

1. John Burroughs



THE SECRET OF HAPPINESS IS SOMETHING TO DO

THE POET stood at his window and watched a neighbor walk by. He walked—not as a man should, in joy and triumph—but with slow step and sagging shoulders, like a man with a great burden on his soul.

John Burroughs knew why. The man had no work he loved, nothing to keep him busy and content, to give his days purpose and direction.

“An idle man is a wretched man,” he thought, listening to the shrill cacophony of the birds, to the soft whispering of the trees. Surely no one knew better than he the blessedness of work, of life-giving and life-sustaining work!

Had he not been idle himself once, and one of the most utterly dejected of God’s creatures? Life had lost its savor for him, had become empty and stagnant; he couldn’t eat or sleep, couldn’t think or dream.

Work had saved him. Good hard work on a farm, with his hands, raking and hoeing, plowing and planting, feeling the good earth between his fingers . . . feeling his oneness with the universe.

The plow had done its perfect work on him, as on his fields. The bitterness and boredom had been plowed under, the stagnant pools of discontent drained off. The planting and pruning had shaped his life as surely as they had shaped his fruit trees. For seeing the rivers shine and dimple in the spring, watching the birds arrive and hearing their shrill, excited laughter, looking up from his work and seeing the skies and distant hills bathed in the

magic of sudden beauty, he had found renewal and inspiration. He had found his life's work.

John Burroughs turned from the window, walked slowly to his desk. *Wake-Robin* had been the first of a series of books about birds, flowers, and rural scenes that had brought him world-wide recognition. But far more important, his poems and essays on out-of-door life had brought him joy and contentment.

If only he could make others realize that happiness was no elusive will-o'-the-wisp, that real happiness was the simplest thing in the world—and within reach of all! People all about him were reaching for happiness in hopeless ways, or, like the neighbor who had just walked by, were letting their lives empty into stagnant pools. He must try to make them realize that the secret of happiness was in work, congenial work, *something to do*. He picked up his pen and began to write:

There is a condition or circumstance that has a greater bearing upon the happiness of life than any other. What is it? It is one of the simplest things in the world and within reach of all. If this secret were something I could put up at auction, what a throng of bidders I should have, and what high ones! Only the wise ones can guess what it is. Some might say it is health, or money, or friends, or this or that possession, but you may have all these things and not be happy. You may have fame and power, and not be happy. I maintain there is one thing more necessary to a happy life than any other, though health and money and friends and home are all important. That one thing is—what? The sick man will say health; the poor man, wealth; the ambitious man, power; the scholar, knowledge; the over-worked man, rest.

Without the one thing I have in mind, none of these things would long help their possessors to be happy. We could not long be happy without food or drink or clothes or shelter, but we may have all these things to perfection and still want the prime condition of happiness. It is often said that a contented mind is the first condition of happiness, but what is the first condition of a contented mind? You will be dis-

appointed when I tell you what this all-important thing is—it is so common, so near at hand, and so many people have so much of it and yet are not happy. They have too much of it, or else the kind that is not best suited to them. What is the best thing for a stream? It is to keep moving. If it stops, it stagnates. So the best thing for a man is that which keeps the currents going—the physical, the moral, and the intellectual currents. Hence the secret of happiness is—something to do; some congenial work. Take away the occupation of all men, and what a wretched world it would be!

Few persons realize how much of their happiness is dependent upon their work, upon the fact that they are kept busy and not left to feed upon themselves. Happiness comes most to persons who seek her least, and think least about it. It is not an object to be sought; it is a state to be induced. It must follow and not lead. It must overtake you, and not you overtake it. How important is health to happiness, yet the best promoter of health is *something to do*.

Blessed is the man who has some congenial work, some occupation in which he can put his heart, and which affords a complete outlet to all the forces there are in him.



It was out of the richness and fullness of his own life that John Burroughs wrote the above words.

Wake-Robin had awakened him to his own destiny, had shown him what he wished most to do in life. It was followed by *Birds and Poets*, *Locusts and Wild Honey*, *Signs and Seasons*, *The Ways of Nature*—books that made him the successor of Henry David Thoreau as America's most popular essayist on birds, plants, and animals.

Like so many others who lived the good life, Burroughs felt in later years the need to share his philosophy with others, to pass on his secret of happiness. "Keep the currents moving," he urged. "Don't let your life stagnate."

Today he is perhaps as well remembered for his reflections on happiness as he is for his poems and essays. The selection given

here has been quoted so many times it would be impossible to calculate its influence—an influence that increases with every reprinting.



The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for. *Joseph Addison*



Work and thou canst not escape the reward; whether thy work be fine or coarse, planting corn or writing epics, so only it be honest work, done to thine own approbation, it shall earn a reward to the senses as well as to the thought. No matter how often defeated, you are born to victory. The reward of a thing well done is to have done it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson



Happiness, I have discovered, is nearly always a rebound from hard work. It is one of the follies of men to imagine that they can enjoy mere thought, or emotion, or sentiment. As well try to eat beauty! For happiness must be tricked! She loves to see men at work. She loves sweat, weariness, self-sacrifice. She will be found not in palaces but lurking in cornfields and factories and hovering over littered desks; she crowns the unconscious head of the busy child. If you look up suddenly from hard work you will see her, but if you look too long she fades sorrowfully away.

There is something fine in hard physical labor. . . . One actually stops thinking. I often work long without any thought whatever, so far as I know, save that connected with the monotonous repetition of the labor itself—down with the spade, out with it, up with it, over with it—and repeat.

And yet sometimes—mostly in the forenoon when I am not at all tired—I will suddenly have a sense as of the world opening around

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me—a sense of its beauty and its meanings—giving me a peculiar deep happiness, that is near complete content.

David Grayson



The mintage of wisdom is to know that rest is rust, and that real life is in love, laughter, and work.

Elbert Hubbard



To awaken each morning with a smile brightening my face; to greet the day with reverence for the opportunities it contains; to approach my work with a clean mind; to hold ever before me, even in the doing of little things, the Ultimate Purpose toward which I am working; to meet men and women with laughter on my lips and love in my heart; to be gentle, kind, and courteous through all the hours; to approach the night with weariness that ever woos sleep and the joy that comes from work well done—this is how I desire to waste wisely my days.

Thomas Dekker



Thank God every morning when you get up that you have something to do which must be done, whether you like it or not. Being forced to work, and forced to do your best, will breed in you temperance, self-control, diligence, strength of will, content, and a hundred other virtues which the idle never know.

Charles Kingsley