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Tradition

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TRADITION

Of the influences which affect the conduct and affections of men, none is so powerful as tradition. Resting upon use and custom, on what is familiar and therefore instinctive, it is independent of the caprice of man and exercises over him an uncontrollable dominion. A common tradition promotes intimacy. Upon it depend friendship and patriotism, parties and congregations, peace and goodwill. It is at once a tie that binds and a lash that repels. States are divided by imaginary lines, and humanity is confined to arbitrary boundaries. If I kill this man, I am a hero; if I kill that man, a criminal. Between the two there is a boundary. To be of this religion is to deserve salvation; of that, to invite condemnation.

Tradition depends not at all upon thinking, nor is it disturbed by thinking. Wise men and fools think the same thing with respect to miracles and the infallibility of the Pope. Creeds contain certain words and none agree with respect to their meaning, yet many are ready to die rather than forsake a familiar arrangement. We cling to words because we have become attached to them and not because we understand them. Among Protestants there is variety, and a candle in the midst will promote dissension.

“Men’s thoughts are much according to their inclination, but their deeds are often as they have been accustomed. The rule still holds that the engagement of words is not so forcible as custom, in so much that a man should wonder to hear others protest, engage, give great words and then do just as they have done before. “Custom is the principal magistrate of life,” said Bacon.

What has seemed just to our ancestors is deemed right by ourselves. Torture was practiced for centuries and wise men tried to arrive at truth by torment. To hang a boy for stealing bread was not thought wrong either by Puritan or Cavalier. By one law the insolvent debtor was condemned to slavery; by another to imprisonment. The Roman father could kill his son or put aside his wife at his caprice.

An old thing will resist the new and overcome it. We turn old customs to new uses, thinking that we have changed them. We first made presidents kings, and then kings presidents. The elders of the church became bishops, and then the bishops elders. The feasts of the church are founded upon the festivals of the

heathen. There are now as many saints as the gods of antiquity, and each sinner must still have his own. To be rid of an old superstition we must renew it, and every new truth must still have the aspect of old error.

The value of tradition lies in its unreasonableness. It contains experience rather than thinking, and what has been found useful in the past is more apt to be wise than what is thought so. Judges quote precedents because they are diffident in judgment and must find support in the opinions of others. They have a notion that what has seemed right to many for a long time is more apt to be right than what seems right to one. Morals and manners and laws and religions seem to change from day to day, yet what is good in them abides. The gentleman of today is the gentleman of yesterday and tomorrow.

If a tradition seem foolish, it may nevertheless be useful. To clothe judges in scarlet is to make them seem wise, and so we fortify authority. Clergymen are heard who seem sanctified by vestments, and are helped by ceremonies, and preach from altars. To marry without a sacrament is perilous. It is because two are not apt to be in all respects alike that we must be guided by tradition. If every man were a law unto himself and each were free to follow his own opinion and none were bound by tradition, we should not live together in quietness.

We owe the stability of society to the persistence of tradition. The church was more necessary than truth during the Dark Ages. It helped men to a common conviction and reconciled them to each other. Religious liberty was won slowly, and only after tradition had ceased to be useful did it lose its power. Printing came first, and then learning, and then liberty. Today we select one, not the best, and give him leave to teach the word and wisdom of God, yet few are led astray and many are confirmed in piety. We choose teachers to tell of received opinions in order that traditions may not be lost, preferring the teaching of experience to the doctrines of untried truth.

Tradition unites us; convictions divide. To think a thing and have a reason for it is to be intolerant; to think a thing, and lack a reason is to act with your neighbor and suffer him without hate. We fight for convictions, but exchange opinions and are instructed by them. Tradition is experience transmitted; opinion is tradition in the making. The fanatic can always justify himself; the common man is more reasonable and thinks it possible he may be mistaken. To know this or that is to be equal to God; to be of this or that

opinion is to be like one's neighbor. What was said of opinions was meant for convictions: that neither Gods nor beasts partake of them, but men only; and from them proceed the mischiefs of the world.

In the management of convictions, we must use more tact than authority. We should rather turn them to our service than seek to overcome them. The orator who gives passion to prejudice may use prejudice for his purpose. A man must speak what another will hear, or waste his words. The demagogue is wiser than the philosopher, for he speaks to the prejudice of another and gains power over him. Few can walk out of a beaten path and find a way. To alter a conviction is to undo a man, for what he has always thought he must return to for peace.

The progress of the world is from experiment to experiment, yet innovation is ever to be feared. Revolutions are to be deprecated, because they proceed with violence and after overturning an old king cannot establish a new tradition. "A king is a thing men have made for quietness' sake." What is unfamiliar, none will reverence. If this man say, "I will rule over you," we look at him in wrath. To accustom men to change, a republic must have frequent elections. Aristides became dangerous because liberty was thought to depend upon him. The death of Diaz was followed by a bloody revolution in Mexico. America chooses common men for office, in order that they may not obtain too firm a hold upon the affections of the people. It is still free because wise men and the mob unite to elect common men to office. We fear to elect too often the same man, lest he become indispensable to us.

To suppress opinion is to render it dangerous; to let it speak freely is to discover its folly. This man denounces property, and we understand its value; another attacks religion, and we perceive its usefulness. The anarchist is never so useful as when he fails to justify his doctrine.

War is the clash of one tradition with another, and as passion must be given to prejudice in order that men may endure sacrifices, we encourage fanaticism during war and stimulate hate. The loudest denouncer has ever the largest audience. We listen to him eagerly, because we must fight fiercely in order to win. In the clash of arms, traditions relax, laws become silent, reason is hushed. Fighting for liberty, we practice oppression. Excited men demand that something be done. The fool suggests some-

thing and it is done no matter how injurious. We have no time to stop and consider. We appropriate wealth by taxation and then bully men because they cannot lend what they lack. In war the foolish man has most influence because he alone thinks he knows. One tells us how to increase production by lowering prices; another how to produce more by fixing a minimum price; and we follow both. This man says we must save; that man, we must buy. We are advised to create money by a printing press, yet cautioned against exacting more for paper money than for gold. We fix at the same time a maximum price and a minimum price; striving to stimulate production upon the one hand and diminish consumption upon the other by contrary expedients. All folly is useful to the Cause, and he alone is a traitor who wishes to stop and consider. We cannot stop; we must fight.

War is the best prover of tradition. With peace comes time for reflection. We then perceive what was hid from us and understand the value of that from which we have departed and the foolishness of those whom we have followed. The value of a tradition ever lies in its vitality and tenacity. More than written constitutions, it restrains the whim of the people. When it loses power, men lose wisdom.

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