

## A WAY OF LIFE



# A WAY OF LIFE

*By*

WILLIAM OSLER

AN ADDRESS  
DELIVERED TO YALE STUDENTS  
SUNDAY EVENING, APRIL 20TH, 1913

*With a Foreword by*

JOHN P. McGOVERN



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### *Foreword*

**I**N APRIL 1913 Sir William Osler delivered the Silliman Lecture to the undergraduates of Yale University and urged them to "live in day-tight compartments." He had spent a month making notes for this lecture, most of which was written on the steamer enroute to America, and the remainder, as Cushing reports in his *The Life of Sir William Osler*, was hand-written the day before delivery, in the Graduate's Club at New Haven.

"The load of to-morrow, added to that of yesterday, carried to-day makes the strongest falter," Osler told the students. He bade them banish the ghosts of the past, shut their minds to the spectre of the future, and get on with the day's work. His theme, sounded again and again, referred to the Aristotelian concept of life as a

habit, and habit as the gradual acquisition of power by long practice; he entreated his audience to establish the habit of living for the day, thereby gaining mastery over body and mind.

The idea is not novel, but Osler brought a new enthusiasm and his considerable powers of persuasiveness to its advocacy. His words are simple, direct and compelling. His very simplicity of approach could be dangerous if it induces the reader to glide too easily over his words. They are words that deserve to be studied, meditated upon, returned to again and again, for the goal of living for the day has a telling relevance in our time.

Ours is a world that has multiplied in complexity beyond anything dreamed in Osler's day. Tension and anxiety, uncertainty and stress are the inevitable result of

our civilization's rapid advance, mental and emotional ills its hallmarks. With the spectre of total annihilation hanging over him, contemporary man desperately needs to learn the lesson of "sufficient unto the day. . . ."

*A Way of Life* offers an antidote in the form of a life style. But is the goal attainable? Osler's own life, marked by brilliant achievement in many spheres, testifies to the efficacy of sound habits of work and discipline established early and followed strictly. Can others follow his example?

I believe they can. My long-time friend and teacher, Wilburt C. Davison, organizer of the Duke Medical School, vivifies the Oslerian "way." We were discussing this very essay last winter and Dean Davison, a Rhodes scholar under Osler and his staunch admirer, raised

doubts that living in "day-tight compartments" was possible. The irony is that Dean Davison might fail to see what others see—that he himself has learned to "live for the day," for the fleeting moment, in Osler's sense. He does it better than anyone else I know. I mention this anecdote simply to underscore the fact that Osler's admonition, the task he holds out to us, seems enormously difficult; yet most of us can achieve some measure of it and the best of us can master it.

An unidentified commentator on Osler's essay remarked that "the medical profession might well be proud of a leader who could, without affectation, preach a lay sermon which an archbishop might not be ashamed to have written."

Unlike some sermons, this one stimulates. Unlike most, it has survived for half



a century and may well endure for centuries more. It speaks to all of us, whatever our age or sex or field of endeavor. We who honor Osler's memory can have no greater wish for the reader than that which Osler himself expressed at the conclusion of *A Way of Life*: "Perhaps this slight word of mine may help some of you so to number your days that you may apply your hearts unto wisdom."

JOHN P. MCGOVERN

*Houston, Texas*



## A WAY OF LIFE



## *The Salutation of the Dawn*

*L*isten to the Exhortation of the Dawn!  
Look to this Day!

*For it is Life, the very Life of Life.*

*In its brief Course lie all the*

*Varieties and Realities of your Existence:*

*The Bliss of Growth,*

*The Glory of Action,*

*The Splendour of Beauty;*

*For Yesterday is but a Dream,*

*And Tomorrow is only a Vision,*

*But Today well lived makes*

*Every Yesterday a Dream of Happiness,*

*And every Tomorrow a Vision of Hope.*

*Look well, therefore, to this Day!*

*Such is the Salutation of the Dawn.*

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Osler inscribed this poem, from the Sanskrit, in his own library's copy of *A Way of Life*, noting that if the essay was reprinted, he wished the poem to be included.



*What each day needs that shalt thou ask,  
Each day will set its proper task.*

*—Goethe*

*Fellow Students:*

Every man has a philosophy of life in thought, in word, or in deed, worked out in himself unconsciously. In possession of the very best, he may not know of its existence; with the very worst he may pride himself as a paragon. As it grows with the growth it cannot be taught to the young in formal lectures. What have bright eyes, red blood, quick breath and taut muscles to do with philosophy? Did not the great Stagirite say that young men were unfit students of it? —they will hear as though they heard not, and to no profit. Why then should I trouble you? Because I have a message that may be helpful. It is not philosophical, nor is it strictly moral or religious,

one or other of which I was told my address should be, and yet in a way it is all three. It is the oldest and the freshest, the simplest and the most useful, so simple indeed is it that some of you may turn away disappointed as was Naaman the Syrian when told to go wash in Jordan and be clean. You know those composite tools, to be bought for 50 cents, with one handle to fit a score or more of instruments. The workmanship is usually bad, so bad, as a rule, that you will not find an example in any good carpenter's shop; but the boy has one, the chauffeur slips one into his box, and the sailor into his kit, and there is one in the odds-and-ends drawer of the pantry of every well-regulated family. It is simply a handy thing about the house, to help over the many little difficulties of the day. Of this sort of philosophy I wish to make you



a present—a handle to fit your life tools. Whether the workmanship is Sheffield or shoddy, this helve will fit anything from a hatchet to a corkscrew.

My message is but a word, *a Way*, an easy expression of the experience of a plain man whose life has never been worried by any philosophy higher than that of the shepherd in *As You Like It*. I wish to point out a path in which the wayfaring man, though a fool, cannot err; not a system to be worked out painfully only to be discarded, not a formal scheme, simply a habit as easy—or as hard!—to adopt as any other habit, good or bad.



## I

A FEW YEARS AGO a Christmas card went the rounds, with the legend "Life is just one 'derved' thing after another," which, in more refined language, is the same as saying "Life is a habit," a succession of actions that become more or less automatic. This great truth, which lies at the basis of all actions, muscular or psychic, is the keystone of the teaching of Aristotle, to whom the formation of habits was the basis of moral excellence. "In a word, habits of any kind are the result of actions of the same kind; and so what we have to do, is to give a certain character to these particular actions" (*Ethics*). Lift a seven months old baby to his feet—see him tumble on his nose. Do the same at twelve months—he walks. At two years he runs. The muscles and the nervous system have

acquired the habit. One trial after another, one failure after another, has given him power. Put your finger in a baby's mouth, and he sucks away in blissful anticipation of a response to a mammalian habit millions of years old. And we can deliberately train parts of our body to perform complicated actions with unerring accuracy. Watch that musician playing a difficult piece. Batteries, commutators, multipliers, switches, wires innumerable control those nimble fingers, the machinery of which may be set in motion as automatically as in a pianola, the player all the time chatting as if he had nothing to do in controlling the apparatus—habit again, the gradual acquisition of power by long practice and at the expense of many mistakes. The same great law reaches through mental and moral states. "Character," which partakes

of both, in Plutarch's words, is "long-standing habit."

Now the way of life that I preach is a habit to be acquired gradually by long and steady repetition. It is the practice of living for the day only, and for the day's work, *Life in day-tight compartments*. "Ah," I hear you say, "that is an easy matter, simple as Elisha's advice!" Not as I shall urge it, in words which fail to express the depth of my feelings as to its value. I started life in the best of all environments—in a parsonage, one of nine children. A man who has filled Chairs in four universities, has written a successful book, and has been asked to lecture at Yale, is supposed popularly to have brains of a special quality. A few of my intimate friends really know the truth about me, as I know it! Mine, in good faith I say it, are