

THE SPIRITUAL LAW OF COMPENSATION

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Charles Beard, the eminent historian, was once asked what he had learned as a result of a lifetime spent in the study of history. He replied that he could sum it all up in four sentences:

1. When darkness comes, the stars appear.
2. The bee fertilizes the flower it robs of its nectar.
3. Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power.
4. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.

The words of wisdom were recalled by Norman Cousins last week when he gave the commencement address at Kalamazoo College. And he went on to quote some other world figures he had interviewed on what wisdom they had learned — including Khrushchev's advice, "Never turn your back". I don't want to pursue this. I would like to use these words of Beard to introduce the theme of what I think is the basic law of life — what might be called the spiritual law of compensation. It's not my discovery. Emerson wrote a famous essay on compensation; the philosopher Hegel gave it its most profound interpretation; but it is as old as the Greeks. It is found in ancient China. And it is found in the Bible in the Christian doctrine of salvation.

The law of compensation recognizes that there are polar forces in the world — oppositions; but that somehow these oppositions work together and are reconciled in the ongoing growth of life, course of nature.

The ancient Chinese viewed the world as a dynamic process of the opposition of two cosmic principles, one called Yang, the other Yin. Yang is an active force; Yang is masculine. It is symbolized by the mountain, the sun, light, the dry. Yin is a passive force; it is feminine. It is symbolized by the valley, the earth, the darkness, the moist. These two forces come together to generate the ongoing processes of nature and life. The two forces working together in harmony was called the Way of the Tao. It was symbolized by a sphere divided by a wavy line, half light, half dark; and in each half was a tiny circle of the other color to indicate the interplay of forces. The Tao represented the cosmic harmony of the polar forces of day and night, winter and summer, life and death. It represented the moral order to follow and served as a guide to all of life. Chinese medicine was based on it; acupuncture is aimed at stimulating and balancing vital energies. Even Chinese cooking is affected — the balance of sweet and sour in flavors, for example.

The early Greeks had a similar idea of polar opposites, but they tended to emphasize the oppositions between them. Strife is the law of life, says Heraclitus. Homer was wrong when he said, "Would that strife would disappear from the world of gods and men", for without strife, in the sense of the tension of opposites, there would be no life. Tension of opposite forces of bow and string makes possible the strength of the bow to shoot the arrow; and tension of strings against the frame makes possible the harmony of the lyre. Everything is a polarity of forces.

And the more one looks, the more evidence one finds of the polar forces of the world. In the physical world: for every action there is a reaction; darkness and light; heat and cold; breathing in and breathing out; male and female; centrifugal and centripetal force; north and south; one pole of a magnet induces its opposite. A dualism bisects nature and each side needs the other to become whole.

This is what is expressed in the cosmic law of compensation. The law is that there must be a balance. When the balance is disrupted, there must be a swing in the other direction. The Chinese express this by saying, "Reversal is the way of the Tao": everything turns to its opposite. At noon it is becoming dark. It is darkest before dawn. Life is a movement toward death. And the death of winter moves into the life of spring. In prosperity prepare for adversity; in times of despair look forward in hope. Never fall prey to excessive moods, either joy or sorrow. When the pendulum swings to one side, it must swing to the other. Fair and foul weather ultimately must balance in the cosmic scheme.

The Greeks carried this even further in their concentration on moderation as the guide of life. Excessive action carries its own punishment. There is a Nemesis that keeps watch and lets no offense go unchastised. Their stories are full of examples like the jealous rival who tried to pull down the statue erected to the victor of the games. He finally succeeded in loosening it from its pedestal, but as it fell, he was crushed to death beneath it. The world of fable and legend is full of such stories.

And the world of proverbs gives similar witness. There is a balance to be preserved or restored. There is a cosmic law of compensation. Tit for tat; eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; measure for measure. Give and it shall be given you. He that casteth bread on the waters shall find it after many days. If you forge a chain around a slave, the other end binds you. Curses recoil on those who hurl them.

This moral law of compensation is rooted in the Bible as well. The cosmic forces are basically moral: good against evil; Jehovah against the Baals; the righteous against the wicked. And the Old Testament is full of stories of the battles of the Lord against the unrighteous. When the children of Israel rise up in pride and forget their relation to, their covenant with God, then they are punished for their iniquity. The forces of history God uses even against the chosen ones, to restore the balance of moral justice. The book of Proverbs with its collection of words of wisdom has as its focus this same law of compensation and warns against forgetting the wonder and power of God in a sense of one's own wit and might. There is a swing to the cosmic pendulum of God's moral order. Pride goeth before a fall; we swell in pride to be punctured in penitence. Classic tragedy shows the inevitability of events as consequences of excessive acts of will and

conflicting loyalties. And comedy rests on the puncturing of the pretensions of man. The pompous person suffers an undignified fall. The bad guy gets his comeuppance. This is the stuff that life, as well as drama, is made of.

It is this law of compensation that is found wherever we look. The four truths with which I began, which Charles Beard said formed the quintessence of the wisdom he had learned, are but picturesque expressions of the same principle. When darkness comes, the stars appear. There is always the gleam of hope to light the deepest darkness. One might add, in the same vein although it is not nearly as impressive, when dawn comes, the darkness fades; it is just as true. The bee fertilizes the flower it robs of its nectar. There is a recompense to the flower for the loss of the nectar. Without the bee's invasion, the flower would remain sterile. On the other side, I suppose one could say, the bee is compensated for the function she serves. Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad with power. It is the excessive love of power with its consequent repression of others which always leads to the tyrant's destruction. Finally, the mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine suggests that there is no slippage in this cosmic law. Nothing is forgotten; justice ultimately triumphs.

I would like to suggest that this cosmic law of compensation recognized so widely is incomplete until we see how it operates in the context of the Christian doctrine of redemption. Here we have the basic conflict of opposites not so much balanced as reconciled. And instead of an alternation of opposites, there is a creative unity of them. This is expressed in Paul's teaching of God reconciling man to Himself through Christ.

It is Hegel, the great 19th century thinker, who most clearly worked this out. He developed the important notion of the dialectic which has so greatly influenced contemporary thought. The term is a Greek word which means literally "talking something through". We would say "talking it out". It referred to Socrates' famous teaching method which consisted in trying to clarify a definition of a key concept by making objections to a given definition, then redefining the term by taking care of the objections. The pattern is to show that there is a contradiction or opposition to the concept, but that in another form, the opposition can be taken care of. Illustrations best clarify the method. The concept "mine" immediately suggests the opposing concept "not mine" or "yours". This is a conflict of opposites as anyone watching two kids with one toy can see. But it need not remain at this level of conflict. The opposition can be overcome in the concept "ours", just as the struggle with the toy can be overcome with the idea to share. Something mysterious happens here. The opposition is still there. There is still a sense of mine and yours in the notion of ours — but the opposition, the exclusiveness, is overcome because it is reconciled, included in a higher level. Another example: the most abstract concept we can imagine is the concept of that which is — being. But being, sheer being devoid of all particular character, slides into the notion of nothing at all. Being and nothingness form the basic contradiction: to be or not to be. One cannot think them together. But by the dialectic one can. Being and nothingness are reconciled in the notion of becoming, the very concept which describes the process of reality. Because when something is becoming, as when we say the boy is becoming a man, we mean that he is and he is not at the same time in a sense a man.

There is evidence that Hegel developed his theory of the dialectic as a result of his early theological studies in his struggle to understand the Christian doctrine of redemption. What is clear is that Hegel sees the great drama of redemption in dialectical terms. There is the opposition between heaven and earth, God and man, reconciled through Christ. The opposition and reconciliation are reflected in the Trinity. God the Father is set in opposition to sinful man and the world. But God so loved the world that He gave His Son in the form of man for sin. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and hath committed to us the word of reconciliation...

God the Son stands in the place of man in opposition to God for the sins of man. And by the wonder of the great drama of salvation enacted on Calvary and the miracle of God's dialectic, man is reconciled to God, unified with Him in God as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit Hegel understands as the Holy Community which in its visible form is the ideal institution of the Church. As the Holy Spirit, God is in His world, while remaining as God the Father and God the Son.

The theme of the dialectic transforms the earlier cosmic law of compensation. There is now more than a balancing of opposites, of good against evil, righteousness battling wickedness, the saved and the damned. For the law of God is the law of love, and love has the dialectical power of overcoming opposition, reconciling opposites, overcoming evil, creating a new spirit of love. The old image of the swinging pendulum is too static for God's spiritual law. A divine purpose transforms the opposites and creates something new: a new heaven, a new earth. As Paul said, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new."

The older pattern in ethics set up opposites of the righteous against the wicked, virtue against sin, redeemed versus reprobate. It warned of the opposition of desires and duties. Desires are of the flesh; duties of the spirit — and as Emerson complained, popular religion seemed to suggest that the wicked who live by desires are happier than the virtuous who live by duty. But the true pattern is to take seriously God's reconciling act, and to recognize that desire and duty are reconciled in love. For love is the desire to do what duty requires, and love brings the happiness of satisfied desire as well and the blessedness now. To live in love is to live in joy in the spirit of God.

The spiritual law of compensation is not complete until we see God's action in taking on the consequences of man's sin, in compensating for them by His act of redemptive love. And the law for man is to follow God's law of love. It is love which reconciles opposites in the creative purposes of God.

There is a natural temptation to think in terms of confrontation. Man is confronted with an alien and sometimes hostile world. He has to come to terms with his world which seems to stand outside his consciousness as something unfriendly. He can do this only by creatively engaging in the world, transforming it, finding his freedom and identity in coming to terms with it. And, all too often, confrontation, the adversary spirit, is the style of our human relations. We view others as opposing centers of action and so we draw lines of walls about us.

It is the law of love, the spiritual law of compensation, which shows us how to break down walls and draw others into a circle of creative love and unity in the spirit of God. God so loved the world. May the whole world be so redeemed by the spiritual law of love. And may we be instruments of that same love.