

## THE BREATH OF LIFE

“**W**ITHOUT a parable spake he not unto them,” and modern preachers might use this method more. Not only do fields, lilies, heaven, still remain as texts, but science has unfolded them further and found many others. Physical science, however, does not exhaust their meaning, but, as Wasson suggested, only parses Nature, — shows the mere syntax of the sentence, while leaving it still to be read. Nature’s meaning has even grown more religious with advancing knowledge. Astronomy has shown new harmony in the hymn which “the morning stars sang together”; and its heavens, hung with suns and systems, declare a far greater creation than ancient psalmists saw. The earth also has everywhere shown new marvels, and revealed a rule more divine with order. It has shown, not only the immeasurable age, but the immense advance of life, — from Archæan algæ to our forests, from Silurian sponges to human society. As we read in the rocks this long record of progress, geology seems theology, proving a providence eons before Adam.

The same divine work continues, and issues new Scriptures every year. The seasons themselves, with all events recurring so orderly, are revelations of "the Law." Winter even sends stone tables of it, in the polished slabs of every pond and the plates of each frost-crystal, graven with unerring lines and angles by the same hand that carved the tablets on Sinai. Even "Psalms" of beauty are sung by the winter storms, which so quickly create their delicate snow-stars more wondrous than the constellations, or blossom in dainty florets fairer than a lily, to fall by the billion and blanket and bless the earth. But spring writes a still richer revelation. Its foliage, diviner than old folios, not only drapes the earth in beauty, but purifies the air, and out of poison creates both breath and food for man and beast. To the thoughtful soul, every tree of the forest is a New Testament, with its leaves all proclaiming the divine care. Each flower of the field illuminates a manuscript of God. Nor does autumn end the revelation, but brings a better, declaring the endurance of life;—for each falling leaf uncovers a bud, to stand bare through the blasts of winter, and yet to spring into a new branch. Each withering flower tells of more wondrous seeds, which can forsake their stem, be borne far and buried long, lie dried on a rock or drowned in a river, be

baked by summer heats or bear intensest cold,—and still grow into new flowers and fruit. Life seems safe enough. It sleeps all winter, with the ice for its pillow, and with blizzards for its lullaby; but at the touch of the spring sun it awakes refreshed, and, singing, "O grave, where is thy victory?" goes out to work the miracles of another year.

So full of suggestions is Nature. Parables enough are offered on every hand. As Emerson said, "What is a farm but a mute gospel?"

Leaving, however, these cheering phenomena of life and growth, may we not find lessons also in Nature's forbidding aspects of decay? I venture to choose one of her destructive processes, and to take up the parable of the *Breath*. "Destructive,"—for breathing is a genuine burning. It consumes fuel in us as fire does in our stoves. It takes the same oxygen from the air, combines it with the same elements, evolves the same heat, and gives off the same products in breath as in smoke. Respiration is a real fire. Still, may we not find under even this destructive process some beneficent spiritual law?

We ought to, for it is also a most vital process. "Breath of life," the Bible calls it;—and life seems more closely connected with breath than with any-

thing else. Real life on earth begins with breathing, ever depends on it, and ever advances with its increase. The lesson of respiration seems to be that destruction does not kill, that consuming does not destroy, that burning even brings life.

But respiration is not limited to animals. It begins in a lower, and rises into a much higher field. We will try to trace this burning breath through its successive stages, and to show that everywhere it burns to bless, and is indeed a "breath of life."

First, we notice it in the *vegetable* world. For even plants, besides taking food for growth, take true breath to burn out their growth. We are wont to speak of Moses' burning bush as a miracle unique in history. But botanists say that every bush on earth is burning. Through its every living cell that fiery oxygen works all summer. Even the autumn colors are associated with heat. Whittier put good science into his poem when he called "yon maple wood the burning bush." In certain processes the breath and fire become active enough to show their heat. Such is the case in sprouting seeds. Such is the case in flowers. Often a single blossom produces heat enough for the thermometer to show, while dense clusters of them in the Aroideæ sometimes raise the temperature five, ten, fifteen degrees, Sachs says. In

the sight of chemistry, flowers are all fires; and one great genus is well named phlox, — flame. There was fact enough in Hafiz' fancy that roses were the flames of a burning bush; and botany adds that every blooming plant is another, whether blazing in the cardinal-flower or only smoking in the gray grass-blossoms.

But, just as in that bush of old story, this burning does not harm. Rather, it is so helpful that the plant dies without it, as surely as a man dies without air. Not only does it thus save life, but creates more. Out of that burning seed it brings a new plant. It brings new energies, too. In each cell the fire creates force, just as in the boiler of a boat. As a result, the cilia of some algæ lash the water like oars, the diatom moves across the field of the microscope like a propeller across the lake, and the beautiful volvox goes rolling through the water like the wheel of a steamer. And out of that warmer fire in the flower how many new creations come! One is beauty. The leaves are refined to softer petals, grow radiant with gold and purple, — and proclaim to us the spiritual law that the highest beauty is reached only through the burning out of our substance. The same process brings sweetness, too, turns starch to sugar, and loads the flower with honey and perfume. It even brings something like love; and the blossom becomes a real marriage-

bower, where parents join in genuine wedding and give themselves for each other and their offspring. So the flower is consumed only to rise again from its ashes, and to extend its life to distant lands and ages.

Verily, in this familiar blossom burning to bring new life, is not the old miracle still done and outdone? The reverent soul hears the God, who called to Moses from the bush, still calling from every calyx, declaring that, though he be named a "consuming fire," yet to deeper insight his fire does not consume, but works through the vegetable world as very "breath of life."

But we see this law clearer in its second revelation in the *animal* world. Here breath is more active, and grows ever more so through the rising animal scale. And this deeper breathing always means faster burning. Analysis shows, for instance, that the breath of an average healthy man consumes carbon at the rate of one hundred and seventy pounds a year, — literally burns up within him every month the substance of over a bushel of charcoal. With this increasing fire comes increasing warmth. The gilled fish hardly shows it; — he cannot get much fire started there in the water. Even air-breathing reptiles, with their poor lungs, get so little draft that they only smolder,

and we call them cold-blooded. But with better bronchial flues and more active breast-bellows the fire burns freer and the blood grows warmer, until it reaches the high temperature of mammals, and still higher of some birds. The animal world, also, is all burning bush.

Here, too, the fire does not consume. It does, indeed, waste our substance, so that the animal, unlike the tree, soon gets his growth. Some poor-lunged creatures are said to lengthen as long as they live, like an elm; but better breathers burn up their accumulations, and men and birds keep but little body. Nor do they keep even that; but it is continually consumed, — several times during our lives, the doctors say, — muscles, nerves, lungs, heart, brains, bones, and all. But this consumption is always restored, and does not harm us in the least. Rather, it is just the thing that keeps us alive. If we were not thus perpetually destroyed, we should get sick, and die; and the only way we can keep alive and well is by being annihilated every few years. Curiously, too, this destructive process is just the one which cannot be suspended at all. Other functions may be stopped for a season, even the nutritive ones. A man can go even without food, for a week, — for forty days, some say, — but not without breath for five minutes. Eating seems to

be of quite secondary account in life. The really important thing is burning up. When the fire goes out, we die; but so long as it is consuming us, we thrive. Such is the paradox and first principle of this mysterious thing called life. Burning saves and increases it.

Increases all its energies, too. The faster this breath burns, the greater the activity. The tree has roots for holding still, and can hardly be moved without dying. But, with better breath, roots go out of fashion, and there come fins and feet for roving and wings for rising; and the more the breath, the more the motion. In contrast with forests fixed by the river come fish swimming in it, and amphibians lifting themselves out of it, and better breathing quadrupeds crossing the country; while the burning bird soars above the forests, flies over lakes and mountains, makes the tour of the State on a summer morning, and, when winter comes, goes to Florida like a gentleman. Such a breath of life is this fire in the animal world.

But this breath rises to a third stage in *human arts*. For man breathes more largely than with lungs; and, learning how to burn that carbon anywhere, he adds to Nature's slow fire within him a much faster one without. He heats his hut and home; and, instead

of having to migrate like an animal, he brings Florida to his own fireside, and makes the tropics anywhere to order. Learning how to make this artificial breathing faster, and fire fiercer, he gains new forces that far outdo those of animals. Instead of crawling through the country, like the quadruped, he makes this fire carry him and all his family and furniture farther and faster. Instead of flying fifty miles for his breakfast, like a bird, he sits still like a lord and orders it, — beefsteak from Texas, rolls from Dakota, an orange from California, and coffee from Asia. By this breath under a boiler, he gets them brought so easily that Mr. Atkinson says a good mechanic in Massachusetts can get his whole year's meat and flour fetched from beyond the Mississippi for one day's work. Sir Lyon Playfair said that a ton of freight can be carried on water two miles by a cubic inch of coal.

Nor does man stop with moving Nature's products, but makes better, by this same principle. In his manufactures and varied arts, he learns to consume not merely a little in the form of food, like an animal, but enormously in other forms; — not only acorns, but oaks; not only fruits, but whole forests; not only a few acres, but long ages of them condensed in coal; and not only coal, but ores and rocks and the original elements themselves. Human art becomes

a boundless burning, destroying about everything on earth.

Yet this burning, too, only helps. It turns the forests into force, and the whole carboniferous era into energy, — turns ores and everything into something better. It consumes only to create. Indeed, strictly speaking, it does not consume at all. Not an atom of carbon or anything else has ever been destroyed. Burning only sets it free from old forms to enter into life again; and Nature is always waiting to start it into life, — is all the summer turning our smoke and ashes back into new trees and corn. Food does not fail, but is growing more abundant and cheaper every year; and many farmers are praying for a famine or war or something that will reduce the supply. Fuel does not fail. Professors predict that long before the coal gives out, they will be able to get heat cheaper out of something else, or get it for nothing out of sunbeams. Nothing fails; — rather, the consumptions are all restored and more, and the necessities and luxuries are yearly more abundant. Corn, clothes, goods of every kind, more and more glut the market and beg to be bought. The great social problem which troubles us to-day is not, as once, how to produce, but how to get the too abundant products distributed; — not, as once, how to supply the world's table, but how

to pass the supplies that threaten to break the table down. Production is easy enough, and some say that overproduction is what ails us. The whole world, of both Nature and art, is as good as the widow's cruse and barrel; — even better, for use only makes it grow fuller and overflow. Loaves and fishes and everything else are forever multiplied; and the fragments of the feast are apt to be more than the first supply.

Destroying things seems somehow to increase them. Even the wasteful destruction of a conflagration seems to be a sort of creative process. What does a fire in our streets mean? Its deepest meaning is that a better building will go up there. Chicago burns down into higher blocks and more beauty and business. The flames kindle also new energies in the men who were burned out, and new currents of sympathy, that run round the world and rouse the sentiment of brotherhood in distant nations. Mourn as we may, conflagrations still add new streets to our cities and new strength to our citizens and new virtues to our souls. In view of these results, one is tempted to ask, Where is the fire out of which is not born more than was burned? So of other great material losses: they often prove productive, arouse men, and add to the wealth of the country. Consumption seems somehow to be creative, even when it gets the

start of us and runs wild in some great calamity. At any rate, when kept in control and made regular, — as in respiration, — this consumption, whether by fire or other force, works through the world of industry and material civilization, as the very "breath of life."

But above these material fields we trace the same principle through a fourth phase, in *spiritual life*. Thought is a breathing, ever inhaling fresh truth, which consumes old ideas in society, just as oxygen does old cells in the body. Indeed, those arts we have just noticed have all come from this mental breathing. How many established opinions had to be consumed to bring ease of travel! Once, even science argued that no steamer could ever cross the Atlantic; and there was a time when everybody knew that steam could not carry anything on land. The first modern who suggested such a thing is said to have been shut up in the Bicêtre for it, as a lunatic. Afterward, the Englishman who first advocated passenger railways was called by the *Quarterly Review* "beneath our contempt," while the wise old *Edinburgh Review* said, "Put him in a strait-jacket." Prudent men predicted that railways would ruin the country and kill the people; — yet would not do even that, for nobody would use them, and they never would succeed. One

Liverpool gentleman was so certain of this that he said, if trains ever reached a speed of ten miles an hour, he would eat a stewed engine-wheel for breakfast. Even in Massachusetts the *Boston Courier* once called a proposed horse railroad to Albany a "project which everybody who knows the simplest rules of arithmetic knows to be impracticable," and which, "if practicable, every person of common sense knows would be as useless as a railroad from Boston to the moon." So many and so firmly established ideas have been consumed this century in this mere matter of travel. And this is only an illustration of the consumption of old theories that has been going on through the arts and sciences and philosophies in all fields. See it in politics. Half of legislation is repeal, — Buckle said the best half. So, through all fields, this spiritual breath of thought and feeling has been burning fast.

Yet here, too, it has consumed only to create, and been in still higher degree the "breath of life." It has aided all those arts and sciences. It has advanced society, too, — just as breathing has advanced the animal kingdom, — and has brought to mankind a progress about as great as from mollusks to mammals. It has burned out social wrongs only to bring right. Even when the destruction has come by the conflagra-

tion of revolution, as in France, it has still blessed. See Taine's picture of society there, in the eighteenth century, with a king wasting thirty-six millions on only one of his mistresses; with the people starving to death by thousands, and yet having to pay four-fifths of their income in taxes to support the luxuries and vices of the nobles. The French Revolution, with all our just blame of it, still removed far more wrongs than the Reign of Terror wrought, and brought to the people a prosperity they never had before. Far better is it, of course, when the political body does not allow effete evils to accumulate so that it gets diseased and goes off in the spontaneous combustion of revolution, — but clears them out as fast as outgrown, by the regular breathing of reform, as in England. But, whether slow or swift, the destruction has generally blessed, and kept mankind advancing. What an advance history shows, from cannibal savages to modern society feeding its hungry and founding hospitals and charities of a hundred kinds! What an advance even since our pious ancestors of last century, when, Parton says, the best Christian in New England saw nothing wrong in buying Negroes for rum, and selling them for West India molasses to make rum to buy more! What a progress from the days when David could slay a man to steal his wife, and still be

revered as the most sacred psalmist; and when Solomon, with a whole regiment of wives, could be called the wisest of men, and be thought worthy to make the longest prayer in the Bible!

For *religion*, too, has felt the effects of this spiritual breathing, and has been advancing by it. Here, too, ancient ideas have been burning out to bring better. Samuel's Jehovah, ordering innocent men slain like mice, gave way to Isaiah's God of justice and to Jesus' God of love. The Church did, indeed, in its unbreathing centuries, fall far away from Jesus' lofty religion, and taught that God would torture heretics hereafter and wanted Christians to begin it here. But these barbarities have again been consumed, and have given way to a more reverent faith. The burning has always seemed bad, and always proved good. Even the great conflagrations in religion have helped it. The so censured skeptics of the eighteenth century abolished much bigotry; — and even one of the most honored Oxford professors has declared that "Voltaire had done more good than all the Fathers of the Church put together."

Modern thought, with all its destructiveness, has only been enlarging religion. It has swept away the little firmament and the creative week, only to find a creation eternal and infinite, and filled with an order

diviner than Bibles ever told. It has swept away certain supposed miracles of broken law, but only to show all the world a better miracle of laws unbroken. It has swept away the old theory of a petty Providence deranging earth and heaven to help a few men, — but only to show an infinite and truer Providence helping all by principles that can be depended on. Instead of fig-trees blasted, and Jordan ceasing, and Red Sea standing, and sun stopping, and gravitation going to wreck, — as if God were gone and his government a sham, — we find sun and seas and streams and trees and all things forever true, as if God were always here and to be trusted. Old ideas of Deity have indeed been destroyed, but only to show the universe pervaded by a Power more godlike than the God of theology ever was, more mighty, just, and merciful.

Religion all remains, and broadened as never before. Its old boundaries are getting wiped out, but only to show religion reaching beyond them without bound. We are learning to see Holy Land not in Judea alone, but wherever men have worshiped. We are learning to hear divinely inspired words, not merely from a few ancient prophets, but in every human utterance for justice. We are beginning to find a holy family, not in Nazareth alone, but in every home consecrated by love. We are beginning to admit a miraculous birth,

not merely from Mary, but from every mother on earth, with a mystery which all our science still leaves as deep as that of the hypostatic union. We are beginning to see a real Son of God, not in Jesus alone, but in every peacemaker, as Jesus said; and to see God dwelling in every one that loveth another, as the apostle declared. We are beginning to believe in a real Deity, — not a partial and poor one visiting earth in a few times and spots, to make his saints despise all who differed from them; but an infinite and eternal One, enfolding and filling all things, ruling in all laws, living in all life, loving in all love, and to be seen best and served best by love.

So much higher and holier and humaner thought has come with the destruction of old doctrines. This spiritual breathing has advanced religion as much as literal breathing has advanced animal life; — clearing it of its old reptilian habits, warming it to more than mammalian tenderness, and lifting it like a bird to sing a sacred psalm of love and trust. Here, too, the burning has been a very "breath of life"; and religion ought to have learned ere this to breathe fearlessly, and let its old forms be consumed as fast as they will.

But the Church has sometimes forgotten this, and has gone to the unbreathing vegetable world for its

religious symbols. The preacher has often called the Church a vineyard, and exhorted his vines to guard above all things the roots and leaves by which they live and grow. Excellent advice, — so far as religion is a vineyard, — and we ought to learn all that we can from the vegetable world. Roots are indispensable, and I protest against the radicalism that would outroot any good thing. The ignorant servant, when asked if he had trimmed the orchard as ordered, said he had cut the trees all down, and was going to begin to trim them next day; and some who set themselves up for reformers try to trim the tree of life in about the same way. Roots teach us to value and venerate the past, and to keep our vital connection with it. Leaves teach religion the value of forms. To sweep away religious customs and doctrines which men sincerely believe, and by which they live, is as ruinous as to strip an orchard of its June foliage.

But these conservative lessons have their limits, and even the vegetable world tells us so. Even that so necessary foliage teaches us to change religious forms now and then. The trees these autumn days are shedding their leaves quite freely, — and seem to tell the preacher to let old beliefs drop as fast as they die, and not to spend too much of his precious time trying to glue them on. Indeed, their falling is the

very sign of life. The live tree lets them go. When your bare orchard shows a branch keeping them on in January, what does it mean? The leaves clinging there tell you that the branch is dead. The dried forms rustling on some branches of the religious tree often seem to be saying something like that. Life would cast them off, and without waiting for new ones. That timid maxim — not to let anything go until you have something better to put in its place — is mocked by all the trees, which let their whole liturgy go without the hope of getting another till May. These October maples and mountain-sides, blazing in a bonfire which goes out to leave them bare till spring brings better, tell religion to drop, as fast as they are outgrown, even the forms that have served it best, and to trust the good Providence which made them, and which will make more when needed. Even the vineyard teaches this.

But religion is higher than a vineyard, and should find its best symbols in that higher life which burns itself out, not in October alone, but in every breath, and which lives by so doing. Not leaves, but lungs, bring the advanced physical life; and not the leaves of Bibles or of any books, but the breathing of our own thought and love, brings the real spiritual life. For spirit, in a score of languages, is well named from

breath; and inspiration, in both etymology and true theology, means *breathing in*, ever freshly, from the infinite atmosphere of God that infolds us.

Religion ought to beware, and not let its lungs get diseased. For confinement in close walls, where ventilation is feared like vice, and where even the truth, by being breathed over and over again, soon loses its vitality, has the usual result, — develops consumption. It locks the religious lungs in spiritual tuberculosis; — although, as is usual with consumptives, the invalid is sure that nothing ails her, mistakes paleness for piety, and the hectic flush of a revival for religious health. In such cases, the medical advice is: — “Ventilate your abode or, better yet, move out of it, change your climate, try some other creed; and, best of all, live out under the open sky, rough it, start your lungs again, and breathe God’s living air as you were created to do.”

It seems hard to give up doctrines that have cost us much. Some saints are like the asthmatic patient who said he had worked so hard to get that breath in that he did not mean to let it go again. But life consists in letting it go and getting another, and so on forever, without any fear of the consequences. The fear that a new thought may injure religion is like the fear that a new breath may injure our tissue. Wisdom

says, “You had better take it, and leave the care of the tissue to the Providence that always sees to its repair.” All that is really alive and worth living, in our beliefs and bodies alike, will not be harmed. Only the effete and hurtful will be burned out, and they will bring new warmth and life in the process, and will be replaced by better.

Let religion, then, breathe away, and continue to enlarge its lungs and elevate its life. And when, in its rising life, the roots of the vineyard are succeeded by feet that carry faith somewhat beyond the old theological trellis, — or even by wings that lift it high enough to overlook the Christian fence and see that other fields are filled and flooded with the same light and life of God, — let the sight be welcome and be sung with new joy. Religion ought to be like Shelley’s lark, that through the deep blue

“Wingeth,

And singing still doth soar, and soaring ever singeth”;

or like that other poet’s bird, whose voice

“Came quickening all the springs of trust and love,

Dropping its fairy flute-notes from above, —

Fresh message from the Beauty Infinite

That wraps the world around, and fills it with delight.”

Breath brings its best lessons to private life. It rebukes greed, and bids us burn out our gains gen-

erously. Gain is good, but must be followed by giving, as eating by breathing, if we would rise above vegetables. Indeed, our gains have to be given away, to get the good of them. Miserliness is very near to misery, as even etymology teaches. The wise preacher advocated foreign missionary contributions, — since, he said, if they were of no help to the heathen, they greatly helped the Christian contributors at home. Giving does enrich the giver, whether it enriches any one else or not. Beneficence is the bank that pays the best interest on deposits, and it pays back in better coin than was put in. Our proverbs have well declared that the best way to keep what we get is by giving it away in some good cause.

This truth of external possessions is still truer of ourselves. They, too, must be given away, in order to be kept, or even to be found at first. "The life of life is when for another we're living," says a poet; and another tells of one to whom love was the first waking, — "The past was a sleep, and her life began." Love, whether of a person or a cause, is indeed the highest form of the breath of life. It consumes as nothing else can, wastes with self-sacrifice and sorrows, yet only to lift to larger life, to bless with new powers and higher happiness. Selfishness is as fatal to the soul as holding the breath is to the body. Burning our-

selves out in sacrifice for something is the only way to keep the heart warm and the soul alive. This saving of our selves by consuming them is the deepest lesson of the breath. This is the central lesson in Jesus' religion also, and is summed in his saying, "Whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it."

And does not breathing give hint that life shall be preserved? Why assume that death ends us, when it is the essence of every breath and the very thing that keeps us from ending? What if body must be destroyed? It has been destroyed several times already, and the loss has always been bringing new life. And what if we are doomed to such a future as our good Calvinistic brethren prescribe for us? It would indeed be a hopeless case if we were not destined to eternal fire of some kind; for that is the only way to keep growing. The lesson of breath is not fear of either burning or burial, but faith in things that may survive both. It teaches more faith in human life, which so endures through physical destructions and grows by them. It teaches more faith in human love, which is a deeper breath, burning out our lives only to bless them. It teaches more faith in the creative love, which breathes through ours, and consumes only to enlarge us. Through this divine fire, still burning in every bush to bring blossom and

fruit; burning better in our bodies to bring life, and better still in our minds to bring nobler thoughts, and best of all in our hearts to bring higher loves and hopes;—there seems to come a voice bidding us trust, not only while bodily life lasts, but beyond. “He who died at Azan” bade his friends mourn not:—

“For death,  
Now I know, is that first breath  
Which our souls draw when we enter  
Life which is of all life center.”



## The First Unitarian Society

*...for the whole person; truth for the mind, good works for the hands, love for the heart.*

— THEODORE PARKER

IN A CENSUS