

1891

# The motive power of self-sacrifice

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Commencement Oration.

The Motive-Power of Self-Sacrifice

W. F. Sheridan

1891

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# The Motive-power of Self-sacrifice.

By Wilbur Fletcher Sheridan.

The world is moving toward a world-goal. The soul of that movement is the spirit of self-sacrifice. Not self-sacrifice for its own sake; else asceticism, that anachronism of Christian history, that vast leakage of the world's religious vitality, would be, instead of a clog, a help toward that goal. Not sacrifice for the sake of success; else the mercantile spirit of to-day, consuming health, and home-life, and oftentimes honor, upon the altar of an insatiate ambition, would be a large factor in that upward evolution. But sacrifice for the sake of others, a spirit. This, - in sympathetic

touch with all life, alleviating its pains, ennobling its ideals, energizing its weakness, giving itself for human needs. This is the motive-power of heroic action, the law of the world's development. A stern, sad law, do you say? It may seem so. But transformed by an enthusiasm for humanity it becomes man's high inspiration and his crown.

We find a suggestion of this law in nature, where the mineral gives itself to the vegetable, the vegetable to the animal, the animal to man. We find its sun-clear statement and perfect embodiment in Christianity. The life, the teaching, the death of Jesus Christ

pour forth this strain in a ceaseless harmony. Wherever the Christian church has been true to this idea, whatever its creed or culture, it has marched to victory. And the broken chains and healed wounds of men have testified how divinely it has done its work. But wherever it has been untrue to this idea, however high its culture, pure its creed, or great its prestige, it has gone to defeat. And the riveted manacles and gaping wounds of men, <sup>properly covered by a cloak of outward religiousness,</sup> have testified the travesty on the divine original.

It is this spirit of self-sacrifice alone that has met the crises of history. Did intrepid valour secure civil

liberty to Switzerland, The Netherlands and The American colonies? It was this spirit that prompted it. Did a Leo-ligny, and a Gustavus Adolphus and a Cromwell unsheathe the effectual swords in behalf of religious freedom? It was this spirit that moved them. Did Luther face the potentates of Church and of Empire at Worms, declaring - "I cannot submit my faith to Pope or council. Here I take my stand. I cannot do otherwise; so help me God!" - words that have been the keynote of our Protestantism? It was this heroic spirit that inspired him. Did Knox and Melley and Chalmer and their co-laborers

fight the battle of an un-  
trammelled and spiritual  
Christianity and awake to  
conscience and righteousness  
their stupefied generations.  
It was this same lofty spi-  
rit that inspired them all.

It is to this spirit  
also that we must look for  
the solution of the prob-  
lems of this age of discon-  
tent. The conflict between  
labor and capital, with its  
attendant suffering and  
bitterness; social inequality,  
with its growing caste-walls  
and aristocracy of wealth;  
race-prejudice, the dark-  
browed son of ignorance and  
hate, standing between  
eight millions of our fellow  
citizens and "a white man's  
chance in life" — here are prob-

seems to be solved only by a spirit  
 of unselfish devotion,  
 broader than class or party.  
 So both iconoclasm, too, fram-  
 ing iniquity into law, shat-  
 tering our Christian holy day,  
 and robbing the workman  
 of his day of rest; social im-  
 purity, with its foul foot-  
 like in alley-haunt and  
 marble halls, corrupting  
 our youth and paving the  
 way for a Roman and Ba-  
 bylonian decay; the liquor  
 traffic, for robbing de com-  
 mune and remorseless as the  
 grave, dictating politics,  
 terrorizing trade, subsidiz-  
 ing newspapers, councils  
 and legislatures, bidding  
 defiance to all law, hu-  
 man and divine - evils,  
 these - gigantic, hydra-head

ed, to grapple with which  
we must have brave, true  
hearts, persistent self-sac-  
rifice, intensified heroism.

In this time, too,  
of religious unrest, of seek-  
ing, not indeed after a  
new faith, but for the per-  
fect unfoldment of our  
one faith, when the thought-  
ful, sincere mind often finds  
himself amid the bafflings  
of dumb, unspeakable doubts,  
like an infant in the night

An infant crying for the light,  
With no language but a cry—  
We need men who will sacrifice  
pride of opinion for the sake of  
arriving at the truth; men hero-  
ic enough to go forward when  
it is popular to stand still;  
men brave enough, too, to  
stand by a ridiculed past,

when that past seems more  
 just and true than a vaunted  
 present. He want men who  
 will go with Jonathan Edwards  
 into pastoral exile rather  
 than fatten on the fruits of  
 compromise; Pauls, who  
 will make sails, if need be,  
 for a living, but trim sails  
 never! Men who will buy  
 the truth and sell it not; who  
 will buy it with their shoes  
 with their bread -  
 and having found it,  
 will go over Niagara ve-  
 fore they will surrender it.  
 He want a church heroic e-  
 nough to live out the Christ  
 ideal of practicing the Gos-  
 pel to the poor; that will  
 give, not only its money,  
 but itself, to the "submerg-  
 ed tenth" of London and  
 New York and Boston. How

can we make Boston poor believe in the brotherhood of man if a milky way of churches illuminates the "Back Bay" while only here and there a lovely star pierces the night of the North and West Ends? If the Christianity of the future is to be anything more than a religion of the well-to-do there must be a vast infusion of this spirit of self-sacrifice, the heroic spirit of Him of the Manger, the Garden, the Cross.

Never could self-sacrifice accomplish so much as now. Never were its rewards greater or more certain. Majorities may be against him but the stars in their courses fight for the hero. Continents are waiting to canon-

ize the man who will sanctify  
their soil with his blood. Af-  
rica is growing greenest lau-  
rel, but she will find none  
green enough to adorn the brows  
of Livingstone and Harring-  
ton and Stanley and Faylor.  
South America has quar-  
ries of fairest marble but  
she will find none white  
enough on which to carve  
the name of him who shall  
lift from her the yoke of a  
half-pagan Christianity.  
Asia has sky-kissing Hi-  
malayas; but she will  
find no peak high e-  
nough to pedestal the statue  
of him who shall lead her  
from the dark valleys of  
superstition to the sunlit  
summits of Truth's eter-  
nal day.

The law of self-sacrifice must become the law universal. We have had the prophecy of it - the forecast shadow in this century. John Brown prophesied it, marching to Harper's Ferry, where his body became the clay and his blood the spittle, by which the eyes of a prejudice-blinded people were opened to their nation's sin and their bondmen's woe. Florence Nightingale prophesied it, when hovering like an angel of light above the battlefields of the Crimea, she tenderly ministered to the wounded and dying and heralded a new era in the hard conditions of war. William and Catherine Booth prophesied it, when leaving home and congenial

society, misunderstood and despised by those who should have given them naught but sympathy and help, they buried themselves in darkest England for its redemption, a sacrifice none the less real that they found an honored resurrection in the greatest social and religious upheaval of the century. Ten thousand lives in ten thousand homes of our land, bearing the burdens of others, giving up their life-joys for others, offering themselves amid the damps of unwept tears upon the unseen and unheralded altars of parental, fraternal, and filial love, with mute yet resistless eloquence give prophecy of it.

The law of self sacrifice must prevail for it is the law of all nature. It must prevail for it is humanity's ideal. It must prevail for it is the only answer to the world's crying needs. It must prevail, for it is the life-law of the perfect Type, the God-man. It must prevail, for it is the far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves. And when it does prevail, then, and only then, will be ushered in that perfect social state of which Plato and Bacon and Bellamy have dreamed - that golden age which paganism has ever placed in a dim and shadowy past, but which Christianity has ever anticipated of the coming years.

"A glory shines before me,  
Of what mankind shall be,  
Pure, generous, brave and free:  
A dream of man and woman,  
Diviner still, yet human,  
Solving the Problem old,  
Shaping the age of gold.  
Ring! bells! in unweared steeples,  
The joy of unborn peoples!  
Sound, trumpets, far-off blown!  
Your triumph is our own."