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ROLLO MAY

*The Renewal of Life **

Bishop Curtis, Dr. Pinciario, I am exceedingly happy and honored to be here to inaugurate your William H. Conley Charter Day. I am much more honored than I can say that I have been chosen for this honorary degree and to be a part of this university.

I think that after all of these very gracious, flattering, and lovely things that were said about me, I had best get my feet down on the ground with all the rest of you. I can do that best by telling you a story that occurred when I was in training as a psychoanalyst. I worked in a mental hospital for a while, and the director of the hospital asked me one day if I would like to speak to the assembled patients. I agreed but I was very nervous about it. But he said, "I'll sit up on the platform right behind you and everything will go fine." So there came the day of the speech, the patients were assembled as you and I are here, and I launched forth. During the first half of my speech everything went fine. Then a patient stood up in the back of the room and waved his arms and shouted, "That's a lot of nonsense!" My knees began to shake. I turned around to the director and asked, "Shall I sit down or shall I keep going?" He said, "Keep going. Your speech is a great success. That's the first sane word the man has said since he's been in here."

We are all on the common ground of human aspirations and struggles, with some successes and many failures. Harpo Marx once said, "Before I begin my speech I want to say something interesting." Now, before I begin my speech I want to say something not only interesting but sobering and in many ways shocking. As I talk with you about the renewal of life, immediately the question comes up, do we have a right to talk about the renewal of life at this time? Do we

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have a right when we don't really know whether we're going to survive through the next years or not?

At this moment our nation alone has 28,000 nuclear warheads, each one of which can blot out a city, and several can quickly render the world ecologically unlivable. At this period do we have a right to ask about the renewal of life, when seven out of ten people, according to a recent Gallup survey, believe that an overall atomic war will occur or is likely to occur within the next ten years? Do we have a right to talk about the renewal of life when, according to the President's Commission on Human Hunger, starvation threatens 800 million people on this globe? As a society these days, if we look at all realistically at the world about us, we sense that we are caught between an impending apocalypse and an inability to acknowledge it.

All of these things are true, but are they true because these very problems arise out of the fact that a kind of psychosis has gripped our world, and we have become radically confused as to our fundamental values? The misuse of atomic power and the necessity of building so many lethal bombs is certainly a dislocated way of handling our relation to nature. The misappropriation of food, the fact that we here, especially in America, experience our own hedonism and materialism while so many in the world go hungry, is also a dislocation of our values. Our conception of life itself is in upheaval. This is why it is so crucial that we reconsider our values. We need a basic restructuring of our lives. We need a way of overcoming the problems of lethal atomic destruction and solving the problem of hunger.

These problems that I mention cause anxiety. I believe that there is throughout our whole nation a kind of endemic anxiety just below the surface. *If we are to be renewed we cannot avoid facing that anxiety.* Our endeavor to avoid anxiety is one of the central problems in our world-impending apocalypse. It has numbed us. It has understandably blocked off our sensitivity. The problem of the repression, the blocking off of this anxiety is in one sense the problem of the cults. People in our day fly to the hundred and one different cults that now exist around the country as an escape from having to face the problems in our society. There is so much cultism in

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California where I, at the present time, live that a friend of mine there wrote, "I have been Ested, Esalened, asserted, Moonied, Krishnaed, motivated, actualized, and even Marined, and now if I only could remember what a spontaneous feeling is." The authority of a cult certainly does help us to avoid facing our anxiety, but it backfires so that we are worse off in the long run than we were to start. The adherents of Jonestown, for example, at first found comfort and freedom from their anxiety. But later on they experienced the death of their own basic values, and finally their literal death. Renewal will not come — renewal of my life or your life — will not come from our fleeing from our anxiety into the arms of some authority.

Another way that people flee from their anxiety and numb their sensitivities is what I want to call *confusing myth with fact*. By the word myth I do not at all mean falsehood. This distorted popular use of the term I regard as already a sign of our loss of the real meaning of myth through human history. By myth I mean an eternal truth as contrasted with the temporal or immediate fact that is dealt with in scientific research.

The myth of creation is one of the greatest myths in human history. It is a truth that was true for those who first formed the myth and for those who passed it on down through history. It does not change with the morning newspaper. What this myth of creation is about is *relationship*. God *separated* the earth from the sky, the ocean from the earth, and so on. All this beautiful description is about human relationships, human relationships to nature, relationships to the Divine. There is no mention whatever in this account of Genesis of molecules or atoms or thousands of years. When we confuse myth with fact — and facts may be true today and false tomorrow — when we do this, in order to escape anxiety, we substitute an empirical, changeable truth for a truth that is lasting, that comes down through the ages and is as meaningful today as it was in its origin. When people state that the world was created on such and such a date, they are turning this myth into empirical data. *They are using an eternal aspect of religion to make bad science.*

The myth of Adam and Eve presents an eternal truth in contrast to empirical development. It presents the eternal truth of the depth of consciousness in human beings. At first, we read, Adam and Eve

were unconscious as children are unconscious, with the innocence of the infant. Then came the shift to the sense of responsibility, to anxiety, to guilt, which are characteristic of mature people. These emotions make us human; the experience of knowing each other's anxiety is a sense of compassion that we then have. And then they begin to recognize that it is in the biblical story; not only that they are naked and they are guilty, but also that they need each other. Adam and Eve then can genuinely take responsibility for each other and they can genuinely love. This is by no means a myth to be repeated and thrown away. It is a picture that is demonstrated in psychology every day in the week, the birth of our own consciousness that enables us then to experience anxiety, which is really a sign of maturity; to experience guilt, which is a sign that none of us really lives up to our expectations, to our aspirations. If we are to renew our lives we must be able to face these problems.

Another aspect of human existence in our particular world that we must be able to confront is our despair. *Despair in our day is a necessary prelude to the renewal of life.* Despair is like the furnace that smelts out the impurities from the ore. John Bunyan wrote several centuries ago describing every man in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, that the pilgrim must go through the Slough of Despond in order to arrive at the Holy City. When we hit bottom in our despair we give up our defenses, and then the amazing thing is how often we see some possibility of answer for our problems. This is why Alcoholics Anonymous works on the principle that the alcoholic must be able to admit that he is an alcoholic, to confront his despair directly. If he cannot, they soon help him to do so; they then create the curative forces, the forces that make possible the renewal of his life. The cures of the spiritual and bodily ailments then can occur.

Most of us are not alcoholics, I confidently assume, but I want to illustrate this value of the facing of despair through a common ailment or a common experience that we all have, namely sickness and health. We can see here concretely that the despair that occurs in illness can lead to a renewal of our lives. Health is not at all the getting rid of all disease. This is a common illusion. I am the first to take my hat off to medicine. But the point is that with all of their modern inventions, all of their discoveries, we do not go to doctors

any the less. As a matter of fact, we go to them more often. If we succumb to the illusion that the problem of health is simply getting rid of all diseases then we become passive, we become victims of the bacilli or the various germs. We call ourselves patients, which is a passive term, and we miss the real secret of human health.

Now health is the delicate balance between our freedom and our nature. Hadrian, the emperor of ancient Rome, states that "we have understood nothing about illness so long as we have not realized its odd resemblance to war and to love, its compromises, its feints, its exactions, that strange and unique amalgam produced by the mixture of temperament and a malady." If we are to have a society of completely healthy persons, it would be a society of robots. For human beings create by virtue of their struggle with precisely this paradox: that the renewal of life comes through this confrontation, as Hadrian puts it, of a temperament and a malady; it comes as part of the delicate balance between our freedom, our choice, and our nature.

I mean something more profound here than simply that when I get a cold I go to bed and after two or three days I get up again, supposedly renewed. What I mean is illustrated by a friend of mine who said that his back was paining him terribly and he added, "I pay no attention to my physical self until my back cries out, then I am forced to realize that I am a body and I am forced to realize that my body is part of me." He was saying that the despair that comes with the back pain is his body crying out to him, "You must change your way of life."

Now, disease and illness are there not because of the "per-snicketiness" of nature. They are there as a way of nature saying to us, "You must change your way of life." In my 30s I had tuberculosis, very seriously. Statistically, only 50% of the people that had tuberculosis to that degree came through alive; this was before there were any medicines. We got no knowledge whatever of whether the cavity in our lungs was getting larger or smaller except once a month when we were x-rayed, and from x-ray to x-ray we lived in anxiety. Now that taught me, I think, the most important lessons of my whole life.

If I may be autobiographical with you tonight, I would say that the thinking that goes into these books that I write, the successes of some of them, the honors that I have gotten, are most of all due to what I learned when I had tuberculosis. I learned there that I need to cooperate with my body. I learned that I must not drive myself compulsively. I learned to develop my spiritual life. I learned to meditate and I learned the other forms that lead us to a view of the totality of our lives and the life about us.

This balance within ourselves of disease and health, of freedom of choice and our nature, this balance can lead to many of the best things of human life. For example, creativity comes as a result of our struggling to balance our freedom and the nature that is about and in us with its destiny, with its requirements. This is why so many of the creative people down through history have struggled their whole lives long with ailments, diseases of various sorts. And when we cure diseases, which we can cure more and more with drugs, then there come the diseases we cannot cure with drugs; there come heart problems, there come high blood pressure and strokes. There come things that are obviously not only psychosomatic but more obviously a statement of nature, "You must change your way of life." Beethoven is a beautiful example of this. Stone deaf at the age of 28, he went on struggling and struggling, and the discords in Beethoven's music are fundamental for the harmony; discords are made profound so that the harmonies then are profound.

The discords are as necessary for the beauty of Beethoven's music as our confronting of our ailments is necessary for our own creative health. The British physician, Dr. George Pickering, gathered some data together into a book which he entitled *Creative Malady*. The sub-title is "Illness in the Lives and Minds of Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust and Elizabeth Barrett Browning." I could go on and name all of the great creative figures through history, and he says an amazingly high percentage of these suffered severe illness. But they met it constructively and were renewed, able to create. Pickering then speaks of his own arthritic hips as an "ally." He "puts them to bed when they get painful, and in bed I cannot attend committee meetings, cannot see patients, and I cannot entertain visitors."

Avoiding these, he adds, are the ideal conditions for creative work, freedom from intrusion, freedom from the ordinary chores of life.

Nature is the mother of us all, and the problem of health is the problem of our sensitivity through nature in our own freedom. Disease and ill health are what keep us sensitive to nature and to ourselves and to our bodies. This form of renewal was known by the men of literature, the great writers all through human history. There was a play written by Sophocles between the ages of 80 and 90. (Incidentally, the ancient Greeks lived as long as we do except now more of us live longer.) He called it *Philoctetes*. Philoctetes was one of the soldiers who went in the Greek army on the trip to Troy. He was bitten in the leg, and the wound began to suppurate, which was offensive to the other soldiers. So they left him on an island to perish. But on this island he was given by Hercules a very powerful bow and he was able to live by himself.

Now the Greeks went on to Troy and after a number of fruitless years they became aware of a prophecy from the gods that they never could conquer Troy until they brought Philoctetes back again. So they sent Odysseus, who was the cleverest man among them, to this island to persuade Philoctetes to come back with them; but he was angry because they had abandoned him and refused to go back to Troy. The god Hercules then arrives, *deus ex machina*, and he points out to Philoctetes that if he goes back to Troy he will there meet the son of Aesculapius, who will cure his leg. So Philoctetes decides at last to rejoin the Greeks. They are successful in their campaign in Troy and Philoctetes is cured.

The conclusion of this drama is that there is no rational explanation for suffering but there is a moral triumph in suffering. Compassion overcomes suffering. This is the meaning of the drama. Only the wounded one can empathize and can understand. Understand, that is, to "stand under" the sick one. Only those who have been wounded themselves can tune into the sick person's wave length. It is only this kind of person who can have compassion for another needy human being, in contrast to feeling sorry for them. If you feel sorry for them you degrade them; but compassion is a quite different thing, and out of one's own experience of wounds one arrives at the capacity to have compassion for other people.

This is the central thing that I have learned as a psychoanalyst. When in New York City I was on a committee of two different analytic institutes to choose candidates who applied to become trained in psychoanalysis. Whenever a well-adjusted person walked in for an interview I simply looked at my watch and waited five minutes and opened the door again for him to walk out. The well-adjusted person makes a bad therapist.

I could say that in all fields, but I speak only of my own. Perhaps you think this shows the nuttiness of all psychoanalysts, but let me tell you a story about one of them. You perhaps have heard about Frieda Fromm-Reichman. She was the psychiatrist in the very excellent book called *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, also made into a movie. Frieda Fromm-Reichman was the most insightful person I ever knew. I worked with her myself; she was my analyst for a while and then my advisor. She was very short, very lonely. The name Fromm-Reichman, incidentally, comes from her marriage to Erich Fromm. He divorced her when they came to this country, and it is said in psychiatric circles of New York City that the name of Fromm's first book is *Escape From Frieda*. I deeply respected her and I'm very indebted to her, but she was the very opposite of what you would call a well-adjusted person. She was the wounded healer. By virtue of her own wounds, of her own struggles, she could then heal many other people with great insight. Now, it is understood in my field of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis that we do not wipe away the patient's problems when he or she comes to us. What we try to do rather is give him or her the courage, the strength, the sense of the meaning of life that the person can then use to confront his problems. As long as he lives he is going to have to confront anxiety, guilt feelings, and develop responsibility and the capacity to love genuinely.

The last way that I want to tell you about the renewal of our lives occurs, paradoxically, in our confronting death. Just as illness is a part of life, so death is also a part of life. All through nature the death of the leaves on the trees in the fall, the death of the grass, the coming of winter, is a renewal of life. Winter, even if it is as bad a winter as it was this past year, is a cleansing phenomenon, and the trees then develop new foliage in the spring, new flowers spring up from those

that have died. You and I are finite creatures and that, if the truth were known, is one of our most prized of human characteristics; for the fact that we die is related to the fact that we can also experience authentic love. Abe Maslow, the famous psychologist whom I loved as a friend, had a heart attack, and after his heart attack he sat out in his patio by the Charles River, as it flows down toward the ocean, and he wrote me a letter. In this letter he said, "my river never was so beautiful." Then he went on to say how much more life meant to him now than it had before, and then he wrote, "I wonder if we could love at all, if we could love passionately if we knew we'd never die."

The Greek gods who lived on Mount Olympus were not finite like you and me, and they were utterly bored with their existence. They needed, in order to spruce up their existence on Mount Olympus, to fall in love or to have some affair with some mortal; they needed to bring finiteness in to make their so-called infinitude interesting. A drama has been written about that. Jean Giraudoux, a French dramatist, wrote about an ancient Greek triangle in a play called *Amphitryon 38*. In this drama, Zeus looks down from the top of Mount Olympus and he falls in love with a mortal woman down on earth. He watches her through her windows and pines away. Mercury says to him, "Zeus, why don't you masquerade as her husband and go down and express your love." So Zeus takes this advice and when he comes back to Mount Olympus he describes to Mercury what it is like to love a human being. He says "She will say 'When I was young' or 'When I was old' or 'When I die.' This stabs me, Mercury. We miss the poignancy of the transient, that sweet sadness of grasping for something we know we cannot hold."

I think Abe Maslow was profoundly right when he said that passionate love, authentic love, arises out of our knowledge that we will all die. Within this loneliness we need each other, and out of this loneliness human beings bind themselves together in community. We love because we die, and death has meaning because there is love. We know we will lose the loved one some day in death.

I have been speaking of paradoxes. To confront our anxiety is a way of the renewal of our lives. I have been speaking of the necessity of confronting our despair if we are to experience renewal in life. Out of the balance between one's freedom and one's nature comes not

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only health in its dynamic sense but there comes also creativity. But, most important of all, I have spoken of the paradox of authentic love arising from the fact that we know that some day we will die.

I hope these truths will give us some new approach to our values, to the fundamental meaning of our human lives, and that we also may achieve some constructive survival of life of our world.