

Life As Experience

E. Armand

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I consider life as an experience—or, to be honest, as a series of experiences—that are to be rendered as rich, as abundant and as varied as possible. I think that individuals attain the state of consciousness, of intelligent reaction to the environment, to the degree that we analyze and renew the experiences of life, as we run the gamut of emotions or sensations, sometimes because we encounter them inevitably on the keyboard of our existence, and sometimes because, knowing this and wishing it, we provoke them.

What I say of life in this sense must be understood of the inward or intellectual life, that of the sensations or the affections. Life considered in terms of the accomplishment of organic functions — however indispensable these may be to the development of the inner being — hardly gives space for the complexity of experiences. Variety in the preparation of meals will never seriously interest the being hungry with true curiosity. Neither are there a hundred ways to breathe, to digest, to sleep or to reproduce one's self. In this domain, therefore, the field of experience is limited. And equally indifferent, to my mind, are the experiences involved in the quest for a “position”, of glory, of honours, of a good reputation, etc.

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I maintain that we have an interest in multiplying the experiences of life: an interest for those who modify or renew them. Their horizon is widened, their knowledge increased, their sensibility refined; if they love experience for the experience itself, if they seek to educate themselves as much as they seek to make a measurable and palpable profit, if they do not fear sorrow or dread pleasure, the possibilities for individual development seem almost limitless. I do not think that men can be made “good”, to understand the diverse situations of their fellows without judging them, if they have not passed through the crucible of experience.

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To attain its maximum *utility*, the journey of research, the quest for experience, demands that it be recorded, reported, analysed and communicated to another, so that others may learn thereby how to live more fully, more amply — that they may be inspired to gird their loins, to take up their staff and to take to the road themselves.

I think that the Experience that profits only the one who has it fails to achieve its purpose. It is like a new process that a scientist discovers, but whose formula he keeps locked in the strong-box of his memory. Effort and experience do not achieve their power to influence and never provide intellectual pleasure, except to the extent that they are exhibited to the world, the world of the hungry and thirsty, as food or drink. It matters little that those who do not wish to consume it turn away, shrugging their shoulders. The work of propaganda is nonetheless accomplished: the fertile work that emanates from the self, from the heart of the individual to the world outside them, to illuminate the social ensemble, the work of distinction and of individual selection among the masses.

Naturally it is necessary, for it to be recorded and reported, that the quest for experience should be worth the trouble.

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Life as experience is lived constantly outside “law” or “morality” or “customs” — all conventions calculated to assure idleness and internal stagnation to those who refrain from risking themselves, whether through fear or through self-interest.

Life as experience tears up programs, treads decorum under foot, breaks the windows, descends from the ivory tower. It abandons the City of Established Facts, out through the Gate of Settled Matters and roams, vagabond, in the open countryside of the Unforeseen.

For Experience never accepts the established fact as definitive and the settled judgment as beyond appeal. Indeed it wanders, the life without experience, as an “outlaw”, without a fixed abode, attired scantily or not at all — a fright to moralism, a terror to the proper, respectable bourgeois, who is in a constant panic at the thought that someone will come, one night, to pound on their front doors and to wake them from their stupefying habits.

Life lived as experience is not troubled by defeat or by the volume of results obtained. It is no more disturbed by it than by victory. Triumphs, failures, obstacles skirted, barriers overturned, falls in the mud, all are so many subjects of experience. One thing only is capable of troubling it: the thought that it might be lived uselessly or without profit.

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All things considered, we conclude that the true educators are those who teach to embark without fear on the road of experience and to look Life squarely in the face — life with its incalculable wealth of diverse situations. The true educator does not seek to destroy sensibility, to annihilate feeling, to lay out the individual life like a piece of sheet music, to limit its vibrations, to narrow its breadth. Oh no! — For to make us think and value for and by ourselves, there is nothing like equipping others and arousing in them the desire for experience. And the more difficult that experience has been to pursue, the richer it has been in surprises, the more it has been interspersed with difficulties and saturated with pleasures, the less those who have risked it seek to impinge on the liberty of others to think and to act. And so will grow the number of those no longer afraid to live, because they have known how to experience.

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