

Turning Northward

J.R. Miller, 1908

While we live, we must be moving upward. When we stop, we begin to die. Rest is necessary, but only to renew our strength that we may press on again. An anchor is needful for a ship, but anchoring is not a ship's business; it is built for sailing. A man is made for struggle and effort, not for ease and loitering.

There is an incident in the history of the Wandering of the Israelites which is suggestive. It was near the close of the forty years in the wilderness. The people had been for some time in the region of Mount Seir, and seem to have been going around and around the mountain. The meaning is not very clear, but the record says they had circled Mount Seir many days. They were constantly in motion, and yet were making no progress, were not getting any nearer the promised land. They would journey laboriously for many days through the wilderness, enduring hardship, suffering pain and weariness, and at last would come to the very place from which they had started. It was a fruitless kind of journeying. Then they were called to cease their going around the mountain and to enter on a course that would lead them to the promised land. "Jehovah spoke unto me, saying, You have circled this mountain long enough. Now turn northward!"

There is a tendency among people to do something like this in their everyday life. We are inclined to settle down in our present condition and stay there, when we ought to be moving on to something beyond, something better, something higher and nobler. We let ourselves form the habit of moving around and around in a circle, when we ought to break away from the circular course and start forward. It is easy for us to get into a routine in life which will keep us in the same lines from day to day and from week to week.

Sometimes in the country one sees in an old-fashioned tannery, a primitive contrivance for grinding bark. A horse, attached to a pole, goes around and around, running the bark-mill. For hours every day the patient animal treads on, always moving, but never getting away from his little circular path. So it is that many people plod on in their daily routine of life. They do the same things day in and day out, week in and week out. This routine is not idle. It is really necessary that we do the same tasks over and over, with scarcely a variation from year to year.

The women find it so in their home life; their housekeeping duties are about the same every day. It cannot be otherwise. To break up the routine would be to mar the completeness of the home life and work. To omit any of the little duties of the kitchen, the dining room, or the general housework--would be to leave the work of the homeless beautifully done. Most men in their daily task-work must follow a similar imperious routine. They must rise at the same hour, take the same train or trolley car, be at their desk in the office, or at their place in the mill, at the same time, follow the same order, perform the same tasks, go to their meals at the regular times, day after day. To miss a link anywhere in the routine, would mar the day's work.

Some people fret and chafe over the drudgery, as they call it, of their common lives. They weary of its monotonous rounds, its lack of variety, its never-ending repetition. But really there is a benefit, a discipline, in this very unbrokenness of tasks. The old horse that goes around and around in his circular track, turning the creaking, crunching mill--does his duty well, grinding the bark honestly though he never makes any progress himself. No doubt his work through the years adds thousands of dollars to the world's wealth in the article of leathers. The men and the women who rise in the morning and go through the same monotonous round of tasks every day, six days in the week, are doing their work faithfully, and at the same time are forming their own character. That is the way we build our life. It would not be well if we were released from the daily round, though it is so monotonous. We owe much to it. It trains us.

Yet there is always danger that we come to be contented with our routine, and indisposed to go beyond it. We must always do the same daily tasks, never omitting any of them, never neglecting the least duty, however dull or tedious. But, besides this monotonous round, and in it, there should always be something larger and nobler going on. "You have circled -- gone around -- this mountain long enough: turn northward!" We must not let our life run forever and only in a little circle, but must reach out, learn new lessons, venture into new lines, leave our narrow past, and grow into something that means more. Our daily walk should be like that of one whose path goes around a mountain, moving in a circle, perhaps, but climbing a little higher with each circuit, pursuing a sort of upward spiral course, constantly ascending the peak, until at last he reaches the clear summit, and looks into the face of God!

Narrowness is a constant peril, especially for those whose lives are plain and without distinction, the two-talented men and women, the common people whom, Mr. Lincoln said, God must love, because he made so many of them. They must do chiefly, the tasks that are set for them. They do, all their life, someone little thing over and over. It is not easy to live an ever-widening life in such conditions. We are apt to let our immortality shrink into the measure of the little place we fill in the world. Yet it is possible, though our daily round is so small--to keep our mind free and be ever reaching out in sublime flights. There are men who work year after year in some small department of business, and then spend the hours outside of business in some line of work or research in which they are ever growing in knowledge, in mental breadth, into larger, stronger, better, and worthier men.

That is the way the lesson shapes itself for many of us. We must not allow our narrow occupation to dwarf our souls. Our work itself is valuable and noble, and we must never be ashamed of it, and must do it with zest and enthusiasm. Then while we do our little allotment of lowly duty faithfully--we must never permit our minds to dwarf or shrivel, but must continually train ourselves into larger things. Instead of hugging our little mountains and never going off the old paths--we should turn northward and find delight in new fields. This is a large world, and we live most inadequately when we stay all our life in a little one-acre lot.

There seems to be in this thought a suggestion for New Year's or birthdays. We should not live any year merely as well as we lived the year before. There are people who really never advance in anything. They do their common task-work this year as they did it last year, certainly no better. They keep the same habits, faults and all. They become no more intelligent, no more refined, no more holy. They seem never to have a new thought, to learn a new fact, to become more useful among men. They grow no more

patient, gentle, or sweet. They take no larger place in the community, count for no more, are no more useful among their fellows. They read no new books, make no advance in knowledge. Their conversation consists of the same old commonplaces, they tell the same little jokes over and over. In their religious life, they do not grow. They know God no better, have no more trust in time of trouble, love no more, live no more helpfully, and never get to know their Bible any better. They quote only the same two or three verses which they learned in childhood. If you hear them often, you will get to know their prayers by heart. They live the same pitifully narrow religious life at fifty, at sixty--which they were living at twenty. They simply go around and around the mountain, never climbing up to any loftier height as they journey. They never get the wider look they would get by ascending as they plod.

This is not the way to live. The message comes to us continually, "You have been going around this mountain long enough. Now turn northward!" Northward for these pilgrims was toward Canaan, the new homeland. The wilderness was not their destination — it was only a road on which they were to travel, a region through which they were to pass to reach their land of promise, the good land of their hopes.

In the same way, our call is northward, away from the common things into the higher and nobler things of life. We belong to God, and we should seek the things of God. We are risen with Christ, and we should seek the things of the resurrection life. Our citizenship is in Heaven, and we should have our hearts there. We are called to leave the narrow life of our earthly state, and turn northward.

Paul teaches us the same lesson in a remarkable passage in one of his epistles. He gives us a glimpse of the ideal life, the perfect life in Christ. He says frankly that he himself has not yet attained this sublime height, has not reached the best. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus!" Philippians 3:12-14

But this unattained life, he does not regard as unattainable — he will come up to it sometime. "I press on." He is like the boy in Longfellow's "Excelsior." At the foot of the mountain he stood, gazing at the far-away radiant heights, but he wasted no moments in mere gazing. Carrying a banner which bore his motto, he began to climb. Disregarding all allurements, he kept on in his ascending path until he was lost sight of in the storms of the mountain crest. Thus Paul, this man of quenchless ardor, pressed his way toward the highest and best. He was in prison now, but prison walls were no barrier to his progress. He tells us, too, the method of his life. These two phrases which contain the secret of his noble career: "Forgetting what is behind" "straining toward what is ahead."

There were certain things that he FORGOT. Look at this a moment, for the word contains for us a secret we must learn if we would make progress northward. "Forgetting what is behind."

"Remembering" is a favorite Bible word. We are constantly exhorted to remember, and urgently counseled not to forget. It is perilous to forget some things — to forget God, to forget the divine

commandments. We are not to forget our past sinful condition, lest we grow proud. We are not to forget God's goodness and mercy, lest our love shall grow cold.

But there is a sense also in which our only hope is in forgetting. We never can get on to higher things, if we insist on clinging to our past and carrying it with us. We can make progress only by forgetting. We can go forward, only by leaving behind what is past.

For instance, we must forget our past MISTAKES. There are many of them, too. We think of them in our serious moods, at the close of a year, when we are forced to review our past, or when some deep personal experience sets our life before us in retrospection. We sigh, "Oh, if I had not made that foolish decision, if I had not let that wrong companionship into my life, if I had not gone into that wretched business which proved so unfortunate, if I had not blundered so in trying to manage my own affairs, if I had not taken the bad advice which has led me into such hopeless consequences--how much better my life would have been!"

Some people keep circling regretfully the mountains of their one year's mistakes through all the following year. They do little but fret over their errors all the months which they ought to make bright with better things, nobler achievements, loftier attainments. But what good comes of it? Worry undoes no folly, corrects no mistakes, brings back nothing you have lost. A year of fretting, sets you no farther forward. The best use you can possibly make of last year's blunders, is to forget them, and then to get wisdom from the experience for this year. Remembering them, keeping them before you in painful regret--will only make you less strong for avoiding them hereafter. To err is human. We learn by making mistakes. Nobody ever does anything perfectly the first time he tries it. The artist spoils yards of canvas and reams of paper in mastering his art. It is the same in living. It takes most of a lifetime to learn how to live gracefully and holily.

There is a way also by which our mistakes may be made to work good for us. We can so deal with them that they shall be made to yield good instead of evil. We well know that many of life's best things in character and virtue, have come out of follies. We owe far more than we know, to our blunders.

One day Ruskin was with a friend who, in great distress, showed him a fine handkerchief on which someone had carelessly let fall a drop of ink. The woman was vexed beyond measure at the hopeless ruining of her fine handkerchief. Ruskin said nothing, and took the handkerchief away with him. In a few days he brought it back, but ruined no longer. Using the blot as the base of a drawing, he had made an exquisite bit of India-ink work on the handkerchief, thus giving it a beauty and a value far beyond what it possessed before it had been blotted.

There is a mysterious ability in God's wisdom and goodness, which can take our mistakes and follies--and out of them bring beauty, blessing, and good. Forget your blunders, put them into the hands of Christ, leave them with him to deal with as he sees fit, and he will show them to you afterward as marks of loveliness, no longer as blunders, but as the very elements of virtuous character. Forget your mistakes and turn northward!

We should forget our past HURTS. There are hurts in every life. Somebody did you harm last year. Somebody was unkind to you, and left a sting in your memory. Somebody said something untrue about you, talked malignly of you, misrepresented you. You say you cannot forget these hurts, these injuries, these wrongs. But you can. Do not nourish them. Only worse harm to you, will come from keeping them in your memory and thinking about them. Do not let them rankle in your heart.

The Master forgot the wrongs and injuries done to him, and you have not suffered the one-thousandth part of the things he suffered in this way. He loved on, as if no wrong had been done to him. A few moments after a boat has ploughed the water, the bosom of the lake is smooth again as ever. So it was in the heart of Jesus after the most grievous injuries had been inflicted upon him.

Thus should we forget the hurts done to us. Only worse hurt will come to us through our continuing to brood over our injuries. Crimes have been done, by remembering wrongs. But hurts forgotten in love, become new adornments in the life. A tiny grain of sand in a pearl oyster makes a wound; but instead of running into a festering sore, the wound becomes a pearl. So a wrong patiently endured, mastered by love, adds new beauty to the life.

We should also forget our past ATTAINMENTS--the things we have achieved, our successes. Nothing hampers and hinders a man more than thinking over the good or great things he has done in the past. There are many people who never achieved much worthwhile, after doing one or two really worthy or beautiful things. The elation spoiled him, and that was the end of what might have been a fine career. There are people who once did a good thing, and have done little since but tell others about it. They have been circling their Mount Seir many days.

If you have done anything good, worthy, or great in the past--forget it! It belongs to the last year and adorned it--but it will not be an honor for this year. Each year must have its own adornments. However fine any past achievements of ours may have been, they should be forgotten and left behind. We are to go on to perfection, making every year better than the one before. Dissatisfaction with what we have done, spurs us ever to greater things in the future.

We should forget also the SINS of the past. Somehow many people think that their sins are the very things they never should forget. They feel that they must remember them, so that they shall be kept humble. But remembering our sins, weaving their memories into a garment of sackcloth and wearing it continually--is the very thing we ought not to do. Do we not believe in the forgiveness of our sins, when we have repented of them? God tells us that our sins and our iniquities, he will remember no more forever. We should forget them, too, accepting the divine mercy, and since they are so fully forgiven by our Father, our joy should be full.

One of the Psalms tells us of being brought up out of a horrible pit, and our feet set upon a rock. Then comes the song beginning: "He has put a new song in my mouth" — rejoicing instead of hopeless grief over sin. Brood not a moment over your old sins. Circle the mountain no longer, but turn northward! Turn your penitence into consecration. Burn out the shame of your past evil, in the fires of love and new devotion!

These are suggestions of the meaning of Paul's secret of noble life. Of course we should never leave behind us and throw away anything that is good and beautiful. The blossom fades and falls, but from it comes the fruit. In the most transient experiences, there are things that remain — influences, impressions, inspirations, elements of beauty, glimpses of better things. These we should keep as part of life's permanent treasure.

Paul did not mean that in forgetting the things that were behind, he threw away the lessons of experience. In leaving the mountain and turning northward, the people did not leave the mountain behind them — they carried it with them. One never can forget a mountain nor lose the gifts it puts into one's life.

But all that is evanescent and transient is to be forgotten, left behind, while we move on to new things. Forget the things that are behind. Move entirely out of the past. It is gone, and you have nothing whatever more to do with it. If it has been unworthy--then it should be abandoned for something worthy. If it has been good--then it should inspire us to things yet better.

“You have circled this mountain long enough. Turn northward!” Paul also teaches this in the other word which he uses in his plan of progressive life. First, forget everything that is past. Then **STRAINING TOWARD THAT WHICH IS AHEAD**. What are these things that are ahead, to which we ought to strain?

The answer may be given in a phrase — growth in spiritual life. Jesus told his disciples he had come that they might have life. We have no life until we receive it from Christ. Christ is the fountain from which all life flows. His own heart broke on the cross that we might receive life, his life. Nothing will meet our need but life. A picture may seem perfect, but it is only a picture; it has no life.

There is a story of a sculptor who had chiseled a statue in marble and set it before a church in Florence. Michael Angelo was asked to see it. He stood before the marble and was amazed at the success of the young artist. Every feature was perfect. The brow was massive. Intelligence beamed from the eyes. One foot was in the act of moving as if to step forward. Gazing at the splendid marble figure, Angelo said, “Now, march!” No higher compliment could the great artist have paid to the statue in marble. Yet there was no response. The statue was perfect in all the form of life, but there was no life in it. It could not march.

In the same way, it is possible for us to have all the semblance of life in our religious profession, in our orthodoxy of belief, in our morality, in our Christian achievements, in our conduct, in our devotion to the principles of right and truth--and yet not have life in us. Life is the great final blessing we should seek.

Not life merely, not just a little of it, but fullness of life. Jesus said he had come that we might have life, and might have it abundantly. The turning northward was that the people might exchange the wilderness for Canaan. The wilderness meant emptiness, barrenness, sin's bitter harvest. Canaan was a figure of Heaven. What does turning northward mean for us today? It means a larger and holier Christian life. Note some definite elements in its meaning: We rejoice in all that God has done for us in the past. We are grateful for the blessings we have received. But we are only on the edge of the spiritual possibilities that

are within our reach. We are in danger of sitting down in a sort of quiet contentment, as if there were no farther heights to be reached.

“You have been going about this mountain long enough. Turn northward!” Northward is toward new and greater things, larger spiritual good, more abundant life. It means something intensely practical and real. It is a call to holier life. We must be holier men, better women, better Christians. We must be more noble in Christian character. The abundant life must be pure. One man wrote on a New Year’s eve, that he wanted to be a purer man in the new year than ever before. “How I long to be pure all through! What a blessed life that would be!” We need all and always to seek the same purity. It must begin within. “Blessed are the pure in heart.”

A little story tells of a man who was washing a large plate glass in a show window. There was one soiled spot on the glass which defied all his efforts to cleanse it. After long and hard rubbing at it, with soap and water, the spot still remained, and then the man discovered that the spot was on the inside of the glass. In the same way, there are many people who are trying to cleanse their lives from stains by washing the outside. They cut off evil habits and cultivate the moralities, so that their conduct and character shall appear white. Still they find spots and flaws which they cannot remove. The trouble is within. Their hearts are not clean, and God desires truth in the inward parts.

There is a story of a mother who had lost a beautiful child. She was inconsolable, and, to occupy her hands with something about her beloved child, in order that she might find comfort, she began to color a photograph of the precious little one. Her fingers wrought with wonderful skill and delicacy, and at length the face in the photograph seemed to have in it all the winsome beauty of life. The child appeared to the mother to live again before her eyes. When the work was done, she laid the picture away for a time in a drawer. When she took it out by and by, to look at it, the face was covered with blotches and the beauty was sadly marred. Again the mother took her brush, and with loving skill painted out the spots and touched the picture afresh, until once more the face had all its beauty. Then again the photograph was laid away, and when it was brought out the blotches were there as before. There was some fault in the paper on which the likeness was printed.

There are human lives which may be made to shine in the fairest beauty that Christian culture can produce. They may be freed from all that is coarse and unrefined. They may be nurtured into gentleness of manner and sweetness of spirit. Yet in certain experiences of testing and temptation--blemishes are revealed, undivine qualities are brought out, unhallowed tempers and dispositions are disclosed. The trouble is in the heart itself. Sin is still in the heart. The only way to be made perfect is to have the very springs of the life cleansed. “I long to be pure all through.” That is the kind of men and women we should pray to become.

It was the lifelong prayer of Frances Willard, “O God, make me beautiful within!” Think what spiritual beauty there would be in any church, what healing for the world--if all its members were thus made pure, through and through--if all were really beautiful within.

It is to this that we are called each New Year, for example, and each birthday. We are summoned to leave our routine Christian life, the commonplace godliness which has so long satisfied us, and turn northward.

We are called to be saints — not when we are dead and our bodies have been buried out of sight--but now, while we are busy in the midst of human affairs, while we live and meet temptations every day, while men see us, and are touched and impressed by what we do. Shall we not give up and leave behind our conventional godliness, our fashionable holiness, our worldly conformity--and be holy men, holy women, turning northward to get nearer to God?

We need to be always watchful lest we allow our life to deteriorate in its quality as we go on from year to year. This is especially one of the temptations of advancing old age. There seems less to live for, less to draw us onward and upward, and inspiration is apt to grow less strong. The best seems behind us, and zest for toil and struggle grows less keen. We yield to weariness, we relax our discipline and self-restraint, we do not mind so much the little slips, the small neglects, the lowering of tone in feeling, in sentiment, in conduct. We are losing our life's brightness and beauty--and we know it not! We allow ourselves to become less thoughtful, less obliging, less kindly, less forgetful of self, less charitable toward the mistakes of others, less tolerant of others' faults and weaknesses. People to whom we have been a comfort in the past, begin to note a change in the degree of our congeniality and our spirit of helpfulness. We are not interested in others' needs and troubles, as we used to be. Friends apologize for us by saying that we are not well, that we have cares and sufferings of our own, or that we are growing old. But neither illness nor age nor pain should make us less Christlike!

Paul tells us that though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man should be renewed day by day. The true life within us should become diviner continually in its beauty--purer, stronger, sweeter, even when the physical life is wasting away.

To all men there come, along the years, experiences that are hard to endure. Disappointments and misfortunes come, in one form or another. Business ventures do not always succeed. In some cases, there are years of continual and repeated disaster. Ill health saps the energy and strength of some men, leaving them unequal to the struggle for success, and compelling them to drop out of the race.

Life is hard for many people, and there are those who do not keep brave and sweet in the struggle. Some lose heart and become soured in experiences of adversity. Nothing is sadder than to see a man give way to disheartenment and depression--and grow selfish, or cynical, or gloomy, or soured in spirit.

Kenan, in one of his books, recalls an old French legend of a buried city on the coast of Brittany. With its homes, public buildings, churches, and thronged streets, it sank instantly into the sea. The legend says that the city's life goes on as before down beneath the waves. The fishermen, when in calm weather they row over the place, sometimes think they can see the gleaming tips of the church spires deep in the water, and imagine that they can hear the chiming of bells in the old belfries, and even the murmur of the city's noises.

There are men who, in their later years, seem to have an experience like this. The life of youthful hopes, dreams, successes, and joys had been sunk out of sight, submerged in misfortunes and adversities, vanished altogether. All that remains is a memory. In their discouragement they seem to hear the echoes of the old songs of hope and gladness, and to catch visions of the old beauty and splendor--but that is all. They have nothing real left. They have grown selfish and hopeless and bitter.

But this is not worthy living for one who is immortal, one who is a child of God. The hard things are not meant to mar our life — they are meant to make it all the braver, the worthier, the nobler. Adversities and misfortunes are meant to sweeten our spirits--not to make them sour and bitter.

We need to think of these things. There should be a constant gaining--never a losing in our spiritual life. Every year should find us living on a higher spiritual plane than the year before. Old age should always be the best of life--not marked by emptiness and decay, but by richer fruitfulness and more gracious beauty.

Paul was growing old, when he spoke of forgetting things behind and reaching forth to things before. His best was yet to be attained. So it should always be with Christian old age. We must ever be turning northward, toward fuller life and holier beauty. This can be the story of our experience, only if our life is hid with Christ in God. Torn away from Christ, no life can keep its zest or its radiance.

Another phase of this call as it comes to us in life's quiet days, is to increased activity. We cannot fulfill our Master's requirement for us as Christians, unless we are ready for self-forgetful devotion to service. A birthday or the beginning of a new year is a most fitting time for renewed interest in Christian work. "You have circled this mountain long enough." That is, you have been going through the old rounds, living the old way, long enough. Is any one of us satisfied with the measure of work we have done for Christ during the past year, for example? "To each one his own work," is the rule of the kingdom. The work of the church is not meant to be done by a few rare souls merely. Some portion of it is to be done by each one, and that portion is not transferable. No one can do your work for you, for each one has enough of his own to fill his hands. No one can get any other person to do his allotted task for him. All anyone can do, is his own little part.

Are there any of us who have done nothing? We need not press the question for the past, for what has not been done in its time, cannot be done now. The hands that have been idle through a past year, can do nothing in the new year to make up the lack. If you have left a blank where there ought to have been beautiful work done--there can be only a blank there forever. You cannot fill it now. Toil as you will any new year, you cannot make the year you left empty, anything but empty. We cannot go back over our life, and do omitted or neglected duties.

Shall we not cease going around and around in the same little grooves, and turn northward, with our faces toward God and Heaven? Our Master is not exacting, does not require of us what we cannot do. All expected of anyone is his part--what he can do. No one is required to do the work of the whole world--but every one is required to be faithful in his own place. All that the Lord requires of us is faithfulness to that which he has called us to.

We get into the habit of talking about Christian life and work, as if it were something altogether apart from common work, the work we do on our business days. But if we are living as we should, then everything we are called to do, is work for Christ. We need heavenly grace for our secular tasks and duties--quite as much as for our Christian services and occupations.

It is said that at a certain moment of the night, a man in the Lick Observatory, California, lying upon his back, looks out through the great telescope and waits for a certain star to cross a fine line made by the tiny thread of a spider's web drawn across the telescope. This indicates the time, and from this indication the great clock is set. Thus a star from Heaven directs the movements of all the railway trains, all shops and factories, all business of every kind in all the vast region.

In the same way, we are to get light from Heaven for all our life on earth, not only for our worship, our religious activities, our Christian service, but for our business affairs, our amusements, all our tasks and duties, our home matters, our plans and pleasures. The light of the star regulates everything. The smallest things in our lives should get their inspiration from Heaven. All of life should follow the star. Thus we are ever being called to a new life--a holier life, greater activity, and better service.

“You have circled this mountain long enough. Turn northward!” Break away from the routine. Do not keep on doing just what you have been doing heretofore. Do not be content to go over the same old rounds. Turn northward — start in new lines, with your face toward God. Do larger things than you have done heretofore. Pray more fervently. Love better, more sweetly, more helpfully. Live where Heaven will break into your soul. Let Christ have all your life. Do not merely go around the mountain's base — climb up its side! Every time you circle it, gain a little higher range, get nearer Heaven, nearer God.

We never should forget with what sympathy God looks down upon us continually. God is not a hard master. He knows how frail we are. He remembers that we are dust. Therefore he is patient with us. He judges us graciously. If we try to do our best, though we seem to fail, marring our work--he understands and praises whatever we have done. With such a master, we should never lose heart, never grow discouraged, never become depressed, never let gloom or bitterness into our heart--but should always keep brave, hopeful, sweet, forgetting the past and straining forward, knowing that no life which is true to its best, can ever fail!