

What I Have Lived for

Bertrand Russell¹

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither², in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy³—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one's shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable⁴ lifeless abyss⁵. I have sought it, finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring⁶ vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what—at last—I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean⁷ power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

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Questions:

1. Personal writing, i.e. writing over one's own goals, values and deeds, reveals the writer not only in terms of what is consciously told but also what is unconsciously "said" to us. What can you tell of Russell after reading this passage?
2. Russell discusses his "passions" in an order that goes from 掙 onging for love" to "search for

¹ Bertrand Russell (1872-1970): English mathematician, philosopher, and man of letters.

² hither and thither: in all directions, from one place to another.

³ ecstasy: a strong feeling of joy and happiness.

⁴ unfathomable: too strange or mysterious to understand.

⁵ abyss: a deep bottomless hole.

⁶ prefigure: to indicate or suggest beforehand.

⁷ Pythagoras: (6th century B.C.) Greek philosopher and mathematician.

knowledge” and then “pity for mankind.” Does this order suggest anything about his priorities of value? What will happen if the order is reversed?

3. Russell as a liberal has great pity for the poor and longs “to alleviate the evil.” He is certainly much better than those with no sympathy for the poor. But why can’t he “alleviate the evil”? What do you see as his limitations? How can we solve such problems as poverty, famine, oppression and so on?