Word to Youth

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Andre Maurois (1885-1967), French author, whose fame rests on *Ariel*, a life of Shelley, the English poet.

A questionnaire is, generally speaking either a nuisance or a bore. But once in a while one comes along that inspires thinking. At such times the interrogated blesses his examiner. This is what I felt one morning recently when I was asked to answer the following:

1. What is the most valuable lesson life has taught you?

2. To a young person in whom you were interested, what advice would you give which would help him to keep his balance in the most difficult experiences of his life?

There we have two beautiful problems. Let us give them a little thought.

I

Adolescence is the most difficult period of life, because then every defeat seems final. Let the youth live but a little longer and he will learn life's first, most valuable lesson—that nothing is final.

"Things adjust themselves, more or less badly," Disraeli used to say dolefully. Not a very consoling thought, put that way. For it is quite as true that things turn out well. More often still, many actions have no results—they come to naught. A few weeks slip into a few months; and of a situation that seemed at the time to have no possible solution nothing remains but a faint memory, a confused picture, a regret.

The man or woman who has lived through the experience of an unendurable present transformed into a blurred past has more power to face affliction. "A wretched power," the romantic youth will say, "a power made up of indifference and skepticism. Rather than that, gave me my weakness and my suffering."

The youth is mistaken. Men and women who have reached maturity have not become indifferent. If even in love they know the passion is fleeting, that very thought makes the experience acute, more ardent. "Nothing is sadder than a second love," Goethe said. "But a third comes and soothes the other two."

I speak here not only of personal problems and private sorrows. In political life it is especially true that long-faced prophets of misfortune unsettle inexperienced young men. Now here again a longer life teaches that events straighten themselves out by time and circumstance. And a wise old Italian diplomat used to say to the young men who surrounded him. "Don't ever say, 'This is very serious.' For sixty years I have been hearing that things are very serious."

As a matter of fact, how can a human situation possibly be otherwise than serious?

It is very serious to be a man, to live, to carry on. And yet it is also true that, as the Italian minister suggested, life is very simple, very beautiful; and that it has been going on now for some millions of years.

"The hollow optimism of words," some will think. In present sorrow the mere abstract idea of future relief is comfortless. But life itself shows us the way to more active solace. We learn that we can cut loose from its most painful moments. Flee the place of grief and the ache will heal. Twenty miles . . . the thought of not seeing for some time those who have wounded us . . . and little by little unhappy memories fade. Better still, even without stirring from the spot, escape from torment is possible by the enjoyment of reading, of music, and of some form of creation. The function of Art in life is to substitute for futile and painful concentration upon oneself the serene and selfless contemplation of Beauty.

Life's second lesson—at least for me—is that few people are wholly evil. In his first years of contact with strangers, the youth who has known only the mild life of the family circle is frightened by the cruelty, selfishness, jealousy, which he thinks he meets at every turn. His pessimism is not entirely unfounded: humanity can be appallingly base. But as we come to know people better we find that they are capable of kindliness, of enduring tenderness, of great heroism. Then we begin to realize that what is really fear of life is shielding itself behind the armor of crime. What seems revenge is really suffering. And, most frequent of all, ignorance is judging and acting blindly. The English writer, Charles Lamb, said one day, "I hate that man." "But you don't know him," a listener objected. "Of course I don't," said Lamb. "Do you think I could possibly hate a man I know?"

"What is the most valuable lesson life has taught me?" A passionate belief in human nature, in spite of her crimes, in spite of her madness. For that madness is a result: it is not a cause.

II

We must come to the second question, "What advice would you give to a young friend which would help him to keep his balance in the most difficult experiences of his life?"

That's a question for a book, not for an essay. I think I should begin by insisting on the necessity for discipline. It is not well for a man or a woman to be ceaselessly seeking the whys and wherefores of everything. That a life may be happy, it must be based on fixed principles. I would almost say that it is of little importance what those principles are so long as they are solid, steady; and that we accept them without compromise. I am not speaking here of doctrinal creeds. "That," says the poet Byron, "is an affair between a man and his Maker." I am speaking of actions self-imposed, of building upon a solid base, of living by strict discipline. The discipline of a religious life, the discipline of work, of every

kind of sport—these are all sane and wholesome, provided they are whole-heartedly believed in.

Another condition making for mental and moral balance seems to me to be unity in the plan, continuity in the pattern. A young person is tempted by every possibility, and the possibilities are infinite. Limiting himself to a choice irks him. He wants to have every kind of friend; to take every possible journey; to embrace all learning; to embark upon every kind of career; to experience every kind of love. But one of life's conditions is that he must limit himself; he has to choose. Then, and only then, can he live deeply and steadily.

These, I think, would be my answers—if I were to answer.