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ARTICLE II.

THE VALLEY OF DECISION.¹

BY PROFESSOR ROBERT MARK WENLEY, SC. D., D. PHIL.

ON an eventful occasion like the present, you will be prepared to agree with me, that once at least, if never again, a time comes, red-lettered for aye in the career of every strong man, at which the smooth, noiseless current of daily life is stopped suddenly, and the hour, empty of vulgar little cares, compels reflection by its very strangeness. The past, stretching away back to a hazy horizon, looses its usual compelling grip, stands in abeyance almost. The future repels, because of that utter vacancy, always the main mark of the untried and unknown. As a result, we realize intensely that we *are* here now; realize this, too, with an unfamiliar thrill compounded of several conflicting emotions—hope jostling apprehension, joy mingled with solemnity, a certain sense of accomplishment or completeness restrained by unaccustomed hesitancy. Of course, as all who have served awhile in the ranks of the battle of life understand, many diverse, often sharply contrasted, circumstances may induce this peculiar tension, may bring one at a stroke into that quiet yet momentous period when he finds himself alone face to face with self, and only the still, small voice breaks the awful silence. But, in the career of the *educated* youth, it is plain that *two* occasions particularly tend to place a species of check upon natural exuberance, to concentrate lively attention upon practical problems that call for *prompt* decision, and yet,

¹ Commencement Address delivered before Oberlin College, June 27, 1900.

paradox though it be, are fraught with mighty issues, destined mayhap to make or mar a lifetime. Who among us can ever forget the last days of the last year at school? Or, again, who can efface from vivid recollection the weeks that brought the dying college career to terribly swift close? The common round ceased; the daily task filled the fleeting hours no longer; and beyond, the big, foreign world loomed up large, enforcing thought, conjuring apprehension, pressing the necessity for a personal interview with self. An enormous question-mark appeared to stare one in the face; what resources had we managed to assemble, what supports were at our disposal on which we might fall back?

Each returning summer, on these laughing June days, surrounded by the gay Commencement throng, those of us who are older know for a surety that the smiles, the brilliancy, the congratulations, the gifts, are often but as froth on the surface, concealing many a sad heart, or serving to distract attention for a brief interval; and these hearts are sad, because of perplexity. The responsibility thus cast upon the speaker of the hour waxes when he has the wit to call to mind that his words are meant for those who go, not for the happier who may remain, not for the scarred veteran who sighs himself back to his own graduation. His it is to descend once more into the Valley of Decision, remembering his own sojourn there, bringing news of the arena that lies ahead where he has since been bearing some part in the mighty warfare of existence or scintillating amid its shifty skirmishes.

The task, believe me, cannot be regarded lightly; it cannot be undertaken easily. For, as time speeds on in silent flight, a man's difficulties alter, nay, he changes with them; to realize to the full what is now passing in the souls of those who stand to-day where he stood some twenty years ago, becomes harder and harder. "A mad fellow

met me on the way, and told me I had unloaded all the gibbets, and pressed the dead bodies." Is not this sometimes a just commentary on the Commencement Address? The distinguished, the successful speaker, had long since buried his dead, and a dead tale was the best yarn he could bring himself to spin. An effort must be made, therefore, to escape from the Circumlocution Office which, as Dickens said, was beforehand in the art of perceiving how *not* to do it. You and I, my young friends of the Graduating Class, must together lay hold upon the realities of the present crisis—for it *is* a crisis, fraught with deep moment in the life of each one of you apart—and a human life is the most precious, the most indestructible thing in the whole of God's universe. The youth find it difficult to fathom the fact; but as surely as the days flash by, the elders perceive with increasing clearness the absolute truth of the old, old saying—it profiteth a man nothing if, in gaining the entire world, he lose his own soul.

As I have hinted, the reasons why crises overtake men time and again lie in the very constitution of human nature. Be we boys or girls, men or women, our life shapes itself in the formation and execution of plans or purposes. This ability to devise an action beforehand, to work it out as we can or may, serves most of all to mark us off from the brutes which perish. Like us, they suffer hunger and thirst, passion and pain, disease and death. But they cannot plan as we do; their instinct furnishes but a poor parody upon that lordly reason whereby we hold rule over them. Their planning—the beaver for his dam, the bird for her nest, the bee for its hive, the monkey for its pilfering—seems a somewhat straightened affair when considered attentively. Means and end lie near each other, no large intervals need be bridged, seldom are new processes demanded on the instant. With man, on the contrary, unforeseen spaciousness of outlook reveals itself constantly;

fresh aims emerge, and so, unfamiliar ways must be trodden constantly, while unanticipated obstacles rise up endlessly to balk the realization of the scheme. By a natural consequence, mere living puzzles us with worries as it never oppresses the beast; for we invite disappointment by that law of our nature which bids us seek ever higher, larger, untried things. Aspiration comforts us, not achievement; we want more worlds to conquer. Blessing and cursing proceed equally from the same source—this is the first, the last, nay the eternal, enigma of human nature. Blessing it is that we attempt so much, curse that most often we can accomplish so little. The things which we would not, these we do; the things which we would, these we cannot do. And, as if to double our burden, we *know* it all, everything conspires to brand it upon our attention. Nay, further, as if to strain us to the uttermost, we are so constituted that, just when we seem to meet direst disaster, we frame yet newer plans, thus inviting worse defeat still. For, afflicted though we may be, hope never deserts us wholly; as our strength is, so are our days. Amid shattering of our dearest desires, we ever echo the words of the poet:—

“ My own hope is, a sun will pierce
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;
That, after Last, returns the First,
Though a wide compass round be fetched;
That what began best, can't end worst,
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.”

But, even at this, something remains to tell ere we can see fully why, once at least in a lifetime, all of us must pass into the valley of decision. Many of our plans, governed by reason though they be, share in a measure the limitations characteristic of animal instinct. Means and end often stand in close proximity with us, just as with beaver and bird, bee and monkey. Perhaps, indeed, the ordinary daily purposes, those thoroughly familiar to every-

body, strongly tend to rest on this level of middlingness. To-morrow at two, I shall play golf; on Saturday evening I shall go to supper with a friend who lives at the other end of the city; next month I shall travel into northern Michigan and remain for a few weeks; while there I shall sail a little, read some light literature, enjoy fishing or shooting, and ramble over the bluffs with acquaintances. These plans, or others exactly like them, form a large portion of our common life. The vast majority present but small difficulty, simply because means and end fit; no sooner said than done, is the familiar phrase which well describes them. Yet, even if such purposes do, as a matter of fact, go far towards engrossing the average energies of the average man, we can see easily enough that they do *not* contain, possibly do not even indicate, the inner spirit that most stamps mankind with its unique, troublous aimfulness. For instance, it is of a surety not such plannings, narrow in their scope, that tempt us to exclaim,—

“ How inexhaustibly the spirit grows !
 One object, she seemed erewhile born to reach
 With her whole energies, and die content,—
 So like a wall at the world's edge it stood,
 With naught beyond to live for,—is it reached?—
 Already are new undream'd energies
 Outgrowing under and extending farther
 To a new object.”

No! The truest life, that which bulks biggest on the scrolls of world-history, cannot but be moved by larger ideas, consecrated to purposes of another kind, possessing incomparably wider scope. And the point to be borne in mind is that you and I, who count for so little seemingly on the great stage of existence, share just such plans with our mightier brethren.

What, then, are these larger, profounder, more pervasive aims that serve to disclose a man's highest humanity most fully? Those, it may be said in a word, which weigh

with us in our better, our more serious moments; in the moments when we realize the responsibility of living, and perceive the opportunities wherewith our strangely complex endowments are fraught. Let me attempt to illustrate this.

I have tried to show already that the smaller purposes, which serve to fill up the ordinary round of common life, present few insurmountable difficulties, because means and end lie close to one another. A few dollars, a comparatively feeble exertion of will, or a mere momentary whim, suffice usually for practical consummation of the projects conceived of on this plane. But, unfortunately for mankind, from one point of view, fortunately from another, no such otiose method meets the soul when it braces itself to execute one of the larger aims which best reveal the stuff whereof a man is made. Suppose one of us takes to-day such a resolve as this—twenty years hence, I shall be at the head of my chosen calling; or this—I shall try to contribute something permanent to the common stock of knowledge, say, by making a brilliant invention, or by writing a really great book; or this—from now onwards I shall lead a righteous life. All of you can see for yourselves that purposes of this sort are wholly diverse from the familiar resolutions relating to meetings, visits, and brief journeyings that cover our day-in, day-out doings. Great as the contrast may be, the bigger plans are not so absurd, so impracticable, as some seem to think. They happen to be plans just as essentially as the rest. The contrast lies in the fact that a long, and often weary, road extends far, far into the future between the aim as conceived, and its result as built into, or constituted part of, life. Further, the length of the road, and its frequent weariness, are due to the plain truth that means and end do not fit immediately. The means to carry out such resolves cannot be said to stand near; a small part of them indeed does touch

us at every moment; but the whole must needs be assembled slowly, even painfully. In other words, we cannot but reckon on mastering circumstances so as to create our own means; and experience everywhere insists that circumstances always present a strong, frowning front. It is not for us to go round them trumpet in hand, and await their fall, as did the Israelites at Jericho; we are quite unable to take them by storm. The lengthy processes of sapping and mining force themselves upon us; a strong heart, confident of itself, yet conscious of its limitations, alone can accomplish much.

But, I appeal to you, is it not just such tasks that are characteristically worthy of a man? He is not set here to fritter away his few brief years in a continual round of little trifles, serving to fill the moment mayhap, but leaving not a wrack behind. And the sooner he takes grave counsel with himself in the valley of decision, the better. A valley it is, because the outlook seems so dark, and the path so difficult. Yet, on the other hand, a valley of decision it is, because, just in proportion as Fate is taken on the instant, can any one hope to conquer a place for himself in this world. He who fails in a great attempt accomplishes more than he who meets marked success in a small. And to succeed in the larger effort demands no more than stronger will, intenser strenuousness, deeper truth to self, above all, greater faith.

Now, the danger run by every youth at the outset of his opening career centers in a tendency to acquiesce in the easier way. Immediate successes attract, and naturally attract; but for the young, immediate successes cannot but be puny—this belongs to the nature of the case. Are you going to be contented with the minor achievements? Are you going to deceive yourselves into supposing that you have come through the valley of decision, when you have not even taken into account the factors on which every

worthy choice must be based? Are you going to rest satisfied with mere standing-room among the unknown throng; or are you going to exert every effort to serve your day and generation with your whole heart and mind and soul, remembering that they beseech you for such service and that, in a mighty land like this, they are preëminently worth serving?

Young people are slow to understand the truth that, in every walk of life, no matter how crowded and unpromising it appear, there is room and to spare at the top. To make this more vivid to you, let me say that, in my own profession, I can count on the fingers of one hand the men who command instant attention. No doubt, it is a long pull to get there. But, after all, is it worth your while, if you have to go into the contest, aiming at the occupancy of a lower place? Plainly, the attempt at least cannot fail to appeal to the entire manhood and moral force of each disciplined person. Is any youth deliberately determined to repay the community for all the advantages he has received—in the matter of education, for instance—with aught but the purest coin of character he can command? When the case is put before you thus clearly, I cannot doubt what the choice of every one possessed of sterling selfhood must be. If one fail in a great effort, he will at all events have brought forth out of the riches of his soul the highest that he possessed; if he succeed, he will have added another career worth emulating to the national stock in trade which, remember, forms the capital of civilization. I do not ask you to be old men in your youth; but I do say that in youth are laid the foundations of future success; youth lost or frittered away can never be recalled. Sir Walter Raleigh, an old-time hero of mine, who surely had seen experience and to spare, sums the situation in a nutshell: "Bestow thy youth so that thou mayst have comfort to remember it, when it hath forsaken thee, and

not sigh and grieve at the account thereof. Whilst thou art young thou wilt think it will never have an end; but, behold, the longest day hath his evening, and that thou shalt enjoy it but once, that it never turns again; use it, therefore, as the springtime, which soon departeth, and wherein thou oughtest to plant and sow all provisions for a long and happy life." Or, as I might venture to condense the situation in a phrase: Hope is the dream of those who are awake. You will never gain respect by soliciting it, you must command it; and to this end, as all masters will confess, there leads but a single, narrow path.

This brings us to the second aspect of the matter. I have emphasized the necessity for self-reliance, for personal force. Is there not something else? Most decidedly.

The youth who has taken his decision well often fancies that the world is a place where, in fighting his way, he can do just what commends itself to him, without much reference to others. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" Fortunately, this question cannot be held either so foolish or so proud as it may seem at the first blush. For, almost certainly, a stage occurs in the development of character which tends to express itself in some such language. The child differs from the youth, both differ from the adult, and all three are marked by their own curious mannerisms, especially when the views of men and things peculiar to each come under consideration. For children and those as yet in the early bud of expanding youth, the world and life can hardly be said to exist. Small difficulties and tiny trials do doubtless occur to cloud the blue sky. The baby may not have everything he whimpers for; he must be in tutelage to parents and nurses; but this supervision presses lightly upon him as a rule, because he reposes confidence more or less complete in his overseers. Similarly the young boy and girl do not often

come into collision with any very real problems. Their various guardians interpose between them and the hardships of living. And although, once in a way, the irksomeness of being governed may serve to draw salt tears, after all, this proves no more than a passing shower on a sunny day. But, as every one knows, such a state of affairs cannot last for ever. As he begins to pass into early manhood, the boy is apt to experience sharply the numerous rebuffs and rebukes that the world has a sad habit of administering. Social conventions restrain him; old beliefs, which he can neither appreciate nor understand, weigh upon him like a nightmare; on many sides he finds his activity curbed. He frames ideals, draws broad pictures of a fine future, only to call down mockery for his pains. Aspiration is balked, for society will not adjust itself to his notions; nay, it appears to thwart, often with amazing originality. Thus the youth comes to harden his heart, to persuade himself that an attitude of uncompromising opposition is alone consistent with his dignity, mainly because the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak. The zealous will greatly outruns the insight of reason, which nothing but experience renders supple. The "clever young man," as his ill advised friends love to call him, is not necessarily conceited. Far rather, a universe that wears the guise of unsympathetic stubbornness forces him into an attitude of protest. Not knowing why things are as they happen to be, he finds fixed limits set on every side to his self-realization. He would fain reform his surroundings by adjusting them to his own ideas. The years that have passed over his head are not yet sufficient to have taught him that, like charity, reformation begins at home. The need for adjustment, for wise use of nearest opportunity, for substantial unity with at least some important group of his fellow-men, has still to become clear to him. And, by a most natural sequence of ideas,—which follows upon a

frequent sequence of events,—he comes to exclaim, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”

The loneliness felt inevitably by every one in traversing the valley of decision is often set in deepest shadow by this common tendency to be at odds with the rest of the world. Reflectively considered, however, it contains some promise of good omen for the future. For the antagonism I have attempted to indicate cannot be regarded as permanent in the immense majority of cases, nor, on the contrary, does it simply put an end to itself. Really it bears lessons regarding the nature of that larger world beyond whereto all young persons are traveling speedily—none more speedily than you, the graduates of to-day. I ask you, by way of conclusion, to consider this aspect of the matter with me for a little.

When one happens to be struggling for a foothold in this world, or when one is face to face with circumstances that render prompt decisions indispensable, then self tends to throw the entire horizon in shadow. Nevertheless, it must be accepted as a maxim that self counts for nothing save in and through coöperation with others. In a word, as no one of us has anything completely his own, it becomes absurd to talk of doing what one wills with his own. I believe that this truth stands in special need of reinforcement with those who are on the threshold of their serious career. Yet, when we stay to consider it for a moment, its roots, though struck deep down in the nature of things, are traceable enough.

Naturalists often emphasize the paradox that man, albeit ruler among animals, is the most helpless creature at birth, and requires the longest time to reach anything like maturity. The chick has hardly left the shell ere it begins to peck; the duckling takes to the water at once; the nestling wings it in a week or two; in three months the puppy can execute no little damage in his mistress's best

parlor; colt and calf are soon in a position to show their frolicsome paces. But the babe's life hangs by a thread for many days; given conditions even slightly unfavorable, and infant mortality often assumes alarming proportions; in any case, months must pass before the child can even stumble around. At every turn he stands in dire need of watchful care—a care which must continue unremitting for some years. On the face of it, all this implies that he owes to others most of what is valuable in his selfhood. Again, we frequently hear, to a lad's advantage, that he comes of a good stock, or, as another phrase has it, out of a good nest. Family life, that is to say, furnishes him not merely with material nurture, but with that moral and spiritual disciplinary attention which, when soon begun, moulds the plastic character so as to determine seriously the direction of its maturer growth. For, in the small society which we call the family, men first learn the indispensableness of social relations. Now, all this is but another way of saying that such personal solicitude as we have a right to demand is intertwined inextricably with the subordination of our own unchastened whims to the duties we owe our immediate circle. You will see readily that two sides are involved here. On the one hand, the more carefully a child is trained and tended by parents and others, the more is his value as a human being recognized and enhanced. On the other hand, the more a child receives from this nurture, the more he falls in debt to the family and friends who have protected and cherished him. Whether we like it or not, the whole circumstances of our early helplessness and of our later training in the ampler relations of life have induced us—without our even knowing it—to become composite beings, made up as much of what proceeds from others as of anything pertaining to ourselves exclusively. For example, it is impossible for a son to be generous towards a mother who has been true to

her most ordinary trust; it is equally impossible for him to be generous to a father who has risen to realization of the privileges of fatherhood. And this for the very simple reason that in the son, mother and father live. They have spent themselves for him, and he is indebted to them for a large part of the foundation whereon he may ultimately build aught that is worthy. So, only by coöperating with them could he ever have become what he now is. What is true in this respect of the narrower domestic life holds similarly of the broader civic relationship.

A main difference, if not the sole difference, between that earlier stage of coöperation or interdependence, illustrated chiefly by the family, and the later era typified in our relations to the larger communities of the school, the municipality, the state, and the nation, or to great groups of our fellow-men either in politics, in religion, in the various professions, or in social organizations,—a main difference, I say, between these two centers is in our comparative unconsciousness of the one, and in our ever deepening recognition of the other. *The* difficulty is that the young who, like you, are about to proceed to a full share in the second stage, frequently prolong the period of unconsciousness too far. The familiar attitude of opposition, to which I have been adverting, may be traced partly to this cause. Yet, certain it is that, if you will but tarry to think for a moment, you will be saved some at least of the disagreeable consequences.

Consider for a little our educational system, whereof you are among the latest products. You know it so well, and on such a day as this in the history of Oberlin College, with its splendid traditions, the broad facts ought to strike home to you so keenly that you will have small difficulty in understanding the matter on hand. Is it enough to say that the boys and girls who have enjoyed its advantages *owe* something to the community which foots the larger

part of the bill? We are all aware that this happens to be the ordinary way of stating the case. Yet, although a certain measure of the truth finds expression thus, the most essential aspects of the situation receive no recognition. The scheme of public instruction in this country, its manifold defects notwithstanding, has served to level up without leveling down. The "educational ladder" is something of a tradition in the United States to-day, but its first inception must be traced to the freedom from presuppositions incident naturally to a new country. So early as 1642, not a generation after the first landing from the "Mayflower," the General Court of the young Colony "by a public act enjoined upon the municipal authorities the duty of seeing that every child within their respective jurisdictions should be educated." In 1647 this legislation was made more emphatic. Every township having fifty householders had to appoint a person "to teach all such children as should resort to him to read and write"; while every township having one hundred householders was directed to "set up a grammar school, whose master should be able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the university." This system, as you all know, is universal in the States where education has been organized carefully; and it implies that the whole latent talent of the country may be tapped. Every child whose parents are so minded, no matter how lowly their sphere in life, has an opportunity to receive the highest education that the school system affords. And with what result? The inhabitants of this broad land are, with the single exception of the Scotch, the most generally educated people in the world. Now this means simply that, by recognizing its own responsibilities as concerns education, society in the United States has developed characteristics peculiar to itself. In other words, the environment in which you young people live possesses marked features of its own, and in

these you are vital partakers. You see, then, it is not merely that you *owe* society something for the advantages you have enjoyed; but the far more important and profoundly influential fact that your whole life, your understanding of its conditions, your conception of your relations to your fellow-citizens, are widely different from what they would have been had you been brought up in other surroundings governed by another system.

These being the circumstances, you can see easily how profoundly foolish it is for us to talk as if we, each one of us apart, possessed aught exclusively of our own, with which we might do as we please. From our first conscious days we have been breathing a definite social atmosphere; this has entered into us, becoming bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. And if, in the past, by the instrumentalities of family life and the educational system, we have thus been brought into unity with our neighbors, we may rest perfectly assured that, in the future, and most emphatically with regard to the great decisions affecting our career, we shall not escape the same human contact—to succeed we must take our fellows into our confidence. Depend upon it, a man grows rich only as he increases in loyalty. This is the reason why so much stress is laid, and laid rightly, on good manners, to take a very simple instance. These are not mere fashions to be contemned; they are rather indications of that respect for and unity with the feelings of others which happen to be bound up closely with true success. We often “see a world of pains taken, and the best years of life spent, in collecting a set of thoughts in a college for the conduct of life; and, after all, the man so qualified shall hesitate in his speech to a good suit of clothes, and want common sense before an agreeable woman. Hence it is, that wisdom and valor and justice and learning cannot keep a man in countenance that is possessed with these excellences, if he want the inferior

art of life and behavior called good breeding." As a rule, bad manners proceed, not from impudence, but from ignorance of one's fellow-men, and from that most fatal species of ignorance which goes by the name of thoughtlessness, disregard, inattention.

We see, then, our opportunity and our condemnation. The great crises of life, the moments that stand out big even after many years have run by, tend to emphasize individuality and, for this very reason, to induce a certain sense of loneliness and independence which, although true, because grounded on fact, are, when all has been said, but half true. We *must* pass through the valley of decision if we are ever to rise to an important place in the service of the community. Accordingly, our loneliness ought to be transformed by a recognition of our unity with our neighbors. How will the conclusions at which we may be tempted to arrive affect father and mother, brothers and sisters, teachers and friends? How will they reflect on the reputation of this college? How will they influence the opportunities that our fellows may afford us to minister to the state and the nation? Be sure that a place awaits each one of us; but be sure too that no one of us can become anything except in so far as he takes decision to occupy such place, to fulfill such mission as life presents him with. We are dependent upon others, not merely for what we are, but even for what we suppose ourselves to be. And this is as true for evil as for good. I cannot become a leading politician but for others who *will* that I should lead. I cannot become a great orator unless others feel and confess the influence of my words. And in the same way, I cannot become even a murderer except there be some one to slay. And so, *the* crisis to be surmounted in the valley of decision needs no more complicated statement than this: What kind of social relations shall I use my entire influence to preserve? The answer must be

sufficiently plain to all. Those in which the good of self, which is one with the good of others, finds best expression. To be filling my time and place as a lawyer, I must be a good lawyer to my clients; as a preacher, I must be a good pastor to my people; as a teacher, I must be a good instructor to my pupils; and so on for every walk. For, only as I make up my mind to be thus good, can I grow into goodness myself, can I possess myself of anything of any kind that is worth my while.

Thus, the choice in the valley of decision cannot be viewed as a matter of pure self-interest. It urges upon us deeper realization of life—of what it is, of what it is for. The power of a man's character lives in others as much as in himself. Life pursued in the light of such knowledge cannot fail to partake also in a kind of faith. For, "though it seems to us an infancy, and be clothed in swaddling-bands, it cannot but grow into consistency and unity as time advances, it cannot but at the last stand invested in a beauty and power which are without rent and seam, being woven throughout."