

ON BEING A REAL PERSON

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By

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FIFTEENTH EDITION

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Introduction

ABOUT twenty years ago, at the First Presbyterian Church in New York City, my stated responsibility as a member of the staff of ministers was confined to preaching. Desiring more intimate personal relationships with the congregation, and feeling sure that one major test of a sermon is the wish of at least some hearers to talk over their individual problems with the preacher in the light of it, I announced definite hours of conference when I would be available. On one of the first days I found myself dealing with a threatened case of suicide while fourteen other people awaited their turn for interviews.

That I had undertaken more than I had bargained for in thus inviting personal consultation, was soon evident. Having received my education in pre-psychiatric days when the academic study of psychology was a very dry and formal discipline, and such matters as mental therapy, so far as I recall, were never even mentioned in college or seminary, I was utterly untrained for personal counseling. Of this fact I soon became painfully aware. The general run of personal problems on which the minister happens in pastoral calling is very different from the kind presented to him by distracted souls, so troubled that voluntarily they turn to him for help. Some cases, of course, ordinary good sense could deal with, and some were concerned with

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familiar problems of religious faith, but there were many others, the like of which I had not even known existed, whose genesis and diagnosis I could not guess, and before which I stood helpless, fearing rightly that I might do more harm than good. Doubtless I had heard that there was such a disease as homosexuality, but never knowingly had I met a homosexual, so that when a humiliated youth came to me with that problem, or something that looked like it, involved in his distressing situation, I knew that I must have help.

Dr. Thomas W. Salmon was then in the full swing of his career—the leading American pioneer in the field of mental hygiene. We had become friends in other relationships and in my need I consulted him. Case after case, involving problems beyond my depth, he took on, and then with infinite patience went over them with me, explaining his diagnoses and therapies, illustrating his explanations from kindred or contrasting cases out of his practice, and sometimes turning the patients back to me as a collaborator to help them correct their spiritual attitudes and secure religious resources. My indebtedness to Dr. Salmon is incalculable. He opened a new world to me. Since then, books, a large and varied clientele, and able cooperators have helped to enlarge that world, but to my “clinical” experience with Dr. Salmon I owe the best I have been able to do in personal counseling.

When I undertook the pastorate at the Riverside Church, Dr. Salmon and I hoped to have a clinic there, where the resources of medical science and Christian ministry would be combined in the help of troubled minds, but his untimely death prevented that plan’s fruition. Since then I have constantly utilized the increasing

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resources of psychiatric service in New York City, and I gratefully acknowledge the generous cooperation with which neurologists, psychiatrists, and psychological counselors have habitually met all appeals for help. As I look back on my ministry now, I wish that I could have extended my personal counseling farther, organized it better, and handled it more competently. At times a crowded schedule has reduced it to a minimum. I have never been able to give myself to it as once I dreamed I might, but a steady stream of troubled minds and disturbed emotions seeking help has willy-nilly kept me at it, and nothing in my ministry gives me more satisfaction now than the memory of some of the results.

Such, in brief, is the personal background of this book. More than once in writing it I have asked myself for whom it was being written. Certainly not for professionals in the field of personal counseling! Sometimes I have had in mind my fellow ministers, and others similarly situated, such as teachers, whose vocation is inseparable from the avocation of counseling individuals, and to whom a book like this might be of service. For the most part, however, I have pictured its readers in terms of the many, diverse individuals who have come to me for help. Here I have tried to set down what I have seen going on inside real people, have endeavored to describe their familiar mental and emotional maladies, their alibis and rationalizations, their ingenious, unconscious tricks of evasion and escape, their handling of fear, anxiety, guilt, and humiliation, their compensations and sublimations also, and the positive faiths and resources from which I have seen help come. As I look over my manuscript I see that I have gone

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on trying to be a personal counselor in this book, habitually thinking, as I wrote, of typical individuals who have consulted me.

Naturally, therefore, this book deals mainly with the problems of those who pass for normal or near normal. Occasionally, in some hapless case, the discerning minister who knows his way around notes the symptoms of some tragic, and it may be hopeless, mental disorder, and suspects that hospitalization is inevitable. Mostly, however, he deals with ordinary people—some mildly disturbed, others distracted, unhappy, fissured personalities, up against circumstances they feel inwardly inadequate to handle, or moods and feelings they do not understand and cannot bear to live with. In writing this book my major hope has been that to some such folk it might bring help.

The reader, therefore, should understand that this is not at all a treatise about personal counseling. I have said little or nothing concerning the techniques of that difficult, delicate art. My thought has been centered not on the counselor but on the people who consult him. They make up a fascinating company, and this book is altogether for them.

Obviously, a book so written suffers the same limitation as does a sermon addressed to a large congregation—it may not find its way into the special crevice of the individual's need. Preaching has been compared with the discharge of a pipette of eye medicine from a third story window into a crowded street in the hope that it will hit someone in the right place. All such books as this, dealing with the intimate problems of individuals, face that kind of disability, and because of that, my opening chapters, especially the

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first two, are not based on particular case studies but present more general matters involved in all handling of personal life by anyone whomsoever. Any reader, therefore, eager to get at the specific problems of troublesome individual experience, such as fear, guilt, anxiety, and depression, will have to be patient until certain fundamental matters have been presented on which, so it seems to me, all mental and emotional therapy rests.

Nevertheless, it is with individual cases that the book is ultimately concerned. Often I have drawn on my own experience in counseling for illustrative instances, taking care to assure anonymity. When this has been difficult I have sometimes used the published case records of other counselors, covering problems identical with those that I have dealt with. More frequently I have turned to biography and autobiography, and to those novelists, poets, and dramatists who have been, as was said of Shakespeare, circumnavigators of the human soul. Indeed, I have done this so much that I fear some casual reader's misapprehension about the multiplied allusions and quotations with which this book is filled. If one thinks of them as intended to be decorative, or even in a popular sense illustrative, my purpose in using them is completely misunderstood. They are intended to be case studies and so a substantial part of the argument. Nowhere are the common frustrating experiences of personal life more vividly described, our familiar mental and emotional maladjustments more convincingly portrayed, than in biographies and autobiographies, poems, novels, and dramas, and this rich storehouse of psychological self-revelation and insight has been too much neglected.

When Frederick the Great said, "I hope that posterity

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will distinguish the philosopher from the monarch in me and the decent man from the politician," he presented an authentic case study in the difficulty of integrating "multiple selves" into unified personality. When Benjamin Franklin in his autobiography wrote, "So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for every thing one has a mind to do," he was describing "rationalization" long before it was called that. When Flaubert said, "The moment I cease to be indignant, I shall fall flat, like a puppet when you take away the support," he provided a revealing instance of the strangely diverse ends for which basic emotional urges, such as pugnacity, can be used. When Epictetus said, "The condition and characteristic of a vulgar person is that he never expects either benefit or hurt from himself, but from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is that he expects all hurt and benefit from himself," he gave an authentic description of real psychological experience, displaying an attitude without whose presence in some degree mental therapy breaks down. All similar quotations and allusions used in this book have been thus intended to provide case studies of the problems under consideration.

So far as religion is concerned, all the more because I am a minister I have tried not to be a special pleader. My main purpose in writing this book has not been to present an argument for religious faith. Indeed, from the beginning I determined to deal with that not as much, but as little, as I could. I have tried in writing, as in personal counseling, to begin with people as I have found them, and to confront religion only when, following the trail of

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their problems and needs, I ran headlong into it. Nevertheless, one does run headlong into it. In dealing with one problem after another, the realistic wants of troubled souls lead to the confrontation of religious questions and to the need of such backing, reorientation, and resource as genuine religious faith provides. Today many psychiatrists are saying that, and never before has cooperation between them and the ministers of religion been more promising. It is from the scientific angle that Dr. W. H. R. Rivers writes: "One of the most striking results of the modern developments of our knowledge concerning the influence of mental factors in disease is that they are bringing back medicine in some measure to that cooperation with religion which existed in the early stages of human progress."

Concerning my indebtedness to many friends who as psychiatrists, neurologists, and psychological counselors have helped with unstinted generosity, I have already spoken. One of the first lessons the minister needs to learn is his own incompetence. Even in the case of bodily ills it is notoriously difficult for a patient to read his own symptoms truly, and in the emotional realm that difficulty is accentuated. Many translate into terms of moral trouble disorders whose real genesis lies in another area altogether. They come to the minister for counsel about their religion or their morals when the root of their maladjustment is in another soil. I once talked with an able and agreeable person about a minor difficulty and was about to close the interview when a chance remark aroused my suspicion. In the next half-hour I uncovered a tragic case of paranoia in its advanced stages, rapidly approaching

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violent expression, and calling for immediate hospitalization.

Personal counseling, therefore, like marriage, is "not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly." An unwise and unprepared minister, having it thrust upon him, can easily do more harm than good, and for any minister who habitually faces the varied personal problems it presents, cooperation with specialists is obligatory.

As for the preparation of this book, my indebtedness to the writings of others is acknowledged in detail in an appendix of documented references. I am under special obligation to my friend, Professor Richard M. Elliott, Ph.D., of the Department of Psychology in the University of Minnesota, for whose careful reading of the manuscript and whose wise and stimulating suggestions I am very thankful. To my personal secretaries I cannot adequately express my gratitude, and it is particularly due to Miss Elizabeth Gough, who has superintended the preparation of the manuscript, checked all references, and made the Index. The best literary critic I have ever had has been my wife, and anyone who profits by this book is in her debt, both for what is in it, and more especially for the absence of numberless words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that would have been in it had she not ruthlessly cut out the excess verbiage.

Coming, as it does, out of personal experience, this book is necessarily as limited and partial as that experience has been. Nevertheless, for what it may be worth, here is the story of what one minister has found out about people's "insides" and what can be done with them.

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

January 1, 1943.

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CHAPTER I

Shouldering Responsibility for Ourselves

I

THE central business of every human being is to be a real person. We possess by nature the factors out of which personality can be made, and to organize them into effective personal life is every man's primary responsibility. To be sure, the word "personality" through a long history has accumulated many meanings. It is not man's initial vocation to become a "personage," or to be "personable," or to achieve what popularly is known as "personality." When Daniel Webster walked down State Street in Boston, business was temporarily suspended while people rushed to the doors and windows to see him pass, and to the popular imagination he seemed to take up half the street. Such impressiveness, in common parlance called "personality," is a priceless gift, but to consider its achievement man's main business would be preposterous.

The basic fact concerning human beings is that every normal infant possesses the rudiments of personal life. If all goes well, he will grow up to be a self-conscious organism with capacities for memory, thoughtfulness, purposefulness, and affection, and, being thus a person, man, so

far as we know, is unique in the universe. An organism, conscious of its own being, that can remember, think, purpose, and love, is personal. While these attributes in a rudimentary degree are possessed by animals, in man they have attained a development differentiating him from everything else within our ken, and constituting his essential nature. While we are presented at birth, however, with the makings of personal life, their successful organization into unified and efficient personality is one of the most difficult, as it is the most essential task in human experience.

In confronting this task, man's situation is altogether *sui generis*. He is the only creature that can consciously help to create itself. The fulfillment of the possibilities of its species may be the primary function of a seedling tree, but the tree is unaware of that fact and cannot deliberately cooperate. Man alone consciously assists in the fulfillment of his nature. Einstein was born over a grocery store in Ulm, Germany, an infant whose inner consciousness was—to use William James' phrase—a big, buzzing confusion. When one sees Einstein today, an extraordinarily unified personality concerning whom one observer says, "Einstein is all of a piece. . . . There is no division in him," it is difficult to suppose that Einstein himself, with his deliberate purposes and consciously chosen loyalties, had nothing to do with that result. We are not simply creatures; we are self-creators. As Wordsworth put it, "So build we up the Being that we are."

"Of all animals," writes Professor William Ernest Hocking, "it is man in whom heredity counts for least, and conscious building forces for most. Consider that his infancy is longest, his instincts least fixed, his brain most

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unfinished at birth, his powers of habit-making and habit-changing most marked, his susceptibility to social impressions keenest,—and it becomes clear that in every way nature, as a prescriptive power, has provided in him for her own displacement. . . . Other creatures nature could largely finish: the human creature must finish himself.”

That human happiness is at stake in the success or failure of this undertaking seems clear. No external good fortune can bring abiding enjoyment to a half-made, unorganized personality. Without exaggeration it can be said that frustrated, disintegrated, inhibited, unhappy people, who cannot match themselves with life and become efficient personalities, constitute the greatest single tragedy in the world. Wars come and go; economic circumstances alter with time and place; natural handicaps and catastrophes, inherent in human existence, fall with varying incidence on everyone; social inequities are cruel to some, and inherited prosperity ruins others; but through every situation in this variegated scene, in mansion and hovel, war and peace, wealth and penury, domestic felicity and discord, among the uneducated and in university faculties, an omnipresent calamity is found, strangely impartial in its choice of a matrix. Under every kind of circumstance people entrusted with personality, unable to escape it but incapable of managing it, are making a mess of it, and are thereby plunging into an earthly hell.

This statement involves no underrating of the immense importance of external conditions; few people to-day are tempted to minimize the terrific impact of adverse environment; yet happiness is never caused by circumstance alone and is often created despite it. A well-inte-

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grated person, supported by a sustaining philosophy, organized around worth-while purposes, and aware of adequate resources, can capitalize adversity and can even be "frustrated into sublimity." Such a person, however, must start with life's primary datum—that we have ourselves on our hands, and that the most determining fact in our experience is that hour by hour *we* are getting to be *we*. From other facts we may run away, but after every consciously or unconsciously maneuvered escape, we find ourselves back where we started, with ourselves on our hands. From that inner relationship there is no divorce. From the relentless process by which, for good or ill, *we* become *we*, there is no means of flight. Every circuitous alley of evasion brings us back to life's central demand, with our beatitude or misery dependent on our response to it: Be a real person.

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The acceptance of this summons as a reasonable responsibility involves the proposition that three factors enter into the building of personality: heredity, environment, and personal response. The importance of the first two we take for granted; they rigorously limit the control of the individual over his own life. As Oscar Ameringer puts it: "Except that I inherited certain characteristics from an unknown number of unknown ancestors, was deeply influenced by persons most of whom were dead before I was born, and shaped by circumstances over which I had no control, I am a self-made man." Nevertheless, the autobiography of Ameringer or of any other indi-

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vidual leaves the strong impression that whether in success or failure the element of self-making was indubitably there. Life consists not simply in what heredity and environment do to us but in what we make out of what they do to us.

Fate slew him, but he did not drop;
She felled—he did not fall—
Impaled him on her fiercest stakes—
He neutralized them all.

That phenomenon of personal response, however it may be explained, cannot be explained away.

One of the clearest illustrations of this fact is found in the very place where its discovery might seem most difficult. At no point do heredity and environment impinge upon us so intimately as in our own physical organisms. Some ills of the body, such as certain glandular diseases, can utterly disrupt the person. We are psychophysical organisms, and as a building site profoundly influences the size and kind of house that can be built upon it, so the body limits or expands the possibilities of the personality associated with it. Yet even in this most interior impact of inheritance and circumstance on personal life an astonishing prevalence of disorganized and sprawling personalities with sound bodies, and consummate personalities with handicapped bodies, confronts the observer.

Man's inner self is rooted in the body. To be sure, the personal faculties—mind, memory, hope, affection, purpose—belong in a realm unseeable, intangible, nonmetric. A man sees not his friend but only the outward integument, the physical mask that at once conceals and reveals