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Individuality

Josiah Warren

1852

Nothing is more common than the remark that “no two persons are alike,” that “circumstances alter cases,” that “we must agree to disagree,” etc., and yet we are constantly forming institutions that require us to be alike, which make no allowance for the Individuality of persons or circumstances, and which render it necessary for us to agree, and leave us no liberty to differ from each other, nor to modify our conduct according to circumstances.

“To every thing there is a season, and time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up; a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away; a time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak; a time to love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace.”

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A clear presentation of the uniqueness of the individuals and a plea for individual sovereignty.

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Such is the Individuality of times.

There is an Individuality of countenance, stature, gait, voice, which characterize every one, and each of these peculiarities is inseparable from the person; he has no power to divest himself of them — they constitute parts of his physical Individuality; and were it not so, the most inconceivable confusion would derange all our social intercourse. Every one would be liable to the same name! One man would be mistaken for another! Our relations and friends would be strangers to us. No security of person, of possessions. No justice between men. No distinction between friends or foes. All would be mere guess-work or chance, and universal confusion would reign triumphant.

How much, then, are we indebted to Individuality, even in these four particulars of physical conformation! The fact, that these peculiarities of each are inseparable from each — not to be conquered — not to be divided or separated from each, is apparently the only part of social order that man, in his mad career of “policy” and expediency, has not overthrown or smothered. I have spoken of only four of the peculiarities of human character, and if these confer such benefits upon society, what may we not expect on a full development of all the capacities, physical, mental, and moral, with which every one is, to a greater or less extent, invested, but no two alike. And if the little intellectual development now extant results in an individuality that makes men and women restive and ungovernable under the existing institutions, what are we to expect for the future? Not only are no two minds alike now, but no one remains the same from one hour to another. Old impressions are becoming obliterated, new ones being made — new combinations of old thoughts constantly being formed, and old combinations exploded. The surrounding atmosphere, the contact of various persons and circumstances, all contribute to make us more the mirrors of passing things than the possessors of any fixed character, and we have no power to be otherwise; therefore, to require us to be stationary blocks, all of one size, hewn out by laws, institutions, or customs,

is a monstrous piece of injustice, and it is impossible in the very nature of things.

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To what purpose, O legislators, do ye say, "thou shalt not steal?" To what end are all your horrid inventions for punishment! Stealing still goes on, and ye only repeat "thou shalt not steal," and still punish, even though you said at first that punishment was a remedy! Ye have no remedy, but only inflict tenfold more evils by your abortive attempts to overcome effects without consulting causes, or opening your eyes and ears to explanations. Our security against fire and gunpowder is in our knowledge of their natures and their incalculable modes of action, which knowledge raises us above their dangers, and renders them useful and comparatively harmless. Our remedies and securities against social evils are in our knowledge of our own natures, our inevitable modes of action, our true positions with regard to each other, and to our institutions. Even man-made laws, rules, precepts, dogmas, counsel, advice, may all be rendered comparatively harmless and useful by not allowing them to rise above the higher law, the highest utility, the SOVEREIGNTY of the INDIVIDUAL. We are liable to be deceived and disappointed in ourselves, as well as in others, until we are aware of this liability, which raises us above the danger; and we are subject, not only to constant changes, but to actions and temporary reactions, over which, at the time, we have no control whatever.

The intrinsic philosophy of reactions may be beyond our reach, but the facts are notorious, that the reaction of fatigue of mind or body is rest; that the reaction of intense friendship is intense enmity; the reaction of intense love is indifference, a temporary or intense hatred; the reaction of great benevolence is temporary malevolence; the reaction of philanthropy is misanthropy; the reaction of great hope or expectations is temporary or great despair; the reaction of great popularity is sudden unpopularity; and it is well known that the greatest benefactors of the race, from high popular-

ity, have often suddenly fallen victims to an unaccountable public hatred.

It is also notorious, that all of us are liable to strange inconsistencies of character, and that no effort on our part can prevent it; that the most reasonable are sometimes very unreasonable; the most accurate observers are very often under mistake; the most consistent are sometimes inconsistent; the most wise are sometimes foolish; the most rational sometimes insane! How unreasonable, then, how inconsistent, how unwise, how absurd, to promise for ourselves, or to demand of others, always to be reasonable, correct, consistent, and wise under all these changes, and actions, and reactions, and inconsistencies of character, over which, at the time, we have no control whatever. How difficult to regulate ourselves! How impossible to govern others!