

THE LESSONS OF THE GOSPEL OF RELAXATION

The Gospel of Relaxation is an essay by William James. It is, in written form, a commencement address he gave to the 1896 graduating class of Boston Normal School of Gymnastics. James, an M.D. (who never practiced as such), was a professor at Harvard, a psychologist, a philosopher, and a popular lecturer at a time when public lectures were in vogue. Think Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain. He was, in fact, the father of American psychology, and became America's most eminent philosopher. In 1890, James published his masterwork, ten years in the making, *Principles of Psychology*. It is volume 53 of The Great Books of the Western World. In 1892 he published an abbreviated form of *Principles* as *Psychology: Briefer Course*. After publishing these books, James was asked by the Harvard Corporation to give a few public lectures on psychology to Cambridge teachers. Their purpose was to provide some guidance to the proponents of scientific methods of teaching. There were sixteen lectures, later collected as *Talks to Teachers*. Additionally, in response to invitations to deliver 'addresses' to students at women's colleges, he gave three. These are included as essays in his 1899 volume titled *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*. The first of these addresses to students, delivered to the ladies of Boston Normal, was *The Gospel of Relaxation*. The Gospel is best seen as a guide to inner peace. It provides psychological and philosophical wisdom on the value of equanimity and how to find it. James gives us lessons, based on physiology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, that we can apply to ourselves, and live a better life. James states his purpose in the first sentence of the essay. He proposes to show the practical application of certain psychological principles to mental hygiene, the conditions or practices conducive to maintaining mental health. (825)¹It is to be a self-help lecture.

Lesson #1: How you feel is controlled by how you act.

James begins with an explanation of what he calls a *peculiar* theory of emotions. He refers to it, graciously, as the Lange-James theory, although this famous theory is now universally known as the James-Lange theory. Carl Lange was a Danish physician. Their ideas on this theory of emotions were developed independently. According to the theory, "*our emotions are mainly due to those organic stirrings that are aroused in us in a reflex way by the stimulus of the exciting object or situation.*"(825) I.e., the source of emotion is organic, a reflexive response to some stimulus. Fear or surprise "*is not a direct effect of the object's presence on the mind, but an effect of that still earlier effect, the bodily commotion which the object suddenly excites....*" (825) Here is a very important point (VIP): if we can suppress the bodily commotion, "*we should not so much feel fear, as call the situation fearful; we should not feel surprise, but coldly recognize that the object was truly astonishing.*"(825)

The James-Lange theory is just that, a theory. It has its critics. James himself recognizes this when he says that "*exaggeration may possibly lurk in this account of our emotions ...*," although he doubts any exaggeration is very great. (825) He asserts that the main core of the theory is true. The mere giving way to tears, or an outward expression of anger, "*will result for the moment in making the inner grief or anger more acutely felt.*"(825) Therefore (VIP), the most useful precept in one's personal self-discipline is to pay "*primary attention to what we do and express, and not care too much for how we feel.*"(825)

He says that while it seems that action follows feeling, *“really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not.”*(826) For example, if we are not spontaneously cheerful, we should act as if we were cheerful, and we will become cheerful. To feel brave, we should act as if we were brave, and then a courage-fit will likely replace a fit of fear. If we want to feel kindly toward someone to whom we have been unfriendly or hostile, the only way is to deliberately smile, to make sympathetic inquiries, and to force ourselves to say genial things. *“To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind; whereas if we act as if from some better feeling, the old bad feeling soon folds its tent like an Arab and silently steals away.”*(826) He concludes that *“from our acts and from our attitudes ceaseless inpouring currents of sensation come, which help to determine from moment to moment what our inner states shall be”*(827) Acts and attitudes control emotions.

Lesson #2: Rid yourself of morbid thoughts and be prepared to meet the world head-on.

James next introduces the concept of *Binnenleben*, meaning a buried life of human beings, a term introduced by *“a Viennese neurologist of considerable reputation”* (Mortiz Benedikt). *Binnenleben* is *“the sort of unuttered inner atmosphere in which his consciousness dwells alone with the secrets of its prison house.”*(827) This personal tone, our attitude, is what our friends see as our most characteristic quality. For some, the inner atmosphere includes regrets, ambitions checked by shames, and aspirations obstructed by timidities, and is a breeding ground for self-mistrust and a sense that things are not as they should be with themselves. James says that half the thirst for alcohol exists because alcohol acts as a temporary anesthetic for these morbid feelings. For others, whom James calls healthy-minded, *“there are no fears or shames to discover; and the sensations that pour in from the organism only help swell the general vital sense of security and readiness for anything that may turn up.”*

Lesson #3: A healthy mind needs a healthy body.

As an example of the ‘sense of security and readiness’ that comes with healthy-mindedness, James cites the effects of a *“well-toned motor-apparatus, nervous and muscular, on our general personal self consciousness, the sense of elasticity and efficiency that results.”*(827) Remember that he is addressing the young women at the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, where the curriculum was arranged so that instruction in the theory and the practice of gymnastics (physical training) went hand in hand. In the theory, they endeavored to demonstrate clearly the foundation, scope, and possibilities of rational physical training. They were learning how to promote health and physical fitness. James was showing them that the scope of physical training included mental hygiene.

He told them how the lives of women in Norway had been revolutionized by their taking up skiing. He said that fifteen years earlier, Norwegian women, even more than those in other countries, were faithful followers of the old fashioned ideal of femininity, the ‘domestic angel’. But in breaking out of their sedentary domestic life style and getting on the skis, they had been transformed *“into lithe and audacious creatures for whom no night is too dark or height too giddy.”*(828) He expresses his hope that in America, like in Britain, the *“ideal of the well-trained and vigorous body will be maintained neck by*

neck with that of the well-trained and vigorous mind as the two coequal halves of the higher education of men and women alike.”(828)

Against the notion expressed by one writer that in the future, as man learns to cope with nature, mental ability will be more required, and physical strength less and less, so that there is no need for well developed muscles, James asserts that muscular vigor will never be unnecessary. Even if not needed to physically battle nature, *“it will still always be needed to furnish the background of sanity, serenity, and cheerfulness to life, to give moral elasticity to our disposition, to round off the wiry edge of our fretfulness, and make us good humored and easy of approach.”(829)* It gives us self-esteem, a blessed internal peace and confidence, *“that wells up from every part of the body of a muscularly well-trained human being, and soaks the indwelling soul of him with satisfaction...”* (829) Muscular vigor has a spiritual dimension, and affects our mental as well as physical health.

Lesson #4: Be calm. Equanimity is the ideal.

James goes deeper into the psychology of mental hygiene for his next lesson. He tells of an eminent Scottish physician who visited the United States and made several observations about American behavior. *“You Americans, ‘he said,’ wear too much expression on your faces. You are living like an army with all its reserves engaged in action.”(829)* He compares this to the duller countenance of the British people, which is a sign of a *“better scheme of life,”* and suggests *“stores of reserved nervous force to fall back upon, if any occasion should arise that requires it.”(829)* He goes on to say that we Americans should tone ourselves down. *“You really do carry too much expression, you take too intensely the trivial moments of life.”(830)*

James observes that many of us do not see this intensity of demeanor as a problem. *“Intensity, vivacity of appearance, are indeed with us something of a nationally accepted ideal.”(830)* He recalls reading a story where the author summed up the heroine’s personality saying that the impression she gave to all who saw her was that of *“bottled lightning.”(830)*

To those who would say that the tension expressed in faces is a small thing, James explains that it is of immense importance because *“of the effects on the over-contracted person’s spiritual life.”* This is a consequence of the theory of emotions with which he began the lecture. He explained that, *“by the sensations that so incessantly pour in from the over-tense excited body the over-tense and excited habit of mind is kept up; and the sultry, threatening, exhausting, thunderous inner atmosphere never quite clears away.”(831)* He offers an example to show the relationship between the body and the mind. Consider a person sitting in a chair, never relaxed, with muscles half contracted ready to rise, ‘breathing eighteen or nineteen times a minute instead of sixteen’. He asks, *“what mental mood can you be in but one of inner panting and expectancy, and how can the future and its worries possibly forsake your mind?”* Compare that to a person whose brow is unruffled, their respiration calm and complete, and their muscles relaxed; their inner mode will not be one of inner panting and expectancy, but of repose. (831)

Why are so many of us possessed with over-tense excited bodies and minds? To explain the absence of repose exhibited, he turns to psychology and sociology. He explains the imitative impulse. Writers in those fields have shown that *"invention and imitation, taken together, form, one may say, the entire warp and woof [the essential foundation] of human life, in so far as it is social."*(832) Our *"over-tension and jerkiness and breathlessness and intensity and agony of expression are primarily social, and only secondarily physiological, phenomena."*(832) They are simply bad habits, bred from example, born from imitating bad models.

Is it a bad thing to be a bottled-lightening type? It does have some advantages, but James says that it cannot be wholly good. He agrees with the Scottish doctor that eagerness, breathlessness, and anxiety are not signs of strength, but signs of weakness and bad coordination. That type of demeanor does not correlate with better performance. *"It is your relaxed and easy worker, who is in no hurry, and quite thoughtless most of the while of consequences, who is your efficient worker; and tension and anxiety, and present and future, all mixed together in our mind at once, are the surest drags upon steady progress and hindrances to our success."*(833)

How do we change our demeanor to one of repose? The same way we developed our demeanor of excitement - imitation. *"We must change ourselves from a race that admires jerk and snap for their own sakes, and looks down upon low voices and quiet ways as dull, to one that, on the contrary, has calm for its ideal, and for their own sakes loves harmony, dignity, and ease."* Our ideal should be equanimity. Imitate those who demonstrate equanimity, and others will imitate you.

Lesson #5: Don't focus too much on yourself, or how you are perceived by others. Be yourself.

We all want, to a degree known only to ourselves, to be admired. A natural question for anyone is what do they want to be admired for? Of those who possess a healthy-minded temperament, one whose inner atmosphere is devoid of regrets and checked ambitions and is incapable of prolonged suffering, James says that *"this temperament may be the basis for a peculiar type of religion, a religion in which good, even the good of this world's life, is regarded as the essential thing for a rational being to attend to."*²If good is the essential thing for a rational person to attend to, then a rational person will be, or strive to be, good. Being good is admirable, and will be imitated. As we search history for role models, the healthy-minded will find them in those that exhibited virtues, the good.

Equanimity is a virtue. James observes that if we want this virtue to be imitated, we will be more likely to succeed if we don't try to be imitable, but just be unconscious of the matter. *"Become the imitable thing, and you may then discharge your minds of all responsibility for the imitation."*(835) This is reminiscent of Aristotle, who taught that virtue does not lie in simply doing virtuous acts, but in becoming a person who is virtuous, whose acts define virtue. Just be. Be courageous, be temperate, be calm.

Just being, and not thinking about how to become imitable, is successful because it reduces the involvement of yourself (your ego) in your thinking. James says that this precept is founded on a very

important but neglected psychological principle, namely *“that strong feeling about one’s self tends to arrest the free association of one’s ideas and motor processes.”*(835) VIP: self-focus negatively impacts your thinking and your actions.

James says that the disease of melancholia is an extreme example of this fact. The melancholic person is filled with painful emotion about himself. *“He is threatened, he is guilty, he is doomed, he is annihilated, he is lost.”*(835) His mind is fixed on these feelings, and *“the usual varied flow of his thoughts has ceased. His associative processes ... are inhibited, and his ideas stand stock still, shut up to their one monotonous function of reiterating inwardly the fact of the man’s desperate estate.”*(835) The inhibitive effect of self-focus applies to joyous as well painful emotions.

James now shows, as is his purpose, the practical application of his psychology to mental hygiene. His conclusion is that if *“we wish our trains of ideation and volition to be copious and varied and effective, we must form the habit of freeing them from the inhibitive influence of reflection upon them, of egoistic preoccupation about their results.”*(836) In other words, quit thinking about how your ideas and actions affect you, and you will be more effective in both your thinking and your acting.

He recognizes that some egoistic thinking has a proper place in our lives. Considerations of prudence, duty, self-regard, and emotions of ambition and anxiety are necessary, but they should be confined to the times when we are making general resolutions and planning our actions. Thereafter, we should put aside thoughts of and concern about the outcome of the execution of our plans. *“Unclamp ... your intellectual and practical machinery”* from personal considerations of success or failure, and let this machinery run free, and *“the service it will do you will be twice as good.”*(836)

James makes his point by observing that New England social life in the 1890s is often found to be *“less rich and expressive, or more fatiguing”* than some other parts of the world. He attributes this to the *“over active [self] conscience of people, “afraid of saying something too trivial and obvious, or something insincere, or something unworthy of one’s interlocutor, or something in some way or other not adequate to the occasion.”*(836) I.e., concern about how one is perceived by others, about how their words reflect back on them, dulls the social life. Conversations flourish and society is refreshing, he observes, *“wherever people forget their scruples and take the brakes off their hearts, and let their tongues wag as automatically and irresponsibly as they will.”*(837) Quit caring about how the outcome of your efforts affect others’ perception of you. Be yourself, and don’t worry about it.

Lesson #6: Develop a spiritual dimension to your life. Get in touch with the divine, and equanimity follows.

Worry, James tells us, *“means always and invariably inhibition of associations and loss of effective power.”*(838) He says the sovereign cure for worry is religious faith. With a beautiful metaphor, he illuminates his point: *“The turbulent billows of the fretful surface leave the deeper parts of the ocean undisturbed, and to him who has a hold on vaster and more permanent realities the hourly vicissitudes of his personal destiny seem relatively insignificant things. The really religious person is accordingly unshakable and full of equanimity, and calmly ready for any duty that the day may bring forth.”*(838)

We need here to examine what James means when he speaks of 'religious faith' and the 'really religious person', because it is easy to miss the power of his point if you don't understand his concept of religion. You might conclude on first reading that when James speaks of religion he is talking about theism and institutionalized religion, especially when he follows with the example of the Catholic monk Brother Lawrence. His concept is much broader however. James takes religion as *"the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine."*³ He does not limit the meaning of 'divine'. He explains that there are systems of thought which the world calls religious, but do not assume a God. For example, there is Buddhism, and modern transcendentalism, such as Emersonianism, which *"seems to let God evaporate into an abstract Ideality. Not a deity in concreto, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe"* In a letter (to Miss Frances R. Morse, April 12, 1900), James said that his problem (in developing the lectures that became *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) was to defend *"experience against philosophy as the real background of the religious life."* By experience, he meant *"prayer, guidance, and all that sort of thing immediately and privately felt, as against high and noble general views of our destiny and the world's meaning."*⁴ He wrote that he wanted to make his hearers or readers believe what he invincibly believed, *"that although the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the [religious] life as a whole is mankind's most important function."*

To illustrate his point about the really religious person, he tells the story of Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite friar. Carmelites were a Roman Catholic religious order that adopted a lifestyle of poverty, traveling, and living in urban areas for purposes of preaching, evangelizing, and ministry, especially to the poor. They avoided owning property, did not work at a trade, and embraced a poor, often itinerant, lifestyle. They depended for their survival on the goodwill of the people to whom they preached. It seems that Lawrence had been a footman to a gentleman, but he was awkward and broke everything. He entered the monastery to sacrifice his life filled with pleasure to God, and be made to feel pain for his awkwardness and faults. But God had disappointed him, for he had felt nothing but satisfaction since giving himself to Him.

Brother Lawrence had a troubled (unhealthy) mind; he was filled with mistrust of himself, and felt that he should be damned. But his experience changed him. He wrote, *"I have engaged in a religious life only for the love of God, and I have endeavored to act only for him; whatever becomes of me, whether I be lost or saved, I will always continue to act purely for the love of God. I shall continue to have this good at least, that till death I shall have done all that is in me to love him."*(838) Brother Lawrence unburdened himself from personal responsibility for the success or failure of what he did; *i.e.*, with the results. He acted in the service of God, and if he made a mistake, he confessed (recognized) his failure and didn't worry about it anymore. Since then, he passed his life in perfect liberty and continual joy. James concludes, that *"the simple-heartedness of the good Brother Lawrence, and the relaxation of all unnecessary solitudes and anxieties in him, is a refreshing spectacle."*(839)

Brother Lawrence surrendered his life to *his* God. Consider how his statement would apply equally to

one who surrenders their life to a different divinity, such as the Goddess of Truth of Parmenides famous poem. This Goddess shows us that Truth (what all religions seek) is found in the divine; that Truth is the right path, the way. Substitute 'Truth' for 'God' in Bro. Lawrence's quote: *'I engaged in the religious life only for the love of Truth, I will continually act purely for the love of Truth, I shall continue to have this good at least, till death I shall have done all that is in me to love Truth'*. If you surrender your life to Truth, and act in the service of Truth, you will make mistakes, but just recognize them and move on without regret or self-recrimination. Don't burden yourself with responsibility for your success or failure. In seeking Truth, you come to a greater understanding of yourself and your relationship with the world, and with that understanding comes equanimity. By seeking to get in touch with the divine, the transcendent dimension of life, one gains 'a vaster and more permanent hold on the vaster and more permanent realities of life', and the hourly vicissitudes of their life are seen as the insignificant things they are. This 'religious' person is 'unshakable and full of equanimity, and calmly ready for any duty that the day may bring forth.'

Conclusion – The Gospel of Relaxation is Truly Gospel

James concludes that this feeling of responsibility for our successes or failures needs to be toned down. We need to relax a bit about our moral responsibilities. The Gospel of Relaxation is truly gospel, good news. The good news is that:

If we understand that we can exercise control over our feelings by how we act;
If we rid ourselves of unhealthy thoughts of regret and failure;
If we keep ourselves strong and healthy;
If we make equanimity our ideal;
If we don't focus too much on ourselves, or how we are perceived by others, and just be ourselves;
and, If we develop a spiritual dimension to our lives,
Then, equanimity follows, and we will be happy.

James ends his lecture to the young ladies of Boston Common speculating that many of them would now be resolved to become "*strenuously relaxed*," whatever it took. He told them that wouldn't work. But he had a trick: "*the way to do it, paradoxical as it may seem, is genuinely not to care whether you are doing it or not. Then, possibly, by the grace of God, you may all at once find that you are doing it.*"(840) The paradoxical question is, if your goal is to be equanimous, or virtuous, or imitable, if that is your desire, your motivation, how can you achieve it if you do not care about whether you are achieving it? Perhaps James in the Gospel is saying that of course we should care about being equanimous and virtuous. That we should determine for ourselves what that means to us; for *what* do we want to be imitable? Make that your goal, but then remove it from your consciousness; *i.e.*, don't care, don't focus on how to achieve your goal, and unconsciously, you will become the imitable thing.

Just be like Brother Lawrence; rid yourself of the burden of worrying about the results of your actions. Act in the service of good, let that guide your life. How you act may sometimes not turn out well, but that matters not if you acted for the right reason.

Relax, be yourself, be good, and you will be happy.

—Ed Craig

¹All page references are to William James: Writings 1878 – 1899, The Library of America (1992), unless otherwise noted.

²The Sick Soul, William James: Writings 1902 – 1910, The Library of America (1992), at 121. ³Circumscription of the Topic, Lecture II of The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James: Writings 1902 – 1910, The Library of America (1992), at 32.

⁴The Letters of William James, ed. Henry James, Jr., Vol. II, 127.