

CHAPTER IX

THE DELIMITATION OF NON-RESISTANCE

That society is the greatest where the highest truths become practical.

—SWAMI VIVEKANANDA.

Garrison expressed the obligation of non-resistance in its strongest form, and would admit of no exception or qualification. He declared that he would not defend his wife by force in case of an assault, and for such extreme expressions he has been freely criticized. For my part I do not object to overstatements (if this is one). They have their dramatic value, and carry their cause when a carefully trimmed shaft falls short. Just as an athlete makes his muscles rigid one at a time, first the right arm and then the left, now the waist muscles and then those of the legs—so mankind may well exercise its various powers to the utmost in turn. The all-round man is the ideal, but until we can produce him we must specialize more or less. I delight in the strong expression of an idea, from Francis of Assisi to Nietzsche,

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for I find the same muscle imperfectly developed in myself. Each muscle needs the greatest development, and perfection will come with the equilibrium of the most vigorous opposites, and not with their atrophy. Pull your side of the boat and let me pull mine. Too much time is wasted in port's swearing at starboard and starboard at port. Your main duty is to be sincere and to be strong and to pull.

But I believe that Garrison was right for other reasons than these. He was conscious of a new moral obligation to refrain from violence of all kinds, and it came to him as an abstract unqualified principle of universal application. It is of the very nature of moral principles that they transcend present environments and point to the future. The fact that they are impracticable is the very source of their strength, for the attempt to apply them tends to transform the world. What dead things our principles would be if we could actually live up to them! They create and regenerate because they are impossible. It is impossible to be perfect in an imperfect environment, and yet it is our duty to be perfect; and this inherent contradiction in the moral world is the reason for the paradoxical character of all great teaching and the guaranty of perpetual improvement in the human race. Hence we cannot express our

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obligations in too strong and absolute terms, and the task of whittling them down to suit emergencies emasculates them and renders them useless.

Take the obligation of telling the truth. Every man feels the beauty of this principle, and yet we know that there are occasions upon which we might utter falsehoods and justify ourselves in so doing. But is it not still true that the act of lying to an armed enemy, for instance, to save the life of a child would be an unpleasant act—that it would cause us a certain degree of offense—that we would wish to escape the apparent necessity? Is it not difficult to conceive of such a lie on the lips of a Jesus or a Buddha? and do we not instinctively take it for granted that they would find some other way out of the dilemma? And so with courage and cowardice. Where shall the line between them be drawn? At what degree of danger may the brave man be justified in flinching? Surely there is but one proper rule of action and that is, Never flinch. Nature will draw the line without our assistance. I am convinced that the attempts to delimit and define moral laws of this kind is demoralizing. They will delimit themselves sufficiently in practice. We must accept them in their fullest sense, and then practice them as best we can, being assured

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that the mental perplexity which besets us is a part of the growing pains of the race. Not at all that such principles must be accepted as objective, dead, literal laws, but rather as living principles with all the transforming potencies of life. The injunction of the Decalogue against slaughter has never been improved upon. "Thou shalt not kill," said the law-giver, and unloosed a living moral principle—a seed with infinite possibilities of growth contained in it. It was not understood or applied. It never has been understood or applied. Perhaps it never can be, but therein lies the very secret of its power and immortality. Morality is not a matter of rules but of tendencies. Our own language shows it. (And what wonders of ancient and forgotten wisdom are buried in our language!) "Right" and "wrong" (wrung) mean "straight" and "crooked." Ethics involve the direction which we take to a goal, and are of necessity relative to us and our present position. The goal should be forever beyond us. "Hitch your wagon to a star." "Thou shalt not kill." Turn your prow that way. Avoid killing. Kill just as little as possible. It should go against our grain to pull up a weed or cut down a tree. And some day when this sense of the sacredness of life has been fully cultivated by the very necessities of slaughter which surround

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us, we may find ourselves graduated into some sphere in which we may really live and let live, and find in turn some new, inaccessible goal held up before us.

But it is a mistake to assume to behave in accordance with a rigid formula expressing a principle which is still too far beyond us. Garrison felt the full obligation of non-resistance. Whether he would have felt it in the case of an attack upon his wife or not, it is impossible to say; but we must not masquerade upon a plane to which we have not yet attained. I would not advise a man to act counter to his best instincts in such a case, but rather to endeavor to cultivate those instincts. We may be pretty sure that in such a case Jesus would not have killed the aggressor, but until we have his spirit we can hardly justify ourselves in adopting his method. The spirit of violence is an evil spirit, and it can only be effectually cast out by the spirit of love. If we have not that spirit of love which would render acts of violence impossible to us, it is futile to attempt to act as if we had, upon any preconceived intellectual theory of what we should or should not do. The doctrine of non-resistance is not a cold principle to be applied like the rule of three to a mathematical problem, but a living power of the soul. Avoid violence. Indulge in it as little as

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possible. Do not worry yourself about any possible exceptions to the rule, but press on toward the goal. It seems to me that these are the best precepts.

I can recall the case of a man who, following Garrison's example, refrained from voting upon the ground that government reposed upon force, and that force was the wrong method. But after a few years he found that he was trying to live on a plane that was too high for him. Militarism and monopoly were ensconcing themselves ever more securely in the stronghold of office, and his conscience smote him that he did not cast his ballot against them. So he changed his course and began to vote against the wrong, as he conceived it, and for the better—there being no opportunity to vote for the best. And straightway his conscience left him at peace. He was feeling his way, that was all. He did not deny the validity of the law of non-resistance; only he had not grown up to its full size. For him to masquerade in its livery, so far as voting was concerned, was a clear case of false pretenses. He was inconsistent, but, as we have seen, life is by its very nature inconsistent. The absolute logic of the law was qualified by his own personal contribution of common-sense. Logic and common-sense! Between them is stretched taut the throbbing web and woof of life! All controversy,

conversation, manners and customs, laws, undertakings, progress, labor, craft, art, growth and life issue from their divergence. If ever they shall coincide, then at last will the words, "It is finished," be written once for all on the tomb of the universe! Meanwhile it is our business to strive to bring our common-sense up to the plane of logic, in the blessed certainty that we can never fully succeed. We preach logic and practice common-sense, longing for an environment where they may be lost in each other. We must pull our environments along with us—a long pull and a strong pull and a pull all together; but to act upon the logical consequences of a rule which we have ceased to feel would leave us out of touch with our environment, disjointed and unrelated, with nothing but a lifeless, unassimilated law to comfort us, which is clearly absurd. In the last analysis the secret of sane living is to go on compromising, while shouting, "No compromise!" The would-be abstainer from voting recognized the fact that a perfect man would not vote, but he felt like a hypocrite when he acted like a perfect man, knowing himself to be nothing of the sort. The role did not suit him. I ought of course to be perfect, but I must *be* perfect before I *act* perfect, and it is downright dishonesty to imitate the empty acts of perfection.

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This matter of abstention—from voting or violence or anything else—suggests the two opposite ways of regarding any cause directed against any evil. I may have an overwhelming interest in the cause itself, so that I quite forget myself in it. My one effort is to put an end to the evil. Or I may simply try to wash my hands of it—to clear my skirts of it—and in my efforts to maintain my personal purity I may neglect altogether the question of the progress of the cause. Which is the better vegetarian—the one who starves himself to death by sticking to his diet under unfavorable circumstances, thus making himself a living, or rather a dying argument against his principles; or the one who is willing to eat meat for the sake of the cause? There is a good deal to be said for the latter individual. And so the non-resistant who votes in the direction of less force may argue that he is doing more for the cause than if he abstained. He would be right; and the man who had risen to a higher plane and abjured voting would also be right. At any rate it is difficult to see how Garrison's scruples about voting affected his influence. As a matter of fact, they kept him clear of the bootless embarrassments of third-party politics, and those who separated from him on this issue were soon lost in the crowd

who were ready to accept any kind of a substitute for immediate emancipation.

There is a refreshing simplicity in hewing close to the line and in rejecting all temptation to casuistry. We blame the Jesuit writers of "confessional" literature as if they were particularly immoral men; but it was not their fault. The task of trying to determine how near a man may come to doing evil without hurting himself is in itself depraving. Fire point-blank at the sun, and the force of gravity will describe a parabola for you without your assistance. Try to describe a parabola with your projectile and you will signally fail. We are all climbers on the slope of a conical peak, much too steep to mount directly—striving to reach the top. Our rule is, "Climb straight up"; and the man who comes the nearest to this impossible feat will get there first. It is a waste of time to speculate about angles and spirals. Our own inertia will take care of that of itself. And it is consoling to know that the world is going upward, ever more and more away from the plane of brute-force. In the education of children, the treatment of prisoners, the conduct of wars, in every field of life, we are becoming more and more civilized and humane and human. Who shall fix a limit to this advance? Who shall say that barbarism ceases at this point, and here

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the race must cease to rise? I believe that this progress will be eternal, and that Garrison in insisting that all use of force among men was wrong, was truly indicating the proper objective of human progress.¹

¹ A sign of the times is the recent book, "Resist not Evil," by the well-known lawyer and political leader of Chicago, Clarence S. Darrow, who advocates the doctrine in its extreme form with great ability.