

The Simplification of Life

from A Testament of Devotion
by Thomas R. Kelly

Born in 1893 to Quaker farmers in Ohio, Thomas Kelly lived briefly and obediently. Ignited by his contact with Rufus Jones while at Haverford College, he completed a doctorate in philosophy. Marriage, social work in Germany, and college teaching occupied his early years. At forty-two he had an inward experience which changed him. Afterwards he began ministering directly among Friends and students. He died of ill health in 1941, leaving behind just a few writings, among them A Testament of Devotion.

The Simplification of Life

The problem we face today needs very little time for its statement. Our lives in a modern city grow too complex and overcrowded. Even the necessary obligations which we feel we must meet grow overnight, like Jack's beanstalk, and before we know it we are bowed down with burdens, crushed under committees, strained, breathless, and hurried, panting through a never-ending program of appointments. We are too busy to be good wives to our husbands, good homemakers, good companions of our children, good friends to our friends, and with no time at all to be friends to the friendless. But if we withdraw from public engagements and interests, in order to spend quiet hours with the family, the guilty calls of citizenship whisper disquieting claims in our ears. Our children's schools should receive our interest, the civic problems of our community need our attention, the wider issues of the nation and of the world are heavy upon us. Our professional status, our social obligations, our membership in this or that very important organization, put claims upon us. And in frantic fidelity we try to meet at least the necessary minimum of calls upon us. But we're weary and breathless. And we know and regret that our life is

slipping away, with our having tasted so little of the peace and joy and serenity we are persuaded it should yield to a soul of wide caliber. The times for the deeps of the silences of the heart seem so few. And in guilty regret we must postpone till next week that deeper life of unshaken composure in the holy Presence, where we sincerely know our true home is, for *this* week is much too full.

But we must not spend precious time merely stating the problem. And although we all enjoy feeling sorry for ourselves, we must not linger long, bewailing the poverty of life induced by the overabundance of our opportunities. Nor must we rush hastily at a solution, breathlessly anxious for once to get something, this day, to show for the time we've spent upon our problem. Prune and trim we must, but not with ruthless haste and ready pruning knife, until we have reflected upon the tree we trim, the environment it lives in, and the sap of life which feeds it.

Let me first suggest that we are giving a false explanation of the complexity of our lives. We blame it upon the complex environment. Our complex living, we say, is due to the complex world we live in, with its radios and autos, which give us more stimulation per square hour than used to be given per square day to our grandmothers. This explanation by the *outward* order leads us to turn wistfully, in some moments, to thoughts of a quiet South Sea Island

existence, or to the horse and buggy days of our great grandparents, who went, jingle bells, jingle bells, over the crisp and ringing snow to spend the day with *their* grandparents on the farm. Let me assure you, I have tried the life of the South Seas for a year, the long, lingering leisure of a tropic world. And I found that Americans carry into the tropics their same mad-cap, feverish life which we know on the mainland. Complexity of our program cannot be blamed upon complexity of our environment, much as we should like to think so. Nor will simplification of life follow simplification of environment. I must confess that I chafed terribly, that year in Hawaii, because in some respects the environment seemed too simple.

We Western peoples are apt to think our great problems are external, environmental. We are not skilled in the inner life, where the real roots of our problem lie. For I would suggest that the true explanation of the complexity of our program is an inner one, not an outer one. The outer distractions of our interests reflect an inner lack of integration of our own lives. We are trying to be several selves at once, without all our selves being organized by a single, mastering Life within us. Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. There is the civic self, the parental self, the financial self, the religious self, the society self, the professional self, the literary self. And each of our selves

is in turn a rank individualist, not co-operative but shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes. And all too commonly we follow the common American method of getting a quick decision among conflicting claims within us. It is as if we have a chairman of our committee of the many selves within us, who does not integrate the many into one but who merely counts the votes at each decision, and leaves disgruntled minorities. The claims of each self are still pressed. If we accept service on a committee on Negro education, we still regret we can't help with a Sunday-school class. We are not integrated. We are distraught. We feel honestly the pull of many obligations and try to fulfill them all.

And we are unhappy, uneasy, strained, oppressed, and fearful we shall be shallow. For over the margins of life comes a whisper, a faint call, a premonition of richer living which we know we are passing by. Strained by the very mad pace of our daily outer burdens, we are further strained by an inward uneasiness, because we have hints that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper than all this hurried existence, a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power. If only we could slip over into that Center! If only we could find the Silence which is the source of sound! We have seen and known some people who seem to have found this deep Center of living, where the fretful calls of life are integrated, where No as

well as Yes can be said with confidence. We've seen such lives, integrated, unworried by the tangles of close decisions, unhurried, cheery, fresh, positive. These are not people of dallying idleness nor of obviously mooning meditation; they are busy carrying their full load as well as we, but without any chafing of the shoulders with the burden, with quiet joy and springing step. Surrounding the trifles of their daily life is an aura of infinite peace and power and joy. We are so strained and tense, with our burdened lives; they are so poised and at peace.

If the Society of Friends has anything to say, it lies in this region primarily. Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center. Each one of us can live such a life of amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence and simplified multiplicity, on one condition—that is, *if we really want to*. There is a divine Abyss within us all, a holy Infinite Center, a Heart, a Life who speaks in us and through us to the world. We have all heard this holy Whisper at times. At times we have followed the Whisper, and amazing equilibrium of life, amazing effectiveness of living set in. But too many of us have heeded the Voice only at times. Only at times have we submitted to His holy guidance. We have not counted this Holy Thing within us to be the most precious thing in the world. We have not surrendered *all else*, to attend to it alone. Let me repeat. Most of

us, I fear, have not surrendered all else, in order to attend to the Holy Within.

John Woolman did. He resolved so to order his outward affairs as to be, *at every moment*, attentive to that voice. He simplified life on the basis of its relation to the divine Center. Nothing else really counted so much as attentiveness to that Root of all living which he found within himself. And the Quaker discovery lies in just that: the welling-up whispers of divine guidance and love and presence, more precious than heaven or earth. John Woolman never let the demands of his business grow beyond his *real* needs. When too many customers came, he sent them elsewhere, to more needy merchants and tailors. His outward life became simplified on the basis of an inner integration. He found that we can be heaven-led men and women, and he surrendered himself completely, unreservedly to that blessed leading, keeping warm and close to the Center.

I said his outward life became simplified, and used the passive voice intentionally. He didn't have to struggle, and renounce, and strain to achieve simplicity. He yielded to the Center and his life became simple. It was synoptic. It had singleness of eye. "If thine eye be single thy whole body shall be full of light." His many selves were integrated into a single true self, whose whole aim was humbly walking in the presence and guidance and will of God. There

was no shouting down of a disgruntled minority by a majority vote among his selves. It was as if there were in him a presiding chairman who, in the solemn, holy silence of inwardness, took the sense of the meeting. I would suggest that the Quaker method of conducting business meetings is also applicable to the conducting of our individual lives, inwardly. The Holy One stood by, in the inner life of John Woolman, as did Jesus when He stood over against the treasury and watched men and women casting their gifts into the treasury.

And under the silent, watchful eye of the Holy One we all are standing, whether we know it or not. And in that Center, in that holy Abyss where the Eternal dwells at the base of our being, our programs, our gifts to Him, our offerings of duties performed are again and again revised in their values. Many of the things we are doing seem so important to us. We haven't been able to say No to them, because they seemed so important. But if we *center down*, as the old phrase goes, and live in that holy Silence which is dearer than life, and take our life program into the silent places of the heart, with complete openness, ready to do, ready to renounce according to His leading, then many of the things we are doing lose their vitality for us. I should like to testify to this, as a personal experience, graciously given. There is a re-evaluation of much that we do or try to do, which is

done for us, and we know what to do and what to let alone.

Let me talk very intimately and very earnestly with you about Him who is dearer than life. Do you really want to live your lives, every moment of your lives, in His Presence? Do you long for Him, crave Him? Do you love His Presence? Does every drop of blood in your body love Him? Does every breath you draw breathe a prayer, a praise to Him? Do you sing and dance within yourselves, as you glory in His love? Have you set yourselves to be His, and *only* His, walking every moment in holy obedience? I know I'm talking like an old-time evangelist. But I can't help that, nor dare I restrain myself and get prim and conventional. We have too long been prim and restrained. The fires of the love of God, of our love toward God, and of His love toward us, are very hot. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength." Do we really do it? Is love steadfastly directed toward God, in our minds, all day long? Do we intersperse our work with gentle prayers and praises to Him? Do we live in the steady peace of God, a peace down at the very depths of our souls, where all strain is gone and God is already victor over the world, already victor over our weaknesses? This life, this abiding, enduring peace that never fails, this serene power and unhurried conquest, inward conquest over ourselves, out-

ward conquest over the world, is meant to be ours. It is a life that is freed from strain and anxiety and hurry, for something of the Cosmic Patience of God becomes ours. Are our lives *unshakable*, because we are clear down on bed rock, rooted and grounded in the love of God? This is the first and the great commandment.

Do you *want* to live in such an amazing divine Presence that life is transformed and transfigured and transmuted into peace and power and glory and miracle? If you do, then you can. But if you say you haven't the time to go down into the recreating silences, I can only say to you, "Then you don't *really* want to, you don't yet love God above all else in the world, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." For, except for spells of sickness in the family and when the children are small, when terrific pressure comes upon us, we find time for what we *really want* to do.

I should like to be mercilessly drastic in uncovering any sham pretense of being wholly devoted to the inner holy Presence, in singleness of love to God. But I must confess that it doesn't take time, or complicate your program. I find that a life of little whispered words of adoration, of praise, of prayer, of worship can be breathed all through the day. One can have a very busy day, outwardly speaking, and yet be steadily in the holy Presence. We do need a

half-hour or an hour of quiet reading and relaxation. But I find that one can carry the recreating silences within oneself, *well-nigh all the time*. With delight I read Brother Lawrence, in his *Practice of the Presence of God*. At the close of the Fourth Conversation it is reported of him, "He was never hasty nor loitering, but did each thing in its season, with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquillity of spirit. 'The time of business,' he said, 'does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament.'" Our real problem, in failing to center down, is not a lack of time; it is, I fear, in too many of us, lack of joyful, enthusiastic delight in Him, lack of deep, deep-drawing love directed toward Him at every hour of the day and night.

I think it is clear that I am talking about a revolutionary way of living. Religion isn't something to be added to our other duties, and thus make our lives yet more complex. The life with God is the center of life, and all else is remodelled and integrated by it. It gives the singleness of eye. The most important thing is not to be perpetually passing out cups of cold water to a thirsty world. We can get so fearfully busy trying to carry out the second great commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," that we

are under-developed in our devoted love to God. But we must love God as well as neighbor. These things ye ought to have done and not to have left the other only partially done.

There is a way of life so hid with Christ in God that in the midst of the day's business one is inwardly lifting brief prayers, short ejaculations of praise, subdued whispers of adoration and of tender love to the Beyond that is within. No one need know about it. I only speak to you because it is a sacred trust, not mine but to be given to others. One can live in a well-nigh continuous state of unworded prayer, directed toward God, directed toward people and enterprises we have on our heart. There is no hurry about it all; it is a life unspeakable and full of glory, an inner world of splendor within which we, unworthy, may live. Some of you know it and live in it; others of you may wistfully long for it; it can be yours.

Now out from such a holy Center come the commissions of life. Our fellowship with God issues in world-concern. We cannot keep the love of God to ourselves. It spills over. It quickens us. It makes us see the world's needs anew. We love people and we grieve to see them blind when they might be seeing, asleep with all the world's comforts when they ought to be awake and living sacrificially, accepting the world's goods as their right when they really hold them only in temporary trust. It is because from this

holy Center we relove people, relove our neighbors as ourselves, that we are bestirred to be means of their awakening. The deepest need of men is not food and clothing and shelter, important as they are. It is God. We have mistaken the nature of poverty, and thought it was economic poverty. No, it is poverty of soul, deprivation of God's recreating, loving peace. Peer into poverty and see if we are really getting down to the deepest needs, in our economic salvation schemes. These are important. But they lie farther along the road, secondary steps toward world reconstruction. The primary step is a holy life, transformed and radiant in the glory of God.

This love of people is well-nigh as amazing as the love of God. Do we want to help people because we feel sorry for them, or because we genuinely love them? The world needs something deeper than pity; it needs love. (How trite that sounds, how real it is!) But in our love of people are we to be excitedly hurried, sweeping all men and tasks into our loving concern? No, that is God's function. But He, working within us, portions out His vast concern into bundles, and lays on each of us our portion. These become our tasks. Life from the Center is a heaven-directed life.

Much of our acceptance of multitudes of obligations is due to our inability to say No. We calculated that that task had to be done, and we saw no one ready to undertake it. We calculated the need, and

then calculated our time, and decided maybe we could squeeze it in somewhere. But the decision was a heady decision, not made within the sanctuary of the soul. When we say Yes or No to calls for service on the basis of heady decisions, we have to give reasons, to ourselves and to others. But when we say Yes or No to calls, on the basis of inner guidance and whispered promptings of encouragement from the Center of our life, or on the basis of a lack of any inward "rising" of that Life to encourage us in the call, we have no reason to give, except one—the will of God as we discern it. Then we have begun to live in guidance. And I find He never guides us into an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness. The Cosmic Patience becomes, in part, our patience, for after all God is at work in the world. It is not we alone who are at work in the world, frantically finishing a work to be offered to God.

Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well.

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