

The Meaning of
LIFE



by
STANWOOD COBB

It is to develop the soul's creative will that it was submerged in matter. As the mystic views this worldly life it is a vast school whose tasks have but one aim: to strengthen and increase the will of man. Every obstacle surmounted, every difficulty overcome, every ingenious device by which man masters his environment—magnify within him the confidence and power and creative greatness of his soul, rendering it akin to the Divine in its ability to mould matter to its will.

For matter is not really the harsh, impossible medium that it would seem. Handled by the Divinity itself it is easily fluent to His will—harmonious, obedient, joyously evolving into more and more magnificent forms of usefulness and beauty.

As man, then, develops gradually into the enjoyment of his spiritual birthright, more and more will he too be able to control matter, to employ it, to dictate to it, and to mould it harmoniously to his will.

The Essential Mysticism
By STANWOOD COBB

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Author of

DISCOVERING THE GENIUS WITHIN YOU,
CHARACTER, WISDOM OF WU MING FU.



PRICE 10 CENTS



LIFE GUIDANCE SOCIETY, Washington 15, D. C.

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CHEVY CHASE, MD.
PRINTED IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



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WHEN all is going well we do not ask the meaning of life. It is sufficient then just to be alive. In the enjoyment of health, activity and successful achievement, existence is taken for granted and enjoyed for its own sake—just as are beauty and love. As Emerson has said, beauty is its own excuse for being; and so is life when it is zestful and joyous.

But there come into every life periods of depression, of frustration, of struggle against seemingly overwhelming obstacles. Periods of ill health, of over-work, of strain, of anxiety, of misfortune. Then it is we ask: What is the purpose of existence? What is the good of it all? Has life any meaning, or is it only the capricious gift of a fortuitous universe?

I have given a good deal of thought to this problem, both in connection with the events of my own life and with the events of many other lives that have been disclosed in all dramatic detail to my sympathetic study. And I have come to the conclusion that *the sole purpose of life, so far as the individual is concerned, is growth through struggle.*

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Life is a struggle. In truth, struggle seems to be an inseparable element of all existence. It is just this very fact that so frequently causes the complaint: What is the good of it all?

Growth, I feel sure, is the purpose of it all. Life means opportunity for growth on the part of the individual. And we grow only by means of activity—or, as the psychologists call it, *purposeful activity*. Not to be active is to stagnate, atrophy, crystallize. Movement is the sign of life. It is more even than that. It is the *essence* of life.

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LIFE, from one point of view, is simply a succession of inevitable exertions. If we did not start out on a career of purposeful activity the moment we came into the world we would never learn how to walk; how to talk; how to use our hands; how to think.

After the infant period is passed, we struggle through an education. Here too we attain growth only by means of mental and manual activity. At its best education is a struggle—an arduous endeavor which has its strains, its anxieties, its obstacles, its frustrations. All of these scholastic difficulties of growing and developing youth could be avoided simply by not receiving an education. But even with the

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possibility of such a simple solution of our pedagogic difficulties, no sane person would avail himself of this way out of intellectual struggle. We wish an education, with all its strains and difficulties, because we wish to grow and develop intellectually. We may at times envy the savages who bask indolently in the sunshine of the South Sea Islands; but we are really never desirous of substituting such a mentally idle career for the intellectual training of the modern technological world.

When the struggle and strain of education is over, can we then relapse into a life of ease and supineness? Not at all. The real effort of our life has hardly begun. We now face a career. This calls for every ounce of energy in us. Here again we meet with difficulties, with strains, with disappointments and bitter frustrations. All the trials to which humanity is heir seem to be concentrated in the human environment of the business world—a Scylla and Charybdis through which the individual must carefully steer his bark if he would reach successful havens.

Meanwhile marriage beckons from afar. This seems in prospect like a halcyon cruise amid Elysian islands. But in actual experience we discover that marriage has been but the portal to more struggle and effort. One of the most difficult things in life is the human ad-

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justment rendered necessary by marriage, if marriage is to result in any kind of harmony of living. All those pampered qualities which as son or daughter were deemed but charming peccadillos in the eyes of adoring parents, appear now as inexcusable faults which must be shuffled off before married life can rise to a successful stage. Those twain are indeed fortunate who in this marital struggle attain to a permanent harmony and happiness.

To the mated life is eventually added another factor of difficulty—progeny. If the individual has faced anxieties before, they are as nothing to the anxieties met and faced in child raising. What difficulties of child health, of child development, of child training! What financial strains and stringencies! What unforeseen disturbances to the normal tranquility of life!

And now when life has run its course and the physical vehicle is too worn out to further convey the soul on its journeys, does death have its way with us without a struggle? Not at all. This universal event is accompanied by pain, by agony, by intense struggle—just as the event of birth. The soul seeks to maintain its hold upon the body, while the body seeks to shake it off. This tragic struggle can end, of course, only in one way. But why the wrestle, the struggle, the strain? Why can we not just

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go to sleep and fail to wake up? Some do die this way. Perhaps many more of us would if we knew how to do it.

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WHAT an immense struggle all this living is! Yet we can dimly perceive, even in the midst of it, something of meaning. And upon retrospection, as they say a drowning person sees his life pass before him, we can sense the purpose of it all—*that purpose being growth.*

And these struggles, these obstacles which have been thrown before us, have been enormous aids to our development. We have become very different individuals because of the struggles of education. Again we have grown enormously through the struggles inherent in married life. Parenthood we have found a great field of development; for while we were training our children, they were training us. And in pursuing a career we have attained to undreamt heights of certitude and power.

We cannot avoid struggle. But we can meet struggle as an opportunity for growth. We can suffer obstacles and frustration to be merely a misfortune to us; or we can utilize them as aids to development. If growth is attained, the struggle seems well worth the while. If growth has not been attained in the

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course of struggle, in every case, I think it safe to say, the fault is our own and not that of Destiny.

Growth, however, is not an end in itself. It is a means to achievement. The greater the development of the individual, the greater his power of achievement. To grow, to achieve—this is to perform our part in the universe. When we do this we have become creators. We are expressing the native genius which is within each one of us.

And miracle of miracles, *achievement causes further growth*. So that we have here an infinite cycle, of which the mythological snake swallowing its tail may be taken as a symbol; for there is no end to this process of achievement by means of growth, and growth by means of achievement. Achievement therefore becomes both the means and the goal of growth. And since growth is life itself, we must conclude that achievement is the evidence of a constantly expanding existence.

Could any scheme of things more wonderful than this be conceived? Destiny has placed within the hands of every individual the complete means for achieving growth, and for expressing that growth in terms of achievement.

We might depict existence in the form of a diagram. At the center, is the Self—radiating

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out into the world of matter, and expressing itself by means of growth and achievement. At the perimeter, which we may call Existence, we find struggle leading into growth, growth leading into achievement, achievement leading to more growth, and so on to renewed struggle, et cetera, ad infinitum.*

LIFE forces struggle upon us at all times; but especially is struggle a necessary factor of achievement, as has been shown. Sometimes one wonders why so many obstacles must arise between the conception and the accomplishment of a project. Why is matter always obstructing life?

The farmer and his toil is a symbol of the difficulties that face all purposeful activity on a material plane. To get the earth to bear for him, the farmer must first plow it. This necessary process meets with obstruction at every step of the way. When the earth is at last thrown aside and reduced to submissive furrows, the planting must be done. But this is not the end of the matter. Constant cultivation is necessary. The elements present new dangers almost daily. And as if that were not enough, the insidious attacks of the insect world call for incessant battle if these greatest

*The cycle is repeated in ascending curves, as we master the lessons life brings us.

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foes of man are to be conquered so that crops may grow healthy. To bring about a successful harvest is a long drawn out task, requiring infinite patience, industry and wisdom.

And so it is with all thought of man toward achievement. The idea, the plan many come with a rush of joyous inspiration. Here on this inner plane all is clear smooth sailing. But between the idea and its accomplishment appear a thousand obstacles, once a thought-form enters upon the plane of activity.

This is so characteristic of life that we must accept it as a law of existence: *achievement can be reached only over the barrier of innumerable obstacles.*

Why is this so? Is it, perhaps, because if our ideas could be transformed immediately into realities we should become magicians and demigods—a veritable danger to the universe? For we are not isolated individuals when we come to the plane of action, as we were on the plane of conception. In the world of the idea we can erect dream castles *ad libitum* without in any way interfering with other people's dream castles. But when we come to deal with the phenomenal world, our plans and efforts must somehow fit in with plans and efforts of other people; they must harmonize with the organization of humanity and with the universal scheme of things. All

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such plans can be achieved only in competition with the plans of millions of other individuals, in a medium of matter which itself opposes obstinately the will of man.

If we understand these laws, we shall not be so impatient at difficulties in our career; at unexpected obstacles in the working out of projects and ideas.

ONE thing that we can do is to make certain that what we are attempting to accomplish is reasonable—is worth while not only for ourselves but for the world in general; and that it is in line with our own abilities and strength.

Much of the struggle in life is unnecessary and avoidable. It is due to the unwise endeavor to accomplish impossible enterprises—things not meant for us.

When Napoleon, in the intoxication of his titanic vanity, undertook to invade Russia, his rashness and lack of wisdom had already guaranteed insuperable obstacles to the accomplishment of his plans. Never before had his military aims been impossible of achievement. Always his power of will and military genius had enabled him to overcome any obstacles which existed. But here, for the first time, Napoleon undertook a quixotic enter-

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prise. Here was an undertaking in which his genius could not suffice for victory, for it was not simply a case of defeating the enemy on the field of battle. For the first time Napoleon found himself up against insuperable obstacles.

Therefore, we must always consider carefully everything we undertake, realizing that quixotic quests are sure to meet with insuperable difficulties and to end in disaster.

We must budget and economize our energy as wisely as we do our income. If a shipload of banknotes goes down to the bottom of the sea a lot of money may be lost, but very little real wealth. For actual wealth is labor converted into things of human need. The misdirection of labor, either our own or that of other people, into futile enterprises is the greatest loss of wealth that can befall. Therefore, make sure that your labor is creating *real wealth for the world*; and rest assured that in that case it will bring sufficient recompense, both in income and in happiness, to yourself.

IF we find ourselves obstructed in the course we are taking; if we find obstacles hemming us in on every side; or if we find ourselves plunged into misfortune—our first step should be to analyze the situation. See

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where the trouble is coming from. Perhaps it really flows from ourselves; the fault may be in us. Or, if it comes from without, let us see what causes it, and move out of the danger if possible.

Nature has planted in even the humblest and lowest of creatures the instinct to analyze danger and to move away from it. Touch a caterpillar with a stick and it will immediately wriggle and try to escape. It senses danger and is using its insect intelligence to escape that danger. So must man use all of his human intelligence to escape from situations that hem him in unfavorably. First think, and then act, in such a way as to get out of difficulties. Every difficulty, be sure, can in time somehow be overcome.

And we must not rebel against life and the universe because of the necessity for daily struggle. How would progress and evolution get on if there were no obstacles to strive against, no difficulties to overcome? Where there is little need of striving, life degenerates. Evolutionary progress has resulted from overcoming obstacles. Only by biological striving has there been evolved a nervous system, a backbone, and a brain.

We cannot avoid struggle. It is the law of nature. What we can do is to utilize the necessity of struggle as a means for growth. We

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can allow a misfortune to be merely a misfortune, or we can turn it into progress. We must see to it, therefore, that our trials and sufferings become a means for growth; for otherwise they are black tragedy indeed.

The creative person knows well how to utilize misfortune as a stepping stone to higher forms of expression. Whatever comes into the artist's life is so much grist for his mill. A trial, a sorrow, a tragedy, by means of the alchemy of art become a sonata pathétique, a painting which blesses the world, or a noble tragedy which refines and inspires the heart of man.

What the artist does, we can also do. We can forge out from our misfortunes a golden coin to pay our way onward and upward. We can make stepping stones of our dead selves and rise to higher things. It is our own fault, after all, if we do not turn struggle into growth; and growth into achievement.

Right effort applied wisely and persistently cannot fail to win out. A remarkable statement to this effect emanates from one whose own life exemplifies extraordinarily the power to achieve a world mission in the face of apparently overwhelming odds; for although a prisoner for forty years, he yet managed from prison walls to spread over the whole world his message of universal peace and goodwill.

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“Man must be tireless in his efforts,” says Abdul Baha in “The Divine Art of Living.” “Once his effort is directed in the proper channel if he does not succeed today he will succeed tomorrow. *Effort in itself is one of the noblest traits of human character.* Devotion to one’s calling, effort in its speedy execution, simplicity of spirit and steadfastness through all the ups and downs, these are the hallmarks of success. A person characterized with those attributes will gather the fruits of his labors, and will also win the happiness of the Kingdom.”

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A GREAT comfort in times of stress is the knowledge that the hardship will in due time pass, and it will seem as if it had never been. In the struggle of life there are periods of respite, a truce to battle, a time for rest and recuperation.

Nature obeys a sublime law of rhythm. In the plant world the periods of activity, of rapid growth, of harvest, are unfailingly followed by a period of brumal rest which is a time of preparation for further expansion and growth. And so it is in the life of man. We have our periods of zestful activity, of thrilling achievement. These may be followed by periods of weariness; of depression; perhaps even of failure and frustration. But development goes on,

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even in "the winter of our discontent." For we too, like the plant world, are being prepared (though we little know it) for further and greater achievement. In these periods of retirement we can grow mightily, gathering our forces for renewed and more successful struggle.

What a great lesson came to Milton in his blindness! "God does not need my service," he discovered: "Thousands at His bidding speed, and post o'er land and sea. They also serve who only stand and wait."

Into the life of Lincoln came a period of disappointment, of lull, after his enforced retirement from Congress. For some five years his growth in character was mostly in the silence of his own meditations and ruminations. He spent hours in his office writing, reflecting, and studying the stupendous and baffling problem of slavery. At the end of this period of political retirement he was much nearer being of a calibre for President than he had been during his congressional period.

We too may be but gainers from moments, from years even, of frustration. For during our enforced rest from the strains of achievement and success we learn our dependence upon Destiny. We discover the need of relaxation, of resignation, of renunciation.*

*One of Wagner's noblest operas, *Tristan and Isolde*, was composed upon the theme of renunciation as the result of a bitter experience in his own life.

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We learn to give up our own will to that vast Cosmic current which bears us toward more glorious harbors than we even know of. This is not loss, but gain, if we but knew it.

Thus we find strength to repeat once more the cycle of struggle, growth, achievement. And so we wend our way ever onward and upward. Upward, that is, provided we know how to utilize the circumstances which Destiny places in our way.



IN all this life process, this complicated system of existence which so baffles the human intelligence, let us make sure to use as much as possible our *intuitive powers*. Here is a force given to us for our use—a wonderful guidance.

I believe the intuition to be a higher, more far seeing power than the intellect. It gives us an advantage in finding our way out of difficulties, such as a man who was lost in a forest would have if he could climb a high tree and overlook all the environs; or if he could find a trail which guaranteed some definite though unseen goal.

Before embarking upon any important enterprise, therefore, you should consult your intuition most carefully. And if it should appear that you are wrongfully embarked upon

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an enterprise from which the intuition draws back more and more the farther you go into it, pay heed to these warning signals. Do not hesitate to turn about. If a mistake is being made, have no false pride here. There are very few dilemmas from which man cannot extricate himself when he obeys the guidance of his intuition, and uses courage and will power. Pride and consistency have no part to play in such a situation.

There is, it would seem, a negative warning which comes to us often—a feeling that things are not right and that it is not best to continue along this line. Socrates called this the warning of his “daemon,” or good angel. He said this daemon never bothered him when he was doing something which was wise and advantageous for him; but that it never failed to warn him if he was getting entangled in an unwise or unfavorable line of action. By heeding these storm signals, Socrates guided his life very well. This intuitive guidance, you will remember, was the cause of his final serenity on approaching his execution. “If death were a misfortune,” said Socrates in effect, “if it bore us to some bourne of further trouble, my daemon would have warned me. But it has said nothing. Therefore I think that death is either a welcome extinction of the Self, or initiation into higher realms of existence. In

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either case, I cheerfully face this last event of what we here call Life.”

In order to make adequate use of our intuitions, we must be able to recognize them as such. This takes a lot of practice. The intuitional power grows in proportion as we use it.

This need not mean, and should not mean, the abdication of reason. For we have to use our reason to test the validity of our intuitions, and to distinguish real guidance from emotional impulses and aberrations. The intuition is only one factor of the expression of the Self—but it is a factor far too valuable to be overlooked and neglected.

Those persons who make use of intuition to aid them in the choice and execution of activities and enterprises will certainly be spared much of the struggle that mortal life is heir to. They will be helped to avoid many pitfalls. And their achievement, because of this inner guidance, will tend to harmonize with the universal scheme of things. In other words, they will have the force of destiny and of progress upon their side instead of against them.

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WHEN you have done the best you can to steer your life into ways of harmony,

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yet tribulations still beset you, it is a great help to recognize the following important truths:

The trial or misfortune you are laboring under has been attracted to you by some hidden, inner law. It may or may not be a result of previous actions of your life here. But it certainly has an organic connection with your personality, and is *just what you need at the present moment for present and future growth and development. Do not scorn it, therefore, or indulge in bitter and futile rebellion. Accept it, transmute it unto creative values, and escape from it as quickly as intelligence, will power and wisely directed effort will enable.*

Above all things, do not indulge in the persecution complex, or think yourself a martyr beyond all other souls. What you are enduring is the common lot of humanity.* Your experience may be unique—probably is unique. For such is the nature of experience. Experience fits the individual—and no two individuals are alike. *But for the very reason that it is unique, it is helpful and efficacious for you.* It might not be helpful to another person, nor any other person's experience be helpful to you.

And through it all, under every circumstance of life, let us remember that suffering is an essential to growth. For often we do not

*Edward Martin, Editor of Life, once said: "Most people are unhappy because they think everyone else is happy."

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of ourselves willingly enough struggle to exert our utmost powers. Therefore we have to be gently impelled by Destiny, by some change which threatens disaster to our fortunes.



HOW could animals realize this, that the pain, the terror of life was to drive them higher up? How could cave men of ancient Europe, basking in a semi-tropical climate, realize that the icy breaths of descending glaciers from the polar regions were to drive them into effort which would make of them a finer, a more intelligent race, worthy progenitors of modern Europeans? From cave men we have forged our way to the man of the twentieth century with his powerful intellect, ungoverned emotional nature and almost completely undiscovered powers of intuition. Struggle still is necessary, privation and suffering in order to train us to govern the emotions and to utilize that marvelous spirit of intuition which is ready to do the bidding of us all. Upward man has risen for eons past—through struggle, privation and sorrow. Upward he is still to rise, for progress must go on. And the end is perhaps above all sorrow.

As for the individual, does his progress, as well as that of the race, go on forever? That

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is the teaching of the great spiritual heroes who have given their lives for man's fuller development and progress. Personally I am convinced that these few earth years are but a slight segment of existence; and it is my aim to so live here that life hereafter may not be handicapped. I believe that what gains I make here in character and development become an indestructible wealth—a wealth which "moths cannot corrupt, nor thieves break in and steal." I believe that my abilities will find full scope for expression over there; that life will be even more gloriously zestful and active than it is here; and that if we have learned well here the lessons of trials, frustrations and misfortunes, we shall not need such discipline hereafter.

We have not reached the point of truly successful living until we have found adequate expression for the Self within us. . . . The creative person has always the victorious attitude toward life. . . . For what matters all else in the world, if one's life is being poured fourth in terms of beauty, of achievement, of service?

Discovering the Genius Within You

By STANWOOD COBB