

Are Ideals the Bunk?

College suicides are becoming common. When they occur there is the inevitable letter left behind, or the testimony of the classmate that life held nothing more, that the poor victim had explored all the known and was man enough to explore the unknown.

A philosophy has a tendency to work itself out. A man's impulses come from his inner nature, and they will reach their final goal unless they are turned aside or thwarted by external forces, or by counter-impulses from within. A man's convictions, or in other words his philosophy, give rise to his prevailing impulses.

His impulses will be good if they come from the good side of his nature; they will be bad if they come from the bad side. Every nature that has been tainted with original sin has a bad side. St. Paul described it as another Law in his members, fighting against the spirit and seeking to drag it down.

The realities of life as we find them are sordid enough. If we must know all that is to be known, see all that is to be seen, hear all that is to be heard, experience all that is to be experienced, taking the rotten world about us as our guide, we can come to feel in our jaded minds that life is only a bitter farce. And if when we reach that stage in our search for pleasure, and we ask the world for an answer to the problem of life, the world laughs at us as it does at the down-and-outs.

We who believe and hope in a living God know of a force that the world discounts or denies. To the world man is a complex structure of atoms, constituted and governed by the laws of chemistry and physics. He differs only in molecular structure, but not in essence, from a lion, a drop of water, or a printing-press. We who know God know that man is composed of a body and a soul, a soul made in the image and likeness of God; that he has an intellect and a will, a will that can rise above every force about him, that can dominate all his environment, that can say "I will" and "I will not" to every suggestion that can come in from anywhere.

Man as man is an ugly, selfish brute. Man as God's son and heir can become noble, august, inspiring. The materialist can see man only as man, for he has no soul to bring him above his nature; the materialist can, in the end, become only a pessimist, for he can see no hope for a man who gets caught in the vortex of passion. Suicide is the natural end of the pessimist.

Only ideals can lift us above a sordid environment and give us hope of being something better than our environment, something better than our present selves. Our subjective ideals are those pictures of ourselves that are presented by our imagination when it is inflamed by consideration of the beauty and goodness in the lives of those who have fought and won the battles that threaten us. Our subjective ideals depend upon the reality of our objective ideals, the words, and the thoughts, and the lives of others at their best.

The sour-bellied cynic says ideals are the bunk. He delves into history to find scandal with which to besmirch the name of Washington, of Lincoln, of Theodore Roosevelt, of Joan of Arc, of Louis the Ninth, of Edward the Confessor. A woman wounds the pride of the cynic, and he generalizes that all women are false; a friend betrays his confidence, and he generalizes that all men are selfish hypocrites.

Vacation means relaxation, and relaxation tests your ideals. This week-end is a brief vacation, but it may bring you into contact with sordid realities. The grace of God transformed Mary Magdalene from a wanton into the world's greatest penitent, Augustine from a rake into a paragon of holiness, Camillus of Lellis from a debauched soldier into a gentle nurse of nauseating incurables. The grace of God protects ideals, and it restores them when lost. Read the life of a saint this week.