

# *The Principle of Activity*

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"Personality is a mode of motion."—An Egyptian Proverb

## Introduction

**I**N THE CHURCH, as well as in other institutions, there are two classes of people who have an unhealthy attitude towards society. The first we may call "the flighters," because they run away from their real place among people, mingling and working with them merely enough to make a living and fulfill obligations and then getting as far away from them as they can go. Solitude is their god. Mental shelter is their compensation for frustration. But this compensation becomes such a fetish that its false satisfaction lulls them to continue their mental isolation and to do nothing to undo their frustrations. So the church is their cozy rabbit nest where they hole up for life, living a pathetic existence.

The second class we may call "the fighters," because they adopt anti-social measures against people, even though they are ministers and church members. Habitual anger, irritation, scorn, jealousy, criticism, dogmatism, bigotry, sternness, snappy speech, a bossy manner, are their main objective. They adopt them as a compensation for heavy disappointment, fighting society because they blame the world for their frustration, snarling at the world because they have been cornered. Since the world has squelched them they go about squelching people. Belittling them is their means of raising their egos. But their anti-social techniques become so enticing they too lull them into a false satisfaction and lead them to do nothing about their frustration. So the church is their battle ground with personal war continuously waged, while their deepest urges sweat it out for fulfillment.

But there is a special group of individuals who do not flee from or especially fight reality but who nevertheless nurse their frustrations as well as the flighter or the fighter. They, strange to say, WANT to nurse their frustrations — in the spirit of a martyr. They want a cross to bear, feeling that Christian living should be more a matter of sorrow than of pleasure. The Puritan is still within our sanctuaries.

Emerson, who understood the Puritan spirit of his day, wrote of the burden the Puritans make of living — an unnecessary burden. They bear troubles when they can get rid of them. They set up tension when it can be avoided. They hesitate to give a hearty laugh for fear God might stand in front of them frowning a disapproval. Grandma does not tell even an insipid joke once in five years. Puritans would rather gnash their teeth than enjoy themselves. They make a crusade against pleasure for themselves and others. They draw down a black curtain over their lives when they can have light and sunshine.

When Santayana wrote some years ago "The Last Puritan," the only objection to the book was the title. The adjective should have been omitted, for Puritans still sit in our pews. When the main character in the book, Oliver, is torn between the pull of duty and the pull of pleasure, the pull of duty wins out. He deliberately shuns the call for pleasure. Far too often the sense of duty for the Puritan is the hard, stern thing to do, the "stern daughter of the Voice of God" as declared by Wordsworth in his "Ode to Duty," as though life were nothing but a series of "oughts" freighted with the force of the whip. I heard Robert Frost, the New England poet,

say that the New England Puritan living in his gray stone house, behind gray stone walls, and under gray-clouded skies, have more suicides per square mile of population than any other people in any other section of the country. But a chronic depression is the common lot of a Puritan anywhere whether he is a church-member in the East, West, North or South in our country.

If Puritans still hold to their suffering in the spirit of the martyr, then they naturally nurse their frustrations. Any psychologist would venture to say that many Puritans would not give up their frustrations even if a psychologist would clearly indicate a way to lift them. They would reply: "I would rather bear my frustrations than be free of them. If there would be nothing wrong with me, I would not be doing the will of God." Physiologically it takes less trouble to smile than to weep, but the Puritan chooses the hard way. The black garb of the clergy, the depressive inside architecture and decoration of most Protestant churches, the lugubrious countenance of many Christian — all indicate that the Puritan spirit is still extant and that many Puritan Christians expect and practice the idea that Christianity should be more of a cross than a star.

But the bearing of this kind of a cross violates one of the cardinal laws of nature and is not only not Christian but is the very opposite. Those who bear this kind of a cross not only do not represent Christianity, but they also make it a travesty. To show that this is the case is the purpose of this article.

#### Free Activity

In demonstrating the nursing of frustrations as a possible unnecessary cross to bear, we introduce a certain concept of nerve energy. When we quoted our Egyptian proverb at the beginning of the chapter, namely, "Personality is a form of motion," we quoted something that probably sounded a little odd to

the reader, but we hope to show that this Egyptian proverb is literally true as to the proper way of life. In other words, the proper way to live is a certain way to express our energy.

We go to biology to prove our point. C. J. Herrick, the neurologist of the University of Chicago, says that "normal activity within physiological limits is **intrinsically** (emphasis mine) pleasurable." This same idea is expressed by the famous Huxley of England, who said that life itself when it is lived properly possesses a spontaneity of action "and its natural expression gives rise to a **primeval joy of living**." Herrick quotes from Max Eastman to the effect that we not only **react** but we also **act** and that this acting seeks experience which is joyful.

Now what does this biological discussion have to do with frustration? There is a profound connection. Once we understand the statements of these three men we are bound to see the essential meaning of life in spite of the pessimism of certain philosophers who pose a huge question mark as to its essential meaning.

Heidbreder of Wellesly College says that native, biological behavior of human beings is **extroverted** activity, indicating that activity should be overt and not covert, or open and not concealed. Now combining the ideas of Herrick, Huxley, Eastman and Heidbreder about the proper way to act, what do these writers furnish as the handwriting on the wall for those who nurse their frustrations? Here is the answer. That the **natural** way to live is **easy, free and pleasurable**. We naturally like to live. When Herrick says there is an **intrinsic pleasure** in normal activity and Huxley that there is a **spontaneity** in normal expression, and Eastman that we naturally seek the **easy** way and Heidbreder that activity should be **open**, they mean that when an individual acts naturally and properly, there is in the **very heart of his act**

a JOY. This is independent of his will and planning. It is nature providing this fun in the **very act of doing**. Desire and nerve energy are not only all there is to a natural act, but JOY accompanies it as the glorious contribution of nature. Huxley especially stresses this idea when he uses the word "primeval," indicating that when we act according to nature there is an **original pleasure** in doing what we do. **Untrammelled action** for every human being is then God's will. Life is set for happiness.

This inspiring principle of nature is realized in the very make-up of our nerves. In the center of each of our billions of nerve cells is a central body whose biological job is to create energy to be constantly replenished by rest and sleep, if we are to function. But what is the function of energy? Each one of our nerve cells reveals the simple answer: **TO BE EXPRESSED**. If energy is pent up in the nerve cell, then tension results and nature is snarled up. In other words, each of our nerve cells is a little dynamo whose aim is the getting rid of its energy in an easy, unimpeded manner. We use the analogy of the dynamo, for electrical engineers construct a dynamo in such a way that its current is **easily** expended. If not, then we do not have a good dynamo and it burns itself out. So with human beings! If they use their energy with effort and suffering, they burn themselves out. They are not then good human beings.

To show that the idea of life being naturally free and happy is not merely a brain storm of modern man, we quote from the ancient philosopher Aristotle whose teachings profoundly effected subsequent generations. He too shows that easy, open activity is the law of nature. He says in his Seventh Book of Ethics: "Perhaps, it even follows, since each state may have active working **unimpeded** (emphasis mine), whether the active workings of all be happiness or

that some one of them, that this active working if it be unimpeded, must be choiceworthy; **NOW PLEASURE IS EXACTLY THIS.**

### Application

We readily see the meaning of Aristotle, as well as of the other authorities on nature's way, in the behavior of the child. Here nature is yet unspoiled, with movements coming from the very heart of life. **HOW** does he act? Freely, easily and happily. He wants his expression to be natural. Watch him successfully makes his first attempt to walk from chair to chair. The almost ecstatic rapture on his little face testifies to the joy **inherent** in his very act. Watch for the same joyful expression when he succeeds in grasping for the first time the big, red, rubber ball. Watch for that same expression when his little fingers tangle with Daddy's hair. Perhaps the restless, teeming energy of children relieved by climbing fences, scaling trees, "skinning the cat," playing football and baseball, etc., are explained by the joy inherent in the very act of doing something. We all know that children are not primarily concerned with **what** they do, but with the thrill of doing something. No one can study the joy children derive from motion without realizing that God did not intend that energy be bottled up in individuals with their teeth set on edge. Probably the joy adults get from riding autos, trains and airplanes is because of this intrinsic joy in the very act of motion itself.

We also see this activity-principle realized in accomplishments of young people and adults. The awkward, high school boy struggles through his first speech with throbbing fear. But practice after practice soon takes fear away. Further practice soon puts in its place actual pleasure in making a speech until the time comes when one feels a strange exalting feeling in mastering an audience, thrilling not so much at the **content** but of the **manner** of executing

a delivery. Success to him is a matter of motion, which is our old Egyptian proverb. An artist sits before his easel on which rests his blank canvas. The picture is still in his creative imagination. But his brush finally blends together the parts until he steps back and views his work with an inner satisfaction too full to be expressed. He does not know whether he will get two or five hundred dollars for the picture. But this does not worry him. His idea is to **express** himself in an **easy** and **untrammeled** fashion. He wants to earn a joy from a skillful act which is a sign of a free and joyful expression. A man is voted the chairmanship of a Rotarian banquet to honor a big celebrity who has just come to town. It means plenty of hard thinking and planning. So many details to arrange and nothing must be forgotten! But when the banquet is a success the chairman feels that so much of himself has been efficiently expressed that he experiences the joy of expression. Any job well done gives any tradesman a thrill. It is the **way** we unload our minds in what we undertake that provides a pride. Awkwardness of expression kills our egos. Nature kicks back at awkwardness. But it laughs at skill.

#### Experience from World War II

This principle of free expression has been very dramatically brought home to us in World War II. It has been revealed very clearly that many of our soldiers and sailors carried their frustrations into the battle zone and, stimulated by overwhelming demands of battle, developed an anxiety which broke them unless it was released—the word “anxiety” being used to refer to tremendous tension in the autonomic nervous system due to unlifted frustration. The constant need developed, therefore, in every army and navy neurotic ward for an expression of this anxiety, or the release of the individual. Grinker and Spiegel, the medical corps men who wrote about neurosis in the

African campaign from January to May of 1943, made this very significant statement: “It is sometimes difficult for the patient to understand the logic of a therapeutic course which demands that he experience and realize anxiety in order to overcome it.” Here in this one statement is the very core of our principle of expression. Anxiety, the result of frustration, must be given an outlet for the patient to cure himself. Nature thus strives to get rid of anxiety. As put in Grinker’s and Spiegel’s words, “The ego seeks to relieve itself of anxiety.” They also discovered as a further confirmation of our principle of activity that fatigue is often caused by states of emotional tension with no sufficient release. The nervous system wears itself out by bottled-up energy. Frustration must be unearthed to cure patients.

Perhaps the most startling example of nature’s need of free expression is in the use of the drug pentathol, administered to neurotic patients to enable them to express their inner conflict. This marvelous drug produces what is called a “chemical hypnosis” because it actually brings about an hypnosis, though by chemical means. It is administered in a semi-dark room by a hypodermic needle but only in sufficient doses to produce a sleep light enough to enable the patient to talk out his repressions. The following are some examples of frustrations that it uncovers: The author met this flier in a convalescent center as both of us were sipping a cup of coffee. I asked him about his experience that made him a patient in a convalescent center. He hesitated to say. But being warmed up by both coffee and companionship, he told me that I would be very much surprised to know what he revealed while under pentathol. “It was hate for the lower classes of the Indian and Chinese people. I spent months flying over the hump to China.” I was indeed surprised and said, “I do not understand, for

these people are our Allies," He replied, "Yes, I know, but they are so filthily dirty and their manner of living is disgusting." I asked what he said and did while he was under pentathol. "I swore so terribly against those people that my words were too strong to be taken down in shorthand and I beat my bed pillows unmercifully. When they found out that I had a repressed rebellion, the psychiatrist had his clue and instructed me in a further release of this rebellion." I then asked him whether he was better and he said, "Very much; I hope to return to duty soon."

Psychiatrists say that hate and rebellion are the most difficult repressions to pry loose under pentathol. If this is so, then this flier suppressing his rebellion against the Indians and Chinese from his buddies in the CBI theatre of war, coupled with the physical strain of flying, quickly broke down.

Another example is that of an infantry officer whom the author met at a hospital, who had suffered from an acute anxiety. When he was administered pentathol he immediately sat up in bed and began to talk, saying of his wife, "She is going to have a baby. I've been so worried about her. We'd been pinned down in our fox holes all day. Jerry had us spotted, and was throwing mortars at us. I was terribly frightened, but I tried not to show it in front of the men. I can still hear the sound of shells. Don't you hear it? Oh, what a sound! I don't want to hear that sound again. They must think I am an awful baby."

The psychiatrist found that this soldier had never let go of his mother's apron strings, and when he married, his wife became a mother-surrogate upon whom he fanatically depended. The crushing circumstances (crushing for him) drove back into his inner life all of his basic desires. Fear of battle paralyzed him. But by constant expression of his fears and anxiety, he was finally released from the hospital, enabled to

sit and watch an air raid with its noise and terror not bothering him any more.

The next case is that of a flier who had to bale out with a buddy over German territory. He faced two extreme difficulties at the very beginning of his plight. His buddy was seriously wounded and he had to wait until the beginning of nightfall before he could grope his way to the French border with his buddy on his back, without knowing much of anything about directions. His buddy died. This tremendously upset him. He finally reached the French border after a tortuous journey, but he saw two Germans sitting on a bench with their backs toward him. He escaped them but was hospitalized in France. Pentathol was administered and under it he gave the secret of his nervous breakdown, which was not the death of his buddy nor the tortuous journey he made, but the stabbing to death of the two German soldiers at the border, which fact he had kept secret from everyone. The therapist instructed him that he was not justified in holding a guilt complex since he did not murder but killed to save his own life. After further expression of his guilt, he was sufficiently recovered to be released from the hospital.

The last case to illustrate the principle of expression is the commercial artist who had always been withdrawn, having made very few friends, being the son of a Red Cross canteen worker whom the author knew very well. In the loneliness of his mind, he lived. At the front he fought the battles all alone but he soon found himself on a hospital cot, a broken man, because he never let himself down with people. Almost everything he wanted was crushed mentally as he carried his rifle into battle. His mother said that pentathol was administered to him, but to no avail. He had withdrawn so far from people that even pentathol could not

reach him to thaw out his frustrations. He is now nursing never-released-frustrations on a lonely farm close to the city of Denver.

The **freer** a neurotic war patient **expresses** himself, the sooner he is helped or recovered. In the neurotic wards, psychiatrists are working valiantly to apply the key principle of free expression. Dr. John M. Murray, Consultant in the Neuropsychiatric Branch Army Air Forces Office of the Air Surgeon says that operational exhaustion is caused by continued suppression of the normal fear reactions, implying the need of an easy release of this fear. The end of all therapy, he says, is the discharge of these powerful, suppressed emotions. Dr. John C. Whitehorn is an article in the Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry, says, "The natural antidote to anxiety is action," that anxiety breaks up integrated effort and prevents free expression. Tics, sickness and other symptoms are but futile attempts to relieve this anxiety. No freedom of action here! Commander J. L. Henderson, a medical officer in the Navy, says that "action and motion" in a tense and dangerous situation are a safety valve for the draining off of the tension of an excited nervous system. Dr. Kurt Goldstein in an article in Psychosomatic Medicine, stresses the point that work which occupies a soldier's thinking, drains off pent-up nervous force. Here work is but another form of free expression. In the St. Elizabeth Hospital of Washington, D. C., there is a theatre called "Psychodramatic Theatre." This is literally a dramatic instance of the principle of free activity. Here patients are given the opportunity, under careful supervision of a director, to act out on the stage in scenes with other patients, unpleasant experiences in their own past and some trying situations which they may face in the future. Repressions are drained off of these mentally broken soldiers and sailors. If they could have **freely** acted in battle

situations they would have saved their nerves, but they were too frozen by frustrations.

The need of expression is shown in inactive situations where inactivity is equivalent to frustration. A friend of mine said that his son wrote him from New Guinea that he and some others saved their minds by doing all kinds of improvised work such as cutting up inner tubes and placing the strips under their mattress to ease its hardness, or cutting down rattan poles and making designs of them in furniture and ornaments. But the soldiers who sat around and "chewed the ends of their pencils," without mingling with the others in this improvised endeavor "were soon taken away too nervous to take it any more and went off the deep end." Sailors waiting inactive beside their guns on a merchant or war ship are often saved from neurosis by the very activity of firing their guns at the appearance of enemy craft. Many of the casualties of North Africa were caused by backwardness in the battle of El Alamein, which is a lack of free expression. Many a flier back from a mission has saved his mind by jocularity and banter with his air pals.

#### Is License Permitted?

But in discussing the principle of free activity before classes in the college or university, the psychologist always hears the question: "Well, then, we understand from the psychologist that he believes in a person doing whatever he pleases?" But free activity, as we are using the term, is very different from licensed activity. Free activity is employed in the sense of free activity for ALL the mind, not just a part of it, as is the case with licensed activity. For instance, there is certainly an abandonment in heaping criticism constantly upon people, but it is at the expense of some human basic urges, thwarting, for example, the desire for companionship and recognition. There is an abandonment in venting anger constantly upon

others, but it is also at the expense of basic urges more important than the drive of anger.

To be condemned by society and sidetracked for a habit of anger is too much of a penalty for its license. What good is license if it throttles the mind? There is an abandonment in a gangster promoting his game of extorting "protection money" from others but he pays Peter by robbing Paul in stifling the delicate desires of his being, always tugging at his nature. To function one part of the mind at the expense of other parts, is the psychology of wrong. That which paralyzes legitimate drives of the mind is nature's way of proclaiming a wrong. If a florist grows a leaf of a plant at the expense of others, bringing forth a monstrosity, he would not be much of a florist. So any man who follows one tendency to the distortion of natural tendencies is a human monstrosity. Freedom of the mind is of the **whole** mind, or it is not freedom. Our principle of activity calls for a mental democracy, whereby one free act allows for other free acts. It is one for all and all for one.

#### Interpretation

If frustration is the cause of a soldier's breakdown and free expression is his salvation, then this recent war has terribly emphasized the fact that free activity is a basic law of life. If so, then everyone who nurses his frustration is twisting nature around. This marvelous law of nature indicates that energy is **centrifugal** and not **centripetal**, as is the latter case of those frustrated. Energy is not made to be turned back upon an individual to stew in its own juice. A frustration-nurse directs his energy **towards** the center of his being instead of **away** from the center, where it gnaws at the vitals of his personality. This is the biological reason for the psychologist not justifying frustration. Just as the energy of a cell **naturally** expends itself **from** its center, so the activity of a human being should

be directed **from** his mind and not **into** it. Expression is nature's law, and not suppression.

This centrifugal idea is demonstrated in outside nature. How does the tree grow? As if its branches were turned into the roots? This would indeed be fantastic, but this is the way those who by error or deliberation lock within themselves their frustrations, try to develop. How does the rose grow? Are the lovely petals invisible and hidden in an "inward growth?" They are open as a feast of beauty to the eyes. How does the lowly blade of grass grow? Does it turn its tender form into itself? If it did then the green of nature's carpet would never adorn our front yards. All nature opens its inner life to the world. All nature reaches **out**, not **in**. Nature is centrifugal. But a frustrated being reaches **in**, not **out**.

There are some frustrations people cannot lift. A mother who has lost a child, a child who has lost a mother, an individual who has lost his eyesight, a town in England watching the burial of its dead killed by the vicious V-bomb, face conditions which lawyers call "acts of God," meaning that people can do nothing to redeem the circumstances. Many grievous disappointments cannot be undone, and are necessary crosses to bear. But many frustrations can be eliminated and people thus unnecessarily kill the spirit and meaning of life. They fail to realize that pleasure and success, the symbol of expression, belong to the very core of life.

#### Jesus and the Meaning of Life

But the Puritan and other frustrated individuals justify their nursing of frustrations as a kind of a religious sacrifice. Did Jesus ever sanction such an idea? On the other hand, there is justification for thinking that Jesus looked upon life as a joyful, untrammelled expression. It is true that we do not know very much of the life of the Nazarine to answer this question. His sorrow is recorded in one passage,

outside of the agony of the crucifixion. This was when he wept over Jerusalem because of the hard hearts of its residents. But it would be strange if Jesus taught that life should be of sorrow, that his disciples did not so record it.

However, there is one incident which to my mind reveals that Jesus Himself, also regarded life as essentially a matter of free activity expressed in terms of beauty, being the best example of free activity. He pointed to the lilies and the grass of the field. They were to him marvelous examples of a lack of worry and strain. Lilies grow today but wither tomorrow. The grass of the field is tomorrow thrown into the oven. Yet these lowly aspects of nature are a thing of beauty. Even the beauty of Solomon cannot be compared to the beauty of a blade of grass. True, Jesus was not **directly** teaching the beauty of life. He used these examples to show that if God brings forth such products without worry on their part, people, who are a thousand times better, should have a more abundant faith in the provision of God. However, he **indirectly** stressed the beauty of living. "Why the lilies and the grass do not gnash their teeth and groan out a misery. They grow and develop smoothly, easily, without a sign of friction. They express themselves as a thing of beauty, not with frustration and distortion. If they thus grow, why do ye, created in God's image and just a little lower than the angels, not likewise live?" Jesus, who had a mystic insight into the laws of life, must have known and taught this principle of beauteous expression. But whether he deliberately taught it or not, it is nevertheless, as we have seen, one of the cardinal laws of the mind.

This idea of free expression in terms of beauty is also an echo from the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. Someone asked Plato very pointedly the meaning of life. He simply asked that a young man get up and sing a baritone

solo. When he finished singing, Plato turned to his questioner and said, "That is it." Music for Plato became the supreme art for it demonstrated the basic meaning of life, namely, a harmony. He decreed that all children in his model city learn music in order to appreciate the beauty of harmony. Truth, beauty and goodness, according to this great thinker, are the sides of a solid triangle, all of which ascend towards a common point. For instance, the very act of being good is also a thing of beauty. Even truth about the essence of life cannot be something ugly, but it too is a beautiful thing. Bad news concerning the way life is lived indicates a degradation of life.

We previously said that Aristotle advocated that the best choice of living was free expression, but he also explains this idea in terms of beauty. He took a stick and pointed to a place a little above the middle and said that if an architect wanted to place a statue in front of a building to look beautiful as to placement, he would place it a little above the mathematical center of the building. This, for Aristotle, is the famous "golden mean," the best way to achieve a balance. According to Aristotle, this is the meaning of life — a balance between two extremes. Again we see life defined in terms of beauty and not in terms of strain and stress.

### Conclusion

Now where does the frustrated individual stand before the great principle of free activity? Where does he stand before this same principle explained in terms of beauty? Is there any room in the standard of life for strain and stress? Is there a call to throttle life? Is there a call to suppress life with its laughter and joy? Even when circumstances make it impossible to throw off a frustration, this is not to say that life should be lived in this manner. Can then the Puritan justify the dramatization of his own, deliberately planned frustrations? Can also the flighter or



the fighter who unwittingly nurse their frustrations stand also uncondemned?

Whether Puritan, flighter, or fighter, they stand indicted before the throne of God and the bar of nature. Man must endeavor to develop as beautifully as the lilies of the field. Even the lowly

blade of grass unfolds to the sun. So every human life should unfold fully and easily towards the sun of other lives. Our minds are for others and not intended to be locked up by their own tension.